

How to steer Henley

Whether you're racing Henley Womens Regatta or Henley Royal Regatta, the course is the same for the first 1500 meters.

This guide, written by Andy Probert and Julie Hogg, experienced Henley coxswains, will serve you well.

THE COURSE

A map of the course http://www.hrr.co.uk/fs/downloads/HRR_Course_Map.pdf

The stations are numbered from the spectators' viewpoint: so Lane 1 is nearest the bank, Lane 2 furthest away (it's also alphabetical - Berkshire (Berks) nearest, Buckinghamshire (Bucks) furthest away)

The stations are almost equal in terms of numbers of wins, according to the Stewards

The course is straight but the river curves and you row against the stream. This has both real and mental effects:

At the start, the course is close to the bank and the main stream goes the far side of the island, so the stations are equal. Beyond the end of the Island, the Bucks station moves into the stream and Berks gets an advantage. The bank then 'moves away' to the left, giving Bucks the advantage for a while. This eventually peters out and it's fairly even from then on, until the final run in, when Berks begins to get a slight advantage



The Henley course closer to the bank at start & finish.

Mentally, you can 'feel' the people on the bank at the start, but then it suddenly gets very quiet and lonely as the bank 'moves away' into a bay. As a cox you need to fill that gap. The bank slowly comes back and by Remenham Club you can feel the closeness and the shouting again, which stays with you, to a greater or lesser extent, until the finish line

The "Remenham Roar" is famous and real: a help if you are competing for one of the Remenham clubs, a real threat if you are competing against one. Remenham Club and Upper Thames are about halfway down the course and 'the roar' can feel like you are being pushed from the side from the volume of cheering. Anticipate a Remenham crew making a huge and effective move as they pass these clubs

The Stewards Enclosure at the end of the course is longer than the Remenham enclosure and the cheers louder than Remenham but somehow it's less noticeable. Crews are affected but don't actually hear them; coxes have to deliberately switch out of focus for a moment to hear them

RACING

Access both stake boats by passing between them - you can also get onto the Berks one by squeezing between it and the bank (but it's tight and messy) and onto Bucks through the buoys by the island



The Henley start has a Y pole which lines up with a red circle on another pole behind where the picture is taken. For coxless boats this gives you the 'line'.

Despite being the most peaceful, professional and beautiful start in the world, it is also the most terrifying (and that feeling never goes away)

Watch for the flags at both the start and at the end of the Island for indication of cross-winds and for head / tail winds (there are flags on top of posts and by the hospitality tents) - usually just anticipating a cross-wind is enough but knowing if it's head or tail can help with technique calls

The start is pretty well protected from the wind, so the bows shouldn't swing too much between the umpire's call 'hand down' and 'Go!'

You need to be pretty straight off the start - those first buoys are big, real blade-clunkers (unlike multi-lane buoys) - you don't want to hit one

After the start, it's a relief when the booms start at the end of the Island, as they are easier to steer off - but they are lethal - touch one and you've as good as lost the race

The lanes appear to be smaller than multi-lane ones - it's an illusion - you can just about get three boats abreast on the course

There is no line of buoys between the crews (just like the Boat Race or a boxing ring - but unlike those you mustn't push your opponent around) - you have to judge the distance between crews

HOW YOU STEER (as a cox!)

On lining up on the start, whether you are stationed on the Berkshire (Berks) or Buckinghamshire (Bucks) station, line up your bows with the Henley Church spire which is at the end of course and clearly visible all the way down.

STEERING THE BERKSHIRE STATION:

If you are on the Berks station you are fairly close to the river bank (and spectators) and the booms only begin just after the start as the course moves out to left of centre of the river. The course does run against the stream and in years when there has been a lot of rain the flow/current will potentially be quite strong. As you come off the start on the Berks station, keep your bows on the Church and gently ensure that you come into the boomed section, about a blade spoon width off the booms. Stay that way all the way down the course if you can.

There are crossings down the course where boats going to the start can cut over the race course to the far side of the river (the cross-over points). The booms are removed to enable this and so they can be areas where motorised boat wash comes onto the race course. The amount of wash depends how busy the regatta is. I can remember having to call a few 'wash' warnings on the Friday of HRR one year as the river was teeming with spectators in pleasure boats! You just need to watch your steering and anticipate how to steer depending on where and how the wash is coming. I usually tell the crew to hold the knees and nail the rhythm; draw high and feather high, whilst I gently adjust the steering, as necessary.

As you get to Remenham, the course moves slightly more into the centre of the river and on the Berks station, this is where there is some advantage to being close to the left hand (strokeside) booms, especially if there is a lot of stream.

A big push here is always good as there are lots of spectators watching from the Remenham Club and you can feed off the adrenaline, especially if its a close one!

Stay close to the booms all the way down through Stewards and keep your bows on the Church Spire and you won't go far wrong.

STEERING THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE STATION:

Starting on the Bucks Station means you will have Temple Island on your right (Bowside) and depending on the wind, you may have a slightly more sheltered start. The course is buoyed for the first 50 metres or so and then becomes the wooden booms so its important to take your steering line off the Church Spire and not line up along the line of the buoys.

The first part of the course past Temple Island is quite sheltered and once you are into the boomed section you need to line up right of centre of the course, though not too far off the booms to begin with-about half a blade shaft length. As the course moves more into the centre of the river, as you approach Fawley and Remenham, keep right of centre and call a push at Fawley as this will counteract any stream coming through the cross-over points. As you come past Remenham, keep your cool and, if you can, edge a little over to strokeside - not much - do it very gently - and hold your line on the Church. At the hole in the Wall which is another landmark on the Bucks bank - opposite the start of the Stewards Enclosure (it's a footbridge on the Bucks side of the course) the course is more in the centre of the river so edge over to stroke side a bit more, though again, gently as you don't want to be warned or red-flagged by the Umpire or create any blade clashing situations!

The statistics show that wins on each station balance out over the history of both the men's and the women's Regattas. However, when the river is full, the Berkshire station is slightly more advantageous, especially in the first half of the race. If you can be in front at

Remenham and stay in front, then this is the time to break the opposition. If you are level or behind at Remenham, on either station, there is still everything to play for!

In rear loader, either imagine your half being a lane (possibly with an imaginary line of buoys to complement the booms,) or keep an eye on a mixture of fixed on the uprights and the booms which you can judge against a combination of the position of stroke (or seven's) shoulder and the line of blades nearest the booms. There's a parallax between blades and boom that you need to find and know - and once gained, never doubt it; steering the Henley course is about keeping your nerve

In a front loader, aim for the church tower at the end of the course at the start - that will give a course parallel to the booms. Towards the middle of the course, the three pitched roofs of the building at the end come into focus - one roof point lines up perfectly with Berks, another with Bucks, and they will keep you on course until the finish. Just occasionally snatch a quick glance over your shoulder to check the distance between the blades and the boom - but don't panic - believe that what you are doing is correct

If you are getting very close to the booms, don't jam the rudder on, as the boat will pivot and the stern-most blades will hit them; just edge away very, very slowly. If warned that you are too close to the opposition, react hard if you are about to hit them (or risk being disqualified) but react more slowly if you are not, in order to avoid heading straight for the booms

Tactically, domestic crews tend to push at the physical markers down the course because they know where the markers are, whereas more internationally experienced crews may make moves according to the stopwatch. The markers are easier to work with (clock-watching on a boomed course is a risky business) but your opponent will know when you are likely to push. Pushing 10 strokes before or after a marker is a good tactic

It's a two-boat race. You can treat it like a multi-lane race and do your own thing, but your opponent may simply outrace you tactically



Picture of the “Mile & a quarter” signal box progress board showing lane 2 ahead.

Once settled after the start - somewhere around the Quarter Mile signal box (a wooden platform on the Berks booms where an official raises ‘signals’ to indicate who is ahead at that mark) - you need to assess if you’re up, down or level, and whether you are now travelling faster or slower than your opponent (or at the same speed), and play your tactics accordingly. You now need to try and increase your lead, work on pulling the opposition back, or engage in a side-by-side battle



Progress board showing lane 1 leading lane 2 by one and a half lengths (distance between the red numbers)

The course is 2,112 meters long, and against the stream, so it's long enough to allow for at least two pushes: the first (usually about the Barrier - 2 minutes into the race) to get an edge and the second (somewhere beyond halfway) to get a decisive advantage. A third push may be needed if you're down or if the race is too close for comfort

You can make use of the differences in the stations (especially if there is a lot of stream, which can make the course unfair). Crews can time their pushes to the points in the course where they have the greatest advantage

In a two-boat race, you can be privy to (you're close enough to hear their calls) what your opposite number is doing and calling, and so you can counter it

At the start, you needed to have decided whether to turn the amplifier up (to make sure you are heard and drown out the opposition) or down (so that only your crew can hear you). Which you choose depends on your style. Some overseas crews, especially American ones, tend to be very noisy, so you need to counter that with lots of noise of your own, or risk them dominating you

Henley is a long and tiring course, even with easy races. A crew must settle into a fast efficient pace after the start to do well. Luckily, it is a well organized regatta, with well prepared crews which haven't had to make a mad dash to get to the start, so a scramble is less likely

But once settled (as you can hear from the commentary) the trailing crew generally settles to a higher rating than the leading crew

The water at the start is protected by Temple Island and the booms later on have a quelling effect launch washes. However, the bigger washes do get through to the course and it is worth delaying pushes etc until they have passed, as they tend to kill the run of the boat, together with any hope of extra speed

The final run-in on the Henley course starts at about the beginning of the Stewards' enclosure. This is easy to spot in practice because it's got seating in stands but landmarks disappear when there are thousands of spectators. Similarly, markers on the riverbanks can be obscured by small boats on race days. You need to allow for this. The Progress Board is about 10 strokes to go to the line - enough time, if it's close, to snatch a win



The back of the progress board just before the finish line

The run-in needs to be a rising series of attacks - your opposition is tired and losing form - that may be the opportunity to get your bows in front, or alternatively increase your lead

It's always worth attacking on the Henley course - whether you are down or leading by miles and have dropped the rating - never let up; anything can happen, including accidents

IN PRACTICE

It's worth doing pieces in the middle and near the finish of the course, just to get used to it - if you do everything about the start, the finish remains unfamiliar territory

It's also worth alternating which station you use in to get the crew used to both of them

Make a point of never touching a boom or a post, ever, to avoid creating doubt in the crew's minds

On the way to the start, both in practice and during the regatta, cut across to the Berks side if you possibly can - the water is better, it gives a clearer run and there are no motor boats to worry about

Crossing back from the Berks to the Bucks side, there are two cross-over points near each other (with green flags on the posts) - these are set at an angle so you can move into the bay in the bank, swing out and row right across without stopping (which is very satisfying!)

If you come across your opponent in the warm-up, just ignore them. Only if you are very brave do you do a start with them watching you (and vice versa)

At the boat tents, the landing stages/pontoons are angled for a reason - approach them at right angles to the bank and easy (weigh enough) with enough momentum to get you in - once the bows are protected by the pontoons, the stream will start to swing the unprotected stern round, leaving you parallel with, and (hopefully) alongside, the pontoon



Angled boating pontoons and striped boat tents.

It's best to land on the upstream side of the pontoon, with the stream pushing you onto it, and boat from the downstream side, so that the stream takes you away from it - getting it wrong is very embarrassing

If doing the qualifying races, be aware of where the starting posts are (they get hit very frequently), treat it like an intense, high rating head course, not a race, and either stick to the middle of the course (if you are unsure), or (if more confident) try and knock a few seconds off your time by starting on the Berks station, moving across to Bucks for a bit, then moving back to Berks for the end

As one of my coaches used to say “Always win the close ones!”