Foot fetish

DEVELOP YOUR POWER FEET FIRST.

I n December, I was speaking at Jim Joy’s Joy of Sculling Conference and a coach asked me where I stood on the subject of pushing off the balls of the feet at the catch versus off the heels. Since I’ve heard many heated discussions on this topic, I stated that this was just my opinion before I answered. I then told the group that I believe it is more effective if you start the drive pushing off the balls of the feet, and gave some rationale, which I’ll go into in a minute. Then the coach asked Volker Nolte, a former German national team coach and rower, for his opinion, maybe hoping to stir up some conflict. Volker Nolte was going to shoot holes in my explanation. Volker is a two-time Olympic silver medalist and head rowing coach at Union Boat Club in Boston, Massachusetts. You can send questions to Tom at tbfi@tbfi.com or go to his Web site at www.TBFit.com for more training information.

Let the heels come up
Few rowers can keep their heels down at the catch. Unless you are really flexible, your heels will inevitably rise off the footplate. Coaches who tell their athletes to keep the heels down are asking for problems. When the rower approaches the catch and the heels start to come up, they’ll stop the slide and go for extra reach at the catch. Be careful what you say.

Heels-up as a reference
You can use heels-up as a reference point telling you when you are almost at the catch and, as a cue, when to start swinging the arms up to place the blade. I also like to watch the speed of the heels rising; not coming up too fast, but controlled and smooth. If they come up fast and out of control it usually means you are rushing into the catch. You need to feel the patience of the weight rocking onto the balls of the feet. You can practice this by standing up and then stepping forward like a lunge. Land smoothly on your heel, then transfer the weight to the ball of the foot and then spring back.

Weight on the stretchers
You have the weight on the balls of the feet at the catch, now keep it on for the drive. If you start the drive by opening the catch, you’re taking the weight off the feet, which decreases leg drive. A simple exercise to show this is to sit in a chair with your feet on the floor about hip-width apart. Your back should be perpendicular to the floor. Try to stand. Five bucks says you can’t. Now tilt forward so you feel the weight on your back. Now you can stand. Why? Because you have the weight on the feet. This is why we try to keep the body forward for the first part of the drive.

Maintain contact
I believe it’s important for everyone to master the feet-out drill. Why? Try rowing arms only on the erg with your feet out of contact with the foot stretchers or just your heels on the foot stretchers. Then try to push with your toes as you draw the handle to the body. Which is most powerful? If the feet start to lose contact with the foot stretcher as you are opening with the back and then drawing with the arms, you’re throwing away power. Also, if your feet lose contact with the stretcher, your body weight is almost in free fall as it continues to move to the bow. It should be stable and starting to move forward. If it’s not, you risk having sloppy, boat-anchoring finishes. It becomes even worse as the rate gets higher. Think of the foot stretchers as a scale, when you get closer to the catch, the weight increases.

1. Let your heels come up at the catch.

2. Maintain contact through the mid-drive.

3. Finish the stroke with strong connection.

4. A sprinter’s explosive push off comes from the balls of the feet.