

**A GUIDE**  
**FOR**  
**COMPETITIVE**  
**SURFBOAT**  
**SWEETHANDS**

## INTRODUCTION.

The ultimate aim of a new sweep hand is to participate in surf boat racing, But, before even considering competition a competent standard must be gained. You must be capable of handling a surf boat in an efficient manner. This means you have spent considerable time training crews in both enclosed waters and surf work. It has been a practice in the past to throw new sweeps into "the deep end of the pool", before they have gained the basics of sweeping and the safety standards required.

Into today's world, with the high cost of craft and gear and the ever increasing litigation laws this is an expensive and dangerous exercise.

A new sweep who is keen to compete must make sure that they are confident of their ability and are in charge of a crew that are capable of competitive rowing. It is useless for a new sweep to compete if their crew is sub standard. It is a good idea to seek the advice of an experienced sweep within your Club or Branch, on their opinion of your ability to compete.

You will find on most occasions when you start competing that the surf conditions are within the scope of your ability, but there will be times when they are not. Do not hesitate to withdraw from racing, it is not a stigma, it is a sensible and proper decision that your Club and crew should be grateful for. Should this happen do not hit the first pub, try and find suitable surf conditions where you and your crew can practice surf work, so that one day you and your crew can achieve the goal of "catching the wave of the carnival".

You must have good knowledge on the rules of surf boat racing. The S.I.S.A. Competition Handbook is very comprehensive and will always be the basis of competition rules. Special Event rules may differ and when contesting these events make sure you understand every aspect. There is nothing more destroying to a sweep and his crew morale than disqualification or disadvantage from a rules definition.

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- POST RACE:- Run-relax-fluids-food-team spirit.

## **PRE RACE DAY.**

As previously mentioned it is a must that your crew have reached a competitive standard that will see them within two or three lengths of most other competing crews at the buoys. Boat races are between four and five minute duration, and for a crew to give their utmost for two and half minutes is not a big ask. Even if they drop off the pace on the run home, they have shown that they have the potential to improve with further fitness and training. A crew that is hopelessly out of condition and without proper rowing technique are a embarrassment to themselves and their Club and cause the whole carnival to be prolonged.

The next item of importance is to check that your boat is shipshape. Common racing problems are loose foot straps and stretchers-malfunctioning pumps-flat batteries-corroded power leads-faulty power switch-loose bungs with no tie strings-sand still in boat from previous use-sweep and rowlock stems bent-no rowlock rings-loose quarter bars-loose rowlock housing fittings.

Check the sweep oar has no shakes or bad bruises. This also applies to the rowing oars and this inspection should be the job of each individual rower. Rowers must realise that their oars are their tools of trade and top tradesmen have first class tools.

It is also important that a few fundamental tools are available-spanners-pliers-hammer-standard and Phillips screwdrivers-a few assorted screws and bolts-spare foot straps and rowlocks-grease or oar lubricant.

Boat trailer is roadworthy and rego up to date-tail and stop lights are working-ball joint-chain and shackle-tyres and spare O.K.-boat holding cross arms and oar rest O.K.-Wing nuts properly tightened-make sure all tent equipment -poles-ropes-pegs hammer are together.

A good crew are well organized on how they intend to travel to the carnival, what time they intent to leave and approximate time of arrival at the beach this is very important for a crews pre race preparation.

## **RACE DAY.**

Transporting the boat and gear to the carnival is usually the sweeps job, and even if they delegate another person to this task they must make sure it happens. Some Clubs have a check list in there boat shed and every item is ticked off as it is loaded in the vehicles. You can never be too organized in this area, it is very easy to leave behind a important part of your gear. One prominent boat club crews attended a carnival and through confusion who was towing the boat, left the craft back in the boat shed, 100kms away.

Possibly one of the most important thing on race day, is the crew meeting punctually at the carnival. If one person is late, it upsets everyone and boat racing is hard enough without starting the day on a bad note. Mishaps do happen, but with the availability of mobile phones communication is made much easier in todays world. The ideal arrangement is for the crew to travel together. Another important item is that the sweep or first person to arrive at the carnival, report to officials the number of crews competing. This helps officials who appreciate your prompt action. If you start your career by showing officials you are well organized, you will gain their respect and they will help you if you have problems. To reach top class competition you must run a well organized rowing team or crew.

## PREFACE.

On arrival at the beach take some time selecting where to erect the tent or shade cover. A ideal spot is central to the competition starting area, public facilities, and food outlets and if possible a view of racing. On a long day continual walking to these places can sap energy from your crew, also make sure your spare oars are in a safe place. Having a warm up row is a must. All athletes should spend a period, of preparation, warming up their bodies and minds for the particular sport they have trained for. On days when the surf is extremely rough or dangerous, it maybe unwise to have a warm up row, as you must consider damage to your craft, gear or injury to a crew member. In this situation a run along the beach and rowing exercises are a alternative. Warm ups a essential part of surf boat racing.

Coaches and sweeps have different ideas on how to warm up. A general practice is to row to the buoys at three quarter pace, have a few turns, a few short sprints to sea or a longer style row. Then "feel out" the run of the boat on the homeward runners and swells, this is most important for the sweep, running swells differ according to the prevailing wind, run in and run out currents, sand bars and reefs, a new sweep is well advised to decide how they will handle the sea on the outward journey and how they will set the boat on the homeward runners. Knowing that other boats will only be a oars length away. While the crew is warming up they are considering their race tactics. If they have a experienced rower in their crew, then have a talk about what they intend to do. Surf boat racing is a team effort.

When you are practicing your pre race turns it is essential you decide the angle at which the boat will approach the buoy and exact spot the buoy will hit the bow.

When you decide to return to shore make sure you select a wave that is within your capabilities, Catching this wave properly, straight and true to the beach is a morale booster for yourself and crew and shows other sweeps that they will have to beat you in the rowing department, as you are quite capable of holding a wave. There is a lot of gamesmanship in surf boat rowing.

After the warm up row your crew should seek shelter out of the sun or wind and relax, but the sweep must make a further study of surf conditions. Get yourself into a routine of finding a vantage point where all starting positions are visible and in your mind row a full race over the course you are likely to draw, taking in to consideration whether the position will improve or deteriorate as the weather and tide change

If you are not in the first heat you should try and watch it, especially if a top crew is competing. Like a top pro golfer watches his opponent putting in his line, you can see how a good sweep reads the surf and gets his craft through the break. Another point worth considering is to study the starters. They all vary and have different starting methods. Remember although they pull the trigger it does not mean your obligated to start your crew. Starters who try to get crews away evenly through the shore break and not over worry about the main breaking area are easier to read, but those who consider making swells can get you into trouble through frustration.

## **PRE START**

Have your crew and boat ready to start at least two races before your event. This helps to settle your crew and allows you to watch how other sweeps are handling the position you have drawn. Always recheck with officials your buoy colour, its not a bad idea to have a crew member voice this colour half way to the buoys. If you have another crew starting in another division, as soon as you finish this race, make sure they are organized and officials are aware of your problem. **Communicate.**

## **ON THE STARTING LINE.**

When the whistle blows, take your boat into the water slightly upstream to any side sweeping current, with the bow turned into this sweep. This allows you instant control when the craft floats, the check starter may ask you to move left or right and with the boat staple this direction is easily carried out, without a lot of exertion from your crew. All the time you are watching the incoming surf and position of other crews that are near your boat, if they come within a oars length let the check starter know. contrary to many observers thoughts, the most likely mishap at the star is clashing oars with another crew.

One of your crew has to inform you and his crew mates whether the starters "Guns Up"[ready to fire] "Guns Down" [Waiting for a lull]. All the time you must be watching the breaking waves and incoming shore break. Your bow must be set far enough into the side current to compensate for the surge that will effect your boat as the crew jump in. Remember the starter is not seeing the same picture as you, and you have to make your own decision whether the crew gets in the boat when he fires the gun. If the shore break is fierce you may have difficulty in keeping the sweep oar blade in its correct starting position, this may require constant turning of the blade flat and pushing the handle away from your body. It cannot be far enough away, because when you jump into the boat, the handle will come to you very quickly. Some sweeps pull the sweep oar fully into the boat to get away from this problem. This sacrifices their "earthing " effect between water and boat and cause balance difficulties for the crew.

## **THE START.**

When the gun fires all your attention is directed in keeping the boat as steady as possible until the crew take their first stroke. As they catch you maybe able to push the boat[Fig 1] and even take a few paces forward, but when you jump in they must have their oars in the water. It is a no-no to jump in when they are in the recovery cycle as you will surely upset their balance. If you are able to push the boat, try and time your bodies arrival on the tuck deck, just as a broken wave or swell hits the bow[Fig.2]. If your crew catch properly, with this lift, you will find your boat will jump and gain boat speed faster.



Fig. 1 Push at start.

Fig. 2. Sweep aboard as bow hits broken water.

You must be very alert to where other crews are positioned, if they look like coming close to your craft, then veer away from them, even at the cost of going off course. Should another boat be badly out of control, it may be better to stop your crew and try and go around them. When you are racing you are usually in a confined area. you must use this area wisely, steering your craft to a spot in the breaking surf you consider easiest to negotiate.

A common fault among new sweeps is to allow surf conditions to control their boat and they drift away from the best passage seawards. Do your utmost to remain in the position that you feel is the best way out.

## THROUGH THE BREAK.

This is the make or break part of surf boat racing. Unlike taking a boat out for a practice row, you are now in a racing mode. Your whole attitude must change. You have to make instant definite decisions that will benefit your crews chances. In flat conditions it is usual to take on any small waves, relying on the speed of your boat and your crews weight to push or punch through the wave, but if it is possible to slip around the slightest swell it will gain some advantage for your crew.

In moderate conditions with say a two wave breaking sequence, you must show some aggression. Possibly attacking the first breaker with power and weight, gauging your boats impact so that your crew are settled and able to gain enough boat speed to get over the next wave before it breaks.

Do not let your determination to beat the surf, turn you into a "Kamikaze" sweep. You have to take chances when you are racing, but make them calculated risks. Take in to consideration how other crews are progressing, is your boat speed sufficient, how the surf conditions are further to sea. This is the most intense part of boat racing for a sweep.

In really big or dangerous seas your attitude must again change. Make sure you know where other crews are positioned and not a danger to your craft. Beyond that forget about them, your race is with Mother Nature and she will make you earn every metre seawards and try and kick your but coming ashore.

One thing that is very important when you are racing in moderate and rough seas, is to keep in mind the safety of your crew. Remember they have their backs to the incoming waves. Injury to a crew member will not only impede your present race, but possibly put you out of the days competition and future events. Even if it sacrifices a lead, plan your progress in waters with less turbulence. Big waves breaking on sand bars signal problems.

If you stop your crew waiting for a break, do not let your boat drift towards a dangerous area. Back up and work your boat into a safer place for your eventual take off seawards. In a big sea your major decision is deciding when to "have a go". When this decision is made you must drive your crew at top speed and even if you feel you are going to get thumped, keep them going. Over the decades it has often been impossible to believe that a boat has broken through massive seas. Call it luck, human endeavour, or pure lunacy.

Another proven fact is that a boat hitting a big wave with top speed is likely to have less damage to the crew and craft, than that of a craft going at quarter or half pace. When you get through a big wave quickly balance your boat and get your crew sprinting to meet the next wave. What ever you do, do not give up.

Its a fact of a sweeps life that you will get swamped, but if you show timidity to Mother Nature she will give you a real hiding and you will lose your crews respect. You must use body weight to balance your crew as much as possible. Hunching forward to help your crew gain boat speed to punch into a wave then swinging backwards to lift the bow over the white water

When your craft goes over a large wave it may become airborne and land with a loud thump. This is where a good sweep gains a advantage in a race, they land evenly balanced, on their feet, sweep oar handle away from their body and ready to counteract any list their boat has made to the port or starboard. [Figs.3-4-5-6]. You can compare this action to a boxer coming out of his corner for the start of the next round. They leap from their stool, springing forward ready to fight.



Fig.3. Sweep lays back to lift bow.

Fig.4. Sweep lands balance and in control.

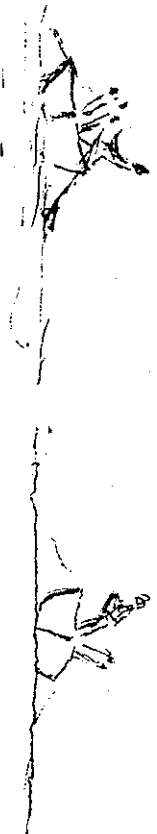


Fig.5 Balance.

Fig.6.

When the boat lands the sweep oar may slam down on the quarter bar, make sure your fingers are clear and you have a firm grip as it rebounds. At no other stage of racing do you move your body so excessively.

Do everything in your power not to fall over, your sweep oar is your walking stick. If you have to move your feet, do so quickly and make sure they are firmly back on the deck before adjusting your balance.

When the boat is about to hit a big broken wave it is very wise to push the sweep oar handle as far away from your body as possible, this prevents the blade digging in on the boats impact and likely breaking.

If the force of the wave pushes your boat backwards, your crew must be prepared to dig deep and stop this motion. You will often see top crews standing up on their foot stretchers trying their utmost to stop their craft back shooting [Fig. 7]



Holding. Fig. 7

By holding your boat in a near stationary position it will allow the pumps to remove excessive water and allow you to prepare for another attack on the incoming surf.. Never give up if you are going to sink, be like the old sea dogs and go down fighting.

## **COURSE TO THE BUOYS.**

Having negotiated the break and settled your crew, you quickly take note of your opponents position and set a direct course to your turning buoy. The contest to the buoys is a fair indication who wins and you must drive your crew to stay in contact with the leaders, should you be in front consolidate and increase this advantage.

The standard of surf boat racing is very high and nearly all races are evenly contested and all your wits and body movements are needed to help your crews effort. Your body balance is constantly used to keep your craft on a even keel and crew comfortable. Course correction is made without any jerky movement. Never apply excessive power on the sweep oar when the crew are in the recovery cycle. Try and remain as close to your nearest opponent as possible, about a oars length, this ensures your are meeting the same sea conditions as they are, while doing this keep on your direct course to your buoy.

Old-timers will try you out if they are in front, they will slowly lead you off course and then duck away before you know what has happened. They will not persist with this tactic for to long as it will be detrimental to their own progress.

It is very important that none of your crew look around to see their position in the race, one faulty stroke while racing can cost the winning place. Pay attention to the incoming swells and surface water conditions. Should a bad section of turbulence be sighted let your crew know so they can concentrate on blade control and balance.

If you see a smooth section coming, alert your crew to give more effort in these better rowing conditions. A crew that can handle chop has a tremendous advantage.

In tight races with strong N.E or S.E. winds it is sometimes a good tactic to let your opponent on either your left or right take a slight lead and let your craft progress in the lee of their boat, let them take the brunt of the windy chop, but make sure another crew is not breaking away from the pack.

Over the decades different sweeps have devised their own particular tactics in the race to the buoys. Kieth "Spaza" Hurst, who always had fit and well coached crews, would do everything in his power to take the lead right from the start. He would consolidate this lead, calm his crew and try and conserve their energy, he would then allow his

opponents to creep up on his lead. Then he would drive his crew for a 30 or 40mt sprint, he would play this cat and mouse game all the way out and slowly draw away from the field. He broke many great opposing crews hearts. Ken Murrays policy was to have fanatically fit crews whose only pace, at all times, was "full speed ahead". The only way to beat them was to adopt the "row till you die" attitude.

Plotting the most direct course to your turning buoy is essential. Boat races can be won by gaining only half a metre, with a correct course setting. Prevailing conditions are a major consideration on what course you should set. In light N.E. or S.E. winds it is wise to set a imaginary course marker about half way between your turning buoy and the one on your immediate left [right hand in turns], this will allow for a curving approach to the buoy [Fig.8.]. This allows the boat to travel around the buoy with the least loss of boat speed. It is important that the crew on your left is either even or behind your boat, if they are in front you must reassess your position to ensure that their turning procedure will not cause a collision, some sweeps make very wide turns and although they may be in the wrong, nobody is a winner if a collision occurs. When your boat is 30 or 40mt from your turning buoy you begin changing course from your imaginary marker towards your buoy, this is not a sharp correction, just a slow turning course change.

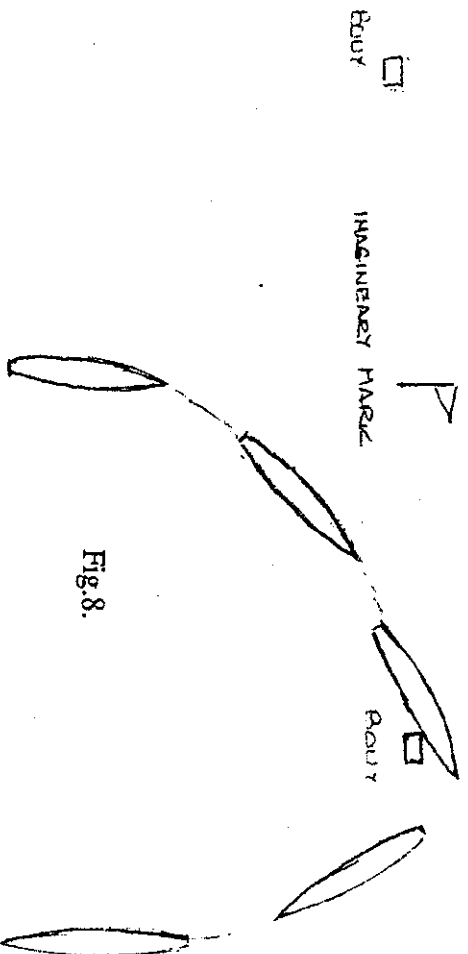


Fig. 8.

## TURNING.

Most experienced sweeps agree that starting and turning are where tight races are won. You must spend hours perfecting your turning routine. Hitting the buoy with the boats bow at the correct angle takes a great deal of skill and concentration. In every race you contest the conditions will differ and hitting the buoy correctly a big challenge. The most common spot that the buoy should hit the bow is adjacent the bow seat. The boat is positioned at about a 45deg angle to the line of the buoys[Fig.8.]. every crew has their own ideas and drill for turning. Generally these variations are

similar. As the bow hits the buoy the sweep calls "Turn" or "Buoy" and the stroke side dig in their blades either sharply or half power. Digging in hard turns the boat much quicker but takes run and speed from the boats progress. A full sweeping turn with a half dig has the advantage of keeping the boat on a more even keel and reducing boat speed the least. If you are in front of the crew on your right hand, then you may have to make a sharp turn to ensure you do not collide or clash oars. It is important that your crew are capable of making both sharp and wide turns.

When the stroke side dig in the bow side keep rowing and increase their rating and length forward. They have no need to finish their stroke hard, their objective is to pull the bow of the boat around buoy. Bow side should finish their turning strokes when the oar is at right angles to the rowlock. [Fig.9.]

Stroke side dig.  
Bow side extend catch.

Bow side finish.

Stroke commence rowing,  
in time with bow side.

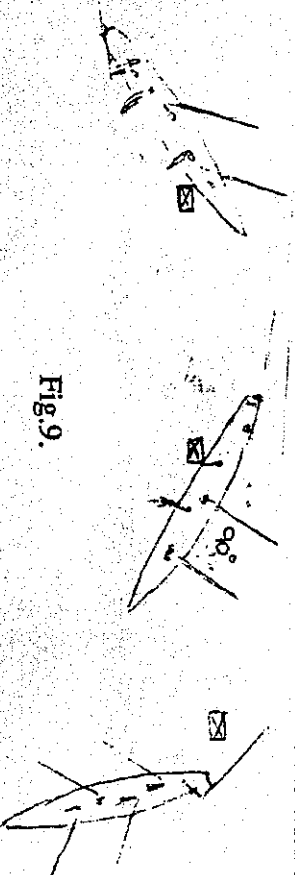


Fig.9.

The sweep has three alternatives as the bow hits the buoy, take a big pulling stroke swinging the oar handle over their head and then giving a power plus push till the boat is on its homeward course. They can turn by taking quick rowing strokes in time with the bow side. They may choose to feather their blade and concentrate on boat balance while the crew turn the boat. All these procedures need excellent crew balance, with stroke side concentrating to remedy any rocking that may occur. The stroke sides job is reasonably easy on the turn, but they must give greater attention to boat balance and make sure they lean well forward and allow bow side to get added length on their forward stroke. [Fig.9.]

When the craft is about three quarters through the turn, the whole crew recover their rowing cycle, remembering that the stroke picks up timing from 2nd bow. On the next stroke the strokehand is again the pacemaker.

The order for the crew to stop their turning routine and start rowing again must be given by the sweep, as only they can see where the opposition are situated. Avoiding interference at the buoys is a very important part of racing.

A crew coming out of a turn must be prepared to give their utmost and get the boat back to top boat speed. The sprinting mode used at the start is again applied.

It must be a giant "kick" with possibly ten power plus strokes. A champion crew have the ability to nearly lift the boat out of the water with their initial strokes out of a turn. On many occasions when your crew take their first stroke after a turn, you may find a small swell or runner under your boat and a big "kick" may allow you to catch this bonus.