

Rowing Advisory for Sailors, Paddlers and Power Boaters on the Charles River

First, welcome to the Charles River, Boston, and Cambridge. As a boater, you already know that the Charles is a very active rowing, sailing, paddling and power boating venue with numerous boathouses along its shore. You may not be aware that the Charles is one of the busiest and most competitive rowing venues in the world. It is routine to see more than 4000 rowers launch in a single day from boathouses from Boston to Newton. Rowing programs are based at not-for-profit, public and private clubs or school based facilities. Many boathouses host more than one organization, so it is not uncommon to see novice rowers launching alongside Olympic hopefuls. In fact, it is one of the things that make rowing special. You may play basketball all your life, but you will likely never play against Paul Pierce. But if you row, you likely will get to race against or be coached by a current, future or former world-class rower.

With all this activity, there is a lot of demand to use the river for all boating activities including the local sightseeing tours. We all need to share the river and respect each other's needs and limitations. The rowing community understands that the basin between the Longfellow and BU bridges, which provides one of the few extended straight sections suitable for rowing competition, is also one of the most active sailing venues in the country and a wonderful place to paddle. We also understand that the Charles is a major resource for power boaters to access Boston Harbor (*though there is a better option if that is your goal. Google map Terminal St. in Charlestown for a double-wide launch ramp owned by the City of Boston with parking for 36 trailers and more cars, all with direct harbor access*). At the same time, we hope that the sailing, canoe/kayaking and power boating communities understand the intricacies of rowing, training, and the challenges of steering on the Charles.

In an effort to promote more effective use of the Charles River, and help others to understand the very strict Rowing traffic pattern, here are a few general guidelines.

Q: Do rowers only row in the morning?

A: No. While the most popular time for rowing is 5:30 AM to 7:30 AM (10 AM on weekends), late afternoon and evenings are also very active times for rowers. In the early morning, the water tends to be calm and flat, good conditions for rowing. In the spring and fall, late afternoons (3-6 PM), many active and very competitive high school programs are on the water. Evenings are busy with morning-adverse club rowers, college teams, and athletes training to qualify for World or Olympic competition who usually row twice daily.

Q: Rowers seem to get upset with a little wake from powerboats. What's the big deal?

Wake is in the eye of the beholder, for sure. It is important for power boaters to know their boat and at what speed it produces low wake.

Unlike some other small craft designed for rough water, the vast majority of the rowing shells on the Charles River are designed for flat water and they don't handle wake well. Safety is the first concern. Rowing shells are delicate boats. Single shells are narrower than the rower's hips and the rower sits just inches above the water line. Wake, even what looks like a small wake to a power boater, can flip a single and swamp the other boats which can lead to drowning or

hypothermia. The second concern is for the boat which can sustain damage in a large wake. Any boater would be upset if another boater caused damage to their hull and rowers are no different. One particular note of caution: Wake is magnified in the stretches of the river with walls that reflect the wake back into the river, causing difficult conditions for a long time after the power boat has passed. Please take particular care in these sections.

Q: I can never predict where those wacky rowers are going next. What are they doing?

A: One of the first things to understand is that these boats don't turn easily. Rowing shells like to go in a straight line. The smaller the boat, the more maneuverable it is, but even single can't turn on a dime. Eights will try to stay on a straight course, but the river is not accommodating in that regard and these 60' long boats will sometimes need to swing wide before a turn to get a better line through a bridge and not go too wide coming out of the turn. Also keep in mind that many boats are steered by a rower who is facing backward and can only see by looking back over his or her shoulder. Coaching singles is often compared to herding cats because everyone sees 'their lane' a little differently, so it can be difficult to tell where they are going.

Q: I don't get the rowing traffic pattern? Can you give tips?

A. First, rowers follow a strict traffic pattern that keeps to the right side of the river, much like road rules. There are notable exceptions. Weeks and Eliot Bridges are on turns that are very difficult for boats rowing at pressure (rowing hard). The center arches of those bridges are used ONLY for upstream rowing traffic.

Q: But sometimes when I'm next to them I'm not sure where they are going. Can you tell me how to figure that out?

A: It might be more prudent for you to tell the rowers where you are going since they may have more room to maneuver than you do. But you can assume that boats will move in a relatively straight line, somewhat parallel to shore. They will often anticipate turns or bridge arches, and try to line up accordingly. For boats that are steered by a rower, watch to see where the bow-most person is looking. They will turn to check their course every 3-4 strokes and that should give you an idea of where they are headed. Eights will always have a coxswain who can be seated facing forward, in the stern. Usually the shortest person in the boat, they may not always see what is directly in front of them which is 60' away.

Q: How can I avoid a rowing shell?

A: Rowers use the river like a roadway. Ideally, slower boats move to shore, faster boats pass to the middle. Power boaters may have little room to maneuver due to depth and bridge heights and may not be able to move out of the way of an oncoming rowing shell and should signal their location well in advance to alert oncoming rowers of their presence. Canoes/kayaks should move to shore if being passed. Sailboats, which may be moving on a completely different trajectory, should use care and try to cross to the stern of the rowing shell. When in doubt, yell. You should never be shy about calling out to a boat that you think might not see you, or even if you think they do see you (*'rower look ahead'* is a good phrase to use). Telling a rowing shell where you plan to go is always appropriate. A coxswain who raises their hand to you is indicating that they hear you and understand what you are saying. A rower may nod to indicate that they have heard you. If either gives you a funny look, they likely did not hear or understand your intent.

Q: Are all rowers doing the same thing?

A: If they are in the same boat, they should be. But different boats, even in what looks like the same pack, may be doing different things. There is a wide diversity of rowers in both interest and skill level. With so many rowers on the water, there may be some that are racing, some that are out for an easy paddle, and some that are just learning how to row. Typically, all coxswains and rowers who steer team boats should be experienced, but they can still miss seeing you. People that are learning to row are a different kettle of fish. Learning how to row can be like riding a horse for the first time - you know that there is a way to control what is happening, but sometimes the boat will do what it wants and not what you want. Giving a wide berth to people that are learning, whether they are in a single or an eight, is prudent for everyone.

Q: How can I tell who is a novice rower?

A: In singles, a good indicator is that the boat will be wider and more stable. In larger boats, it looks a bit chaotic even to the untrained eye. Learn-to-row boats typically stop and start very frequently and maneuver very slowly. If in an eight, they will have a coach nearby. But anyone can put a rowing shell on the water and row, so there may be less experienced rowers in singles, though it is less common. When in doubt, err on the side of caution.

Q: Are rowing race courses always a straight line?

A: Usually, but not always. The official rowing races are usually 1000 – 2000 meters long, on a straight course. On the Charles, you will find people doing 'race pieces' in all parts of the river but especially near Community Rowing above the North Beacon St. Bridge, the Herter Half Mile above the Eliot Bridge, the 1000m (1k) course in the Powerhouse stretch (Weeks Bridge to Magazine Beach), and the 2000m (2k) stretch in the lower basin, from Longfellow Bridge to before the BU Boathouse (the official course is on the Cambridge side and should only be rowed in an upstream direction, consistent with the traffic pattern. Rowers will do 2k pieces heading downstream closer to the Boston shore, but it is more difficult for them to see the start and finish lines). The 1k powerhouse course has a 500m mark on the wall on the Cambridge side, and the 2k course has marks on the Cambridge side at the start, 500m, 1000m, 1500m, and finish. Diagrams of these rowing courses can be found on the CRAB website.

Q. What are the not-straight races?

A: Head races, like the Head of the Charles are usually 3 miles long and follow the twists and turns of the river. Those courses can start and finish anywhere along the river, but the 2 most commonly used are the Head of the Charles course (BU boathouse, downstream of the BU Bridge to just above the wooden boardwalk at Herter Park in Brighton) and the Foot of the Charles Course (MIT boathouse, upstream of the Mass Ave Bridge to Harvard's Newell boathouse, upstream of the Anderson Bridge). Some clubs also run old-fashioned stake races, where 1 to 4 buoys are placed and boats race around them. Anyone running a stake race should have a launch nearby to alert and direct other boaters.

Q: How can I tell if someone is racing or not?

A: If it is an official race, there will be officials on shore and/or in boats starting the race. Please give them your full cooperation. If it is an informal race, or if a team or teams are scrimmaging, it can be tricky to figure out what they are doing. Boats often workout side by side and can be

doing drills, not racing. Or, they can be doing a series of race pieces, such as 5 minutes at pressure (rowing hard), followed by 2 minutes of paddling (rowing easy), and repeated. Or, 30 strokes at pressure, followed by 10 seconds of paddling, repeated for 20 minutes or more. This can be frustrating to figure out and even more frustrating if you are trying to pass. You can call out to a coach or coxswain (pronounced Coss'n) or even a rower, and ask how much longer they have in their piece but be sure to ask a question that can be answered with either fingers (to indicate minutes) or one word, especially if you're asking a rower. An experienced coxswain or rower will signal when it is good to pass but you should do so with as little wake as possible.

Q: Do rowers use a fixed start, count down start, or running start?

A: All of the above. Official races often use a fixed start, with people on anchored boats holding the stern of the rowing shell in place, but many also use a floating start which can be a struggle to line up. If you encounter either, please wait until the race is underway and then follow it down the course. During practice, many coaches will row into pieces, by giving a one minute, 30 second, and 10 second warning. If you hear this, you know those boats are about to pick up speed and you should not attempt to pass.

Q; Who has the right-of-way – rowing shells, sailboats, or motorboats?

A: Per the US Rowing web site, "Right-of way rules have been developed by the US Coast Guard. Vessels with the least maneuverability have the right-of way, but always play it safe and take action to avoid all other types of boats. " In general, human-powered craft have the right of way over sail-powered craft and **both** have the right-of-way over motor-powered craft. But there are exceptions. Any vessel near shore or another obstruction should always be given room to avoid the obstruction. Vessels that significantly alter direction and speed should give room for others to keep clear. While a sailboat with wind must yield to a rowing shell, a sailboat without wind has the right of way. The key here is to avoid contact. While we can argue on shore about who had the right-of-way and who may have made a mistake, no discussion is going to repair a hole in a boat or an injury to a rower, sailor, canoe/kayaker or power boater. Taking early action to prevent a collision is best.

Q: I had the right-of-way and they did not yield. What's up with that?

A: Maybe you had the right-of-way, maybe there was a good reason the other vessel could not avoid you. Maybe the other boat never saw you. Keep in mind that rowers are often looking for a straight course to follow and many not notice the boat that is several lanes over in their view. This is similar to car drivers not seeing bicyclists. Keep in mind that having the right-of-way does not entitle you to go anywhere on the watersheet that you would like. Any right-of-way should be balanced with seamanship and courtesy. Just because I could do something does not always mean that I should.

Q: I am visiting from out of town. What should I pay attention to?

A: The Charles is an extremely busy waterway with thousands of recreational and competitive rowers of all skills and abilities. Many crews are training for top honors in their division and there are a large number of athletes training to represent the USA in World and Olympic competition. While stopping may seem like a reasonable thing for them to do to yield to you or to deal with your wake, this may be the 10th incident that they have had during this row, and they are now falling behind in their training. That does not entitle them to reckless behavior and

the rowing clubs are very proactive in keeping their athletes well behaved. None of us want to have a collision. But understand the challenges that they encounter each row on this busy waterway.

Q: I witnessed an unsafe situation or had a real problem with a rower. How do I make sure that it never happens again?

A: CRAB is not an enforcement agency or any kind of regulatory authority, but its members are committed to safe boating and work cooperatively to achieve a safe environment for all. If you know where the rower boats from, you can contact the organization directly and speak with a head coach or board member. But, if you are uncomfortable with that or are not sure where the rower was from, you can contact CRAB at charlesriverallianceofboaters@gmail.com and we will handle it. You should try to provide the date, time and location of the incident, a brief description of the rower (how many rowers in the boat, color of boat, description of rower including approximate age) and most importantly, the color and pattern painted on their oars. Every program is receptive to hearing about incidents and works to make sure that they never happen again. If the incident involved a collision, that is something for you and your insurance companies to work out. If it involved criminal behavior, then call the State Police. But if your goal is to bring about awareness and better safety on the river, then please, contact CRAB.

I hope that this information has been helpful and is received in the positive light that it was intended. As coaches and competitors, we all benefit from the jewel that the Charles River is. While the rowing, sailing, power boating, canoe/kayaking and dragon boating communities on the Charles have slightly different interests, we are one community and cooperation is the rule. The key for all of us to use the river together is communication.