

THE SPORT OF ROWING

133. Harry Mahon

*New Zealand 1982-84 – Xeno Müller – Rob Waddell –
Greg Searle – Great Britain 2000*



Peter Spurrier

Harry Mahon

The Age of Enlightenment was marked by the free flow of ideas across borders and the emergence of coaches able to approach rowing technique with a fresh set of eyes. One such man was the late **Harold Thomas**

Mahon,⁶⁴²⁵ who worked his magic on four continents.

⁶⁴²⁵ For Americans, Mahon rhymes with “Ron” with a satisfied “ah” sound, as in “mahn.” As spoken by Brits, Aussies and Kiwis, you might also detect perhaps the hint on of an “r” sound before the “n.” “Harry might be quietly amused

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According to his 2001 obituaries in London's *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, Mahon was born in Wanganui on the North Island of New Zealand in 1942. His uncle and grandfather had been rowers, and Harry joined the local rowing club at an early age. He studied geography at Victoria University.⁶⁴²⁶

Journalist **Rachell Quarrell**: "He played rugby and rowed as a lightweight in school and college."⁶⁴²⁷

After graduation, he moved to the small North Island town of Hamilton to teach geography at Melville High School, a state-funded day school. He soon joined the newly founded **Waikato Rowing Club**.

In 1966, Mahon began coaching students from Melville and from nearby Fairfield College. Harry soon transformed Waikato R.C. into "one of the most successful clubs in the country."⁶⁴²⁸

British Olympic Champion rower **Martin Cross**: "He left New Zealand in 1969 for a geography and environmental studies teaching post at **Ridley College** [in St. Catharines, Ontario], Canada. He was there for five years,"⁶⁴²⁹ taking a lightweight coxless-four to the 1974 World Championships,⁶⁴³⁰ after which he returned to New Zealand.

The Times of London: "[Mahon] came to national prominence at the World Championships in Amsterdam in 1977 when, in a David and Goliath struggle, his unrated coxless-four took on an apparently

invincible East German crew and only narrowly missed the Gold Medal."⁶⁴³¹

Tony Brook, bow-seat on the 1982 New Zealand World Champion Eight: "In 1979, his under-23 NZ Colts eight took shape, and many of this crew rowed in his later World Champion eights."⁶⁴³²

Quarrell: "In 1981, Mahon took charge of the New Zealand national men's eight,"⁶⁴³³ this in a country used to improbable success in rowing, thanks to his famous predecessor, **Rusty Robertson**.⁶⁴³⁴

New Zealand Men

Tony Popplewell, a member of the 1964 New Zealand Eight: "I was the manager for the NZ team when Harry came on stream as coach of the very successful Colts eights in 1979 and 1980, and then after the eight that year failed to qualify for the final at the World Championships in Munich in 1981, Harry was moved up to Coaching Coordinator.

"A big learning experience for Harry and for the crew."⁶⁴³⁵

Dudley Storey:⁶⁴³⁶ "I had been thrown in the deep end in '82 as team manager, and I didn't know Harry very well at all. The year before for the first time in sixteen years, New Zealand had not made the A final in the men's eights, and I was mouthing off, saying stuff like, 'All the work that we did in the '60s, you guys have stuffed it all up,' that sort of thing, and I was able to give a lot of this to Harry, and he listened to a fair bit of it and very seldom did he ever argue with anything I had to say.

"I was really only the manager, but I had a lot of input into what he was saying and

today at any difficulty in the pronunciation of his name." – Mark A. Shuttleworth, South Africa

⁶⁴²⁶ Obituary, *The Guardian*, May 24, 2001

⁶⁴²⁷ Rachel Quarrell, *Obituary*, *The Independent* of London, May 25, 2001

⁶⁴²⁸ *Obituary: Harry Mahon - Rowing coach who trained the victorious British VIII at last year's Olympics in Sydney*, *The Times* of London, May 24, 2001

⁶⁴²⁹ Cross, p. 47

⁶⁴³⁰ Mary Stevens, *Magic Mahon Harry*, *Regatta Magazine*, May, 2001, p. 15

⁶⁴³¹ *The Times* of London, op cit.

⁶⁴³² Brook, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁴³³ Quarrell, op cit.

⁶⁴³⁴ See Chapter 120.

⁶⁴³⁵ Popplewell, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁴³⁶ See Chapter 120.

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what he was doing. Some of it he did reluctantly, and some of it he took on board.

"Prior to us leaving New Zealand, I had the whole schedule from the first day we started rowing, right through to coming back on the plane, and of course we called it an Entebbe Raid, because we were really only there a month, because we didn't have the money, so in '82 I had all these things laid out. One of the things I had in there was a big party a fortnight out from the heats. 'If you're going to get drunk, that's the only chance you have to do it.'

"I went and found this place right up in the bloody hills somewhere above the Ägerisee, away from everybody so the guys could make as much noise as they liked. If they got drunk, I'd drive them back, and of course it was something for the people to look forward to as well.

"Time out just for us! Don't have to do nothin' for Dud, nothin' for Harry.'

"So up we go. A few of them got drunk. Most of them didn't, but they all came back. Two of the boys got back about 5 o'clock in the morning, and those two actually *needed* to do this. One wanted to fight all the time, but he also was the best racer that we had.

"Harry, for some reason or other, got quite livid about this. Seven o'clock comes, and everybody's out of bed. The arrangement had been, 'You can go and get pissed, boy, but you had better be there at 7 o'clock the next morning.' Sure enough, everybody was . . . in various states of disrepair, but they were there. Harry takes them out on the water and gives them a hard workout and also gives them a bit of a dressing down. He thought they shouldn't be doing this and should be doing that.

"I didn't know anything about this because I was back recovering m'self. The guys come back after the row and say to me, 'Oh, bloody Harry has given us a chew out this morning. We thought this was all part of the plan.'

"Of course it was. It's what it's all about!'

"Well, Harry's chewed our ears, and he's told us we're a bloody disgrace to the bloody New Zealand blazer and all sorts of stuff.'

"And I thought bug this, so I grabbed Harry, dragged him into the dining room, sat him down and said, 'We had an arrangement before we left New Zealand that this was what we were going to do. You *cannot* change the bloody rules half-way through, not without giving people advance notice, so the best thing you can do, Harry Mahon, is to get off your ass, get across to those two guys particularly but the whole eight generally, and apologise!'

"And he did. Harry was man enough to say, 'I *did* make a mistake. We *did* say we were going to do this. I'm sorry.'

"They won the race right there and then, a fortnight before the man even said go."⁶⁴³⁷

The 1982 World Championship

Cross: "In 1982 and 1983, I watched from the sidelines as his eights took the World title by storm. It wasn't the fact that they won. It was the way they did it, moving with deceptive ease."⁶⁴³⁸

Mahon: "The heat draw was good, facing the 1981 World Champion, Russia, Czechoslovakia (who had won at Grünau) and France. The crew had a real confidence-boosting row – being able to 'sit' with the pace, move decisively to take a length lead, and be able to 'cruise for the last part – but still record a similar time to the other heat winner, East Germany. A controlled, exacting display of rowing which demolished the previous champions,

⁶⁴³⁷ Storey, personal conversation, 2010

⁶⁴³⁸ Cross, p. 47

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FISA 1982 Video

United States Men's Eight

1982 World Fourth Place, Rotsee

5 **John Terwilliger** 6'5" 195cm 201lb. 91kg

0°, +35° to -15°, 0-6, 0-9, 5-10, Modern Orthodox *Kernschlag*

Tight shoulders, explosive entry, rebound, then second effort to the release.

suggesting an exciting prospect for the final.⁶⁴³⁹

Brook: "People always said you could recognize instantly a Harry Mahon-coached boat by how together the crew looked when working on the drive and then how leisurely and relaxed they seemed on the recovery, whatever the rating.

"Contrast the conflicting styles of the U.S. crew and the New Zealand eight in 1982, the USA with a pronounced shoulder snatch at the catch, tension in the shoulders, neck and face, working so hard on the drive and on the recovery. They were first through the 500 and 1,000 and were obviously a fine crew, but they seemed to have 'shot their bolt' by 1,200 metres.

"Five lanes away, we were relaxed on the recovery, conserving energy, and at the catch there was no tension in our faces or

necks as it was all happening off the footstretcher with the big leg push.

"There was good compression at the front stop, but our bodies were upright. We were not the strongest crew in the final, but our style was effective because there was no skying and no missed water at the catch as the blades and feet locked with the water.

"See the legs go down together, *explosive* off the footstretcher [my emphasis]."⁶⁴⁴⁰

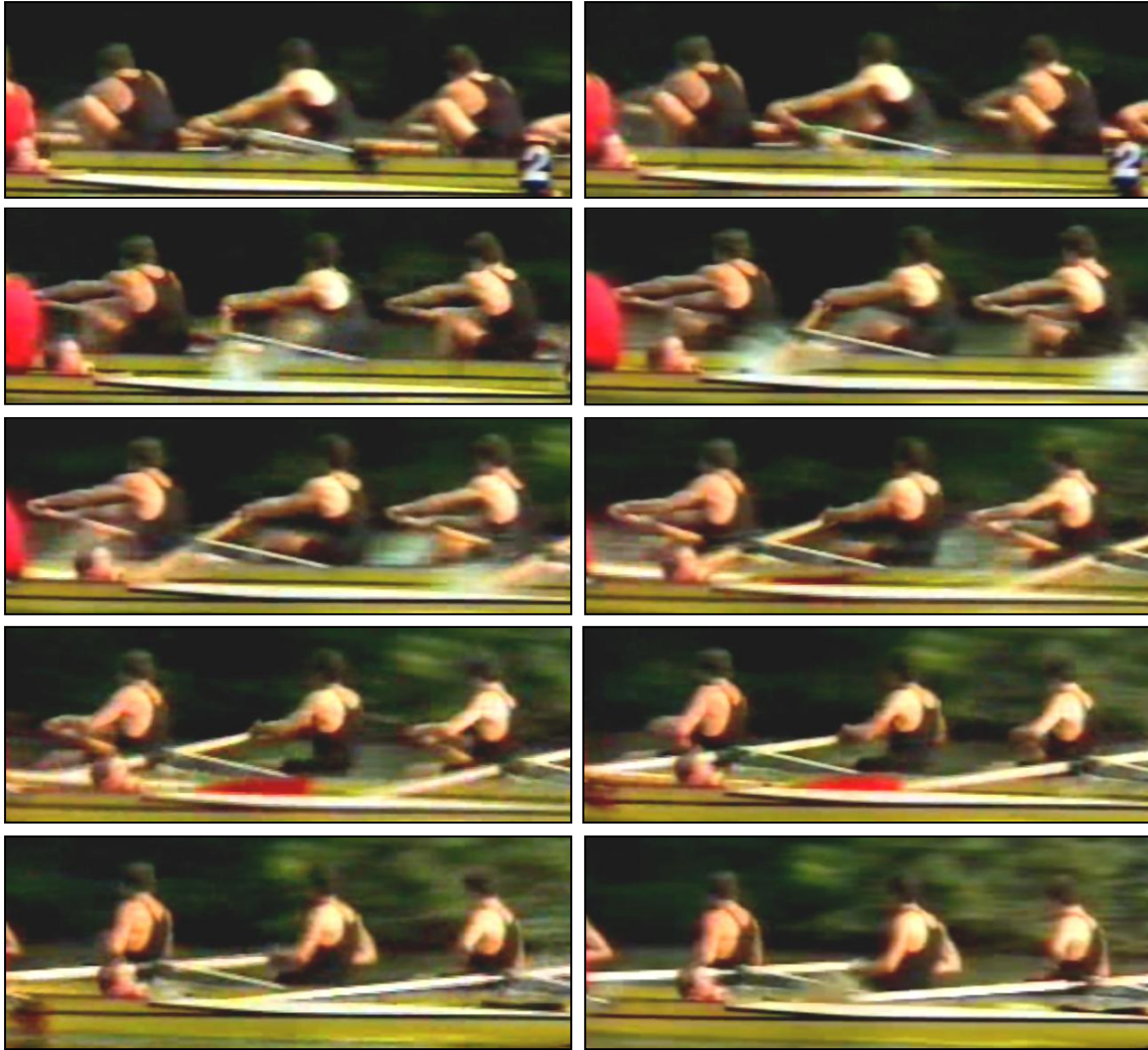
In fact, it was the American crew who had the truly 'explosive' force application upon entry. They put all their *Kernschlag* leg drive into the front half and then continued their impressive effort in a two-part pullthrough.

By contrast, in the New Zealand boat, their fingers-to-toes *Schubschlag* effort began instantaneously but smoothly persisted from entry all the way to their

⁶⁴³⁹ Mahon, Coach's Report: Elite 8 of '82, NZARA, p. 3

⁶⁴⁴⁰ Brook, op cit.

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FISA 1982 Video

New Zealand Men's Eight

1982 World Champion, Lucerne

6 Dave Rodger, 5 Roger White-Parsons, 4 Chris White

+5°, +30° to -15°, 0-9, 0-9, 0-10, Classical Technique, hybrid-concurrent *Schubschlag*

Strong legs, late arm draw, ferryman's finish, Ratzeburg accelerated recovery.

Extremely relaxed and fluid technique.

ferryman's finish. The New Zealand explosiveness that Brook refers to seems to be an attempt to describe the lack of any hesitation in the transition from recovery to pullthrough.

In this context, "explosive" means "instantaneous." This use of the word has

led to similar misunderstandings throughout rowing history.

Mahon: "The technique of the crew was superior to the other crews in the event. A greater emphasis was placed on the leg drive which was completed before the arms and shoulders finished off the stroke. Hands

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Tony Brook

New Zealand Men's Eight

1982 World Champion, Lucerne

1 **NZL** 5:36.99, 2 **GDR** 5:39.17, 3 **URS** 5:39.52, 4 **USA** 5:40.91, 5 **FRG** 5:43.99, 6 **FRA** 5:44.26

Bow **Tony Brook** 6'2" 191cm 189lb. 86kg, 2 **George Keys** 6'4" 19 cm 209lb. 95kg,
3 **Les O'Connell** 6'4" 193cm 196lb. 89kg, 4 **Chris White** 6'3" 190cm 207lb. 94kg,
5 **Roger White-Parsons** 6'5" 196cm 198lb. 90kg, 6 **Dave Rodger** 6'4" 192cm 203lb. 92kg,
7 **Herb Stevenson** 6'3" 191cm 192lb. 87kg, Stroke **Mike Stanley** 6'0" 182cm 187lb. 85kg,
Coxswain **Andrew Hay**

"The last 250m of the race – NZ eight in total control, rating 42, full stretch, powerful, blades in perfect unison at the catch . . . What a testament to the coaching skills of Harry Mahon . . ."

- Tony Brook

came away from the body at the same speed they had come in, and were allowed to move on with the shoulders and finally the legs following in a relaxed manner. There was no pause at the front, and a longer 'pack-up' allowed for an immediate reversal of the slide.⁶⁴⁴¹

Brook: "The blades 'simply disappeared' at the catch, as if by magic. The crew moved effortlessly from forward

mode to drive phase with no discernable check on the boat.

The Final

"We were fourth through the 500 and second through the 1,000, but doing it with ease and energy left to 'do battle' as we reached the 1,200. Our race plan was:

- 20-stroke start at 43-44.
- settle into 38 racing beat

⁶⁴⁴¹ Mahon, op. cit., p. 4

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FISA 1983 Video

New Zealand Men's Eight

1983 World Champion, Reggatabahn Wedau Duisburg

1 **NZL** 5:34.40, 2 **GDR** 5:35.9, 3 **AUS** 5:38.0, 4 **URS** 5:38.1, 5 **FRA** 5:39.3, 6 **TCH** 5:40.2

Bow **Nigel Atherfold** 6'2" 189cm 196lb. 89kg, 2 **George Keys** 6'4" 193cm 209lb. 95kg,
3 **Barrie Mabbott** 6'5" 195cm 198lb. 90kg, 4 **Chris White** 6'3" 190cm 207lb. 94kg,
5 **Roger White-Parsons** 6'5" 196cm 198lb. 90kg, 6 **Dave Rodger** 6'4" 192cm 203lb. 92kg,
7 **Herb Stevenson** 6'3" 191cm 192lb. 87kg, Stroke **Mike Stanley** 6'0" 182cm 187lb. 85kg,
Coxswain **Andrew Hay**

- 'thinking 10 strokes' at 1:30 out to adjust rating to 37, our optimum racing beat, and to look for length and togetherness.
- at 2:30 out, a 30-stroke maximum push off the legs.
- at 4:00 out, another big 10.
- at 1,500, begin wind for home.
- at 250 metres to go, wind it up.

"I will always remember how 'fresh' we all felt at the 1,000m mark, sitting tall, moving as one, feeling powerful off the footstretcher and relaxed on the recovery, in total control over the last 500m."⁶⁴⁴²

Mahon: "The crew went to the start for the final very relaxed. Once again they were able to row near the front, developing confidence. The 'move' was again accomplished with 'commitment,' the break made of the field and the race won. We hadn't even been able to try our final

'planned' move. Our second 1,000 metres had been faster than the first."⁶⁴⁴³

New Zealand won going away.

Never concerned about the fast-starting Americans, the Kiwis keyed their move off the Soviets. After leading through 1,000 meters, the U.S. crew gradually faded to fourth.

The 1983 Team

With a year to go before the Los Angeles Games, Harry Mahon proposed an interesting strategy, but it was never implemented.

Mahon: "The stated aim of the NZARA is to win the eight at the 1984 Olympics. This is possible – but the route to be taken to achieve this objective needs careful consideration. I am of the opinion that our best trout is to row in the other events in

⁶⁴⁴² Brook, op cit.

⁶⁴⁴³ Mahon, op. cit., p. 4

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1983, keeping the pressure on the opposition and off ourselves. At the moment, the European nations have no idea how we beat them – they can be made to sweat some more by beating them in the coxless- and coxed-fours at Duisburg and doing well in the other events as well. The eight in 1984 would not then be the defending champions. It would be pointless to be World Champion 1982, 1983 and not Olympic Champion 1984, just because it was felt that the title should be defended.”⁶⁴⁴⁴

If only . . .

Storey: “Between ‘82 and ‘83, there were little or no changes at the business end of the boat and in the middle. **Tony Brook** retired, and **Nigel Atherfold** replaced him. **Barrie Mabbot** came in for **Les O’Connell** [who moved to stroke of the soon-to-be 1983 World Champion New Zealand Coxed-Four].

“They had won handsomely in ‘82, but they actually got beaten in the heat at Duisburg for the ‘83 year. In that heat, **Dave Rodger** went back to 4, and **Chris White** came up to 6 and they lost. It was hardly an argument, but I had a big discussion with Harry. I said, ‘You should not be changing things this late.’ He said, ‘Oh, I think this is going to be right.’

“By the time the repêchage came around, I had convinced him to put it back the way it was. They won the repêchage, won the final.”⁶⁴⁴⁵

The 1983 World eights final at Duisburg followed the pattern of the previous year. It was Australia instead of the United States that pushed the pace early, but New Zealand was there to inherit the lead when the Aussies were reeled in by the whole field after 700 meters.

The Kiwis cracked the race open in the third 500 and pushed their lead to nearly a length. Although GDR closed a bit in the final strokes, the win had seemed inevitable since the 1,000.

The joy of the New Zealand oarsmen at the medal dock was written on everyone’s faces as the crew looked forward to a possible, even probable Olympic Gold Medal in 1984.

The Perfect Rowing Stroke

Fellow New Zealand junior coach **Tim Richardson:** “Harry and I both shared in the incredibly good fortune of coming under the influence of the late W.H. (Bill) **Eaddy**⁶⁴⁴⁶ ONZM, whose simple explanation of the rowing stroke and the connection between water, boat and body in a quick, explosive⁶⁴⁴⁷ movement, gave both of us the base from which to work in the quest for the faster boat. Harry’s willingness to innovate and his confidence in his understanding of biomechanics and boat dynamics became the hallmark of the man so many in rowing admire and respect.

“In it all, we share one passion – Harry’s passion – rowing and the perfect rowing stroke.”⁶⁴⁴⁸

Indeed, perfection became a quest that drove Harry Mahon all his life.

Keystrokes, Rowing New Zealand’s newsletter: “It is interesting to note that in his eight seasons with Waikato, their fifteen premier titles have been achieved with a variety of techniques as Harry slowly developed his approach to what moved the boats best.”⁶⁴⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁴⁶ coach of Tauranga Boys’ College in New Zealand.

⁶⁴⁴⁷ i.e. instantaneous entry.

⁶⁴⁴⁸ www.rowing.org.uk/mahon.html

⁶⁴⁴⁹ Rowing the Mahon Way, *Keystrokes*, April 2005

⁶⁴⁴⁴ Mahon, op. cit., p. 5

⁶⁴⁴⁵ Storey, op cit.

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Harry Mahon: “I didn’t really have much guidance at all. I had rowed, and I had a few coaches when I was young, and the national coach, **Rusty Robertson**,⁶⁴⁵⁰ was highly respected with some pretty good results. But he did not produce anything written. It was a question of intuition, keeping your eyes open and reading a lot.”⁶⁴⁵¹

Brook: “Harry’s ‘perfect stroke’ evolved over many years of trial and experimentation.

“The ‘perfect stroke’ required immaculate [upper body] preparation for the correct speed, angle and timing of all body parts and blade to arrive at the front stop, connect with the water and push off the foot stretcher in one fluid movement, exactly in tune with the speed of the boat.

“Harry worked on all aspects of the stroke and stressed the importance of a firm finish followed by weight over onto your feet, relaxation forward as the boat moved under you and you prepared for the next stroke, placing the blade in the water ‘with your feet’ at the precise moment you arrived at the front stop, and pushing off the footstretcher with both legs and lower back at the same time.

“‘Hanging off the handle’ was a favourite term as the legs, lower back, torso, shoulders and arms did their bit on the drive.”⁶⁴⁵²

Rob Waddell, 2000 Olympic Singles Champion: “If I remember distinct things that he used to coach technically, a phrase I’ll always remember is ‘Just hang off it,’ and ‘Use the arms as pieces of string.’ The speed and timing of the catch is another thing that springs to mind.”⁶⁴⁵³

Simon Dennis, member of the 2000 Olympic Champion British Men’s Eight:

“The impression I got in 2000 was that the catch was what he felt was the hardest thing for rowers to get right. However, he was forever developing his thoughts on what good rowing was.”⁶⁴⁵⁴

The rhythm of Harry’s New Zealand crews in the 1980s seemed to be an evolution of the high-stroking “tick the boat along” pullthrough coupled with the smooth, accelerated recovery approach taught by **Karl Adam** at Ratzeburger Ruderklub in the 1950s and ‘60s. As with Ratzeburg, the athletes were large and well-muscled, but they tended to row a smooth and relaxed technique.

Coaching Style

Sonia Scown Waddell, twice a finalist for New Zealand in the Olympic Single Sculls, bow of the 2001 World Silver Medal Quad and wife of 2000 Olympic Singles Champion Rob Waddell: “The way Harry coached was rhythmical. He coached in almost a sing-song voice sometimes, trance-like, as if he was in the boat with you. You could feel in his voice what he was trying to get you to do.”⁶⁴⁵⁵

Greg Searle, British World Bronze Medalist Single Sculler in 1997: “When I think of Harry, I struggle not to see him as a ‘Star Wars’ character. He was **Yoda**, the wise one, and strong in him the Force was. I’m certainly very privileged to have worked closely with him for the year that I did.”⁶⁴⁵⁶

Cross: “With a balding head and grayish beard, lines on his weather-beaten face suggested wisdom born from years of intent study of the movement of rowers and their craft.

⁶⁴⁵⁰ See Chapter 120.

⁶⁴⁵¹ Qtd. by Stevens, op cit.

⁶⁴⁵² Brook, op cit.

⁶⁴⁵³ R. Waddell, personal conversation, 2008

⁶⁴⁵⁴ Dennis, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁴⁵⁵ S. Waddell, personal conversation, 2008

⁶⁴⁵⁶ G. Searle, personal correspondence, 2008

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“Off the water, he is a man of few words, but in a way, that adds to the mystique because on the water his speech flows endlessly, like the awareness of a boat’s movement that he is trying to unlock in the minds of those he coaches.”⁶⁴⁵⁷

Harry's drive for perfection was unrelenting.

Mahon: “Keep those hands moving out, stretching out and separating . . . Feel you are sitting there, and the boat is sucking you towards it rather than the opposite way around . . . No, too quick for the boat . . . Steady with it . . . Steady with it . . . Better . . . Hold your shoulders back, and just sit there and watch your handles go away from your body. Now you’re feeling the boat underneath your feet, running through the water . . . Your hands are leading you . . . The water that’s running under you is telling you when your handles will arrive at your feet . . . That was good . . . Yeah, three in a row where you picked it just right . . .”⁶⁴⁵⁸

Pleasing Harry rarely came easy. One New Zealand rower summed up the experience of being coached by Harry as “no no no no no no no no no no no yes no no no no no no no no no no no no no no . . .”⁶⁴⁹

Quarrell: “Swiss Olympic Sculling Champion [**Xeno Müller**] describes with relish how Mahon would have him row a stroke at a time with one of his two oars: plodding round in circles for hours on the lake, until after hundreds of hissed ‘No’s’ came the single emphatic ‘Yes!’”⁶⁴⁶⁰

Xeno: "The circles that I did on the water were all about lifting the blade out, feathering it and then dropping it in before you would pull. I can do it eyes closed now, but when I make people row, it is really

interesting to see that the gentle lift of the blade on the square, then the flow into a feather and then maintaining the height of the feathered blade steadily so that you still have a little bit of room to have the blade squared without changing the handle height, that's something that if you haven't really thought about it and done it a few hundred or a few thousand times, you will just always be a little inconsistent, and the whole goal is to be consistent over thousands of strokes.

“So when Harry was coaching me, he would say, ‘No no no no no GOOD no no no no no no no no no no GOOD!’

“He said to me, ‘Xeno, you *do* it . . . but you need to do thousands of strokes the same way.’”⁶⁴⁶¹

Quarrell: "His approach of smooth efficiency gave his crews a graceful, flowing style which was a delight to watch, and he was most gifted at explaining verbally what he wanted to see on the water."⁶⁴⁶²

Mark A. Shuttleworth, who knew Harry in South Africa: “Sometimes what seemed to the rower to be trivial he would quietly and continuously pursue in a such way that the rower discovered, absorbed and owned the improvement in her or himself, finally also appreciating the importance of the change. The small steady improvements became real and fundamental. There was no ego involved with Harry, so the ego of the rower also took a holiday.

“Harry was so effective and admired because he was unaware of and unconcerned with admiration. He discussed with you your discovery of the right way. He was simply about helping people to row better.”⁶⁴⁶³

Searle: “I remember him being very particular on what it was he wanted me to be doing. His magic was that he insisted that I

⁶⁴⁵⁷ Cross, p. 37

⁶⁴⁵⁸ Qtd. By Cross, pp. 47-8

6459 www.rowing.org.uk/mahon.html

⁶⁴⁶⁰ Quarrell, op cit.

⁶⁴⁶¹ Müller, personal conversation, 2008

⁶⁴⁶² Quarrell, *op cit.*

⁶⁴⁶³ Shuttleworth, personal correspondence, 2008

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internalize what good felt like for myself. In saying this, I mean he would discuss with me what he wanted to see. I would say, 'Yes, I understand,' then look to move on. He would not let go until I had really effected the change he was looking for.

"This could get into a painful process of him saying 'no, no, no' until eventually there'd be a 'yes.'⁶⁴⁶⁴

"Then he'd say, 'Did you get it? Describe it,' or similar. Only when I knew what good was like, for *myself*, could I then move on.⁶⁴⁶⁴

Robin Williams, Coach of Cambridge University during Harry's last years: "I can't coach like Harry, much as I would like to, and in truth I haven't met anyone who can, not exactly. The reason we think we can is because his picture of the stroke was so simple and well explained. That's why he was successful with the rowers – they could understand what he meant."⁶⁴⁶⁵

Mahon: "Simplifying the presentation of our information to our athletes can result in the development of fast crews."⁶⁴⁶⁶

Williams: "The ones who struggled were the ones who could not grasp the CONCEPT that we move the boat past the blade rather than pull the oar through the water. Anyone who tried to *pull* was in for a very hard time! He would indeed say, 'No, no, no, no . . . ' endlessly until the poor culprit would sometimes break down in despair.

"Finally they would ask for help. Harry's intransigence forced them to seek another way, his way. They would ask for further clarity, he would give it, they would try again, and then, if they really had grasped some of the concept, you might hear

a 'yes,' which made you feel like the sun was shining again and life could go on."⁶⁴⁶⁷

Müller: "Then in 1992 after four years of coaching, he came to see me in Providence, Rhode Island on the Seekonk River, and all of a sudden he finally said, 'Good . . . Good . . . Good . . . Good . . . Good . . . ' and I started crying. I was finally hitting the note, and I knew once I started hitting the note, real speed was going to open up.

"That was really great."⁶⁴⁶⁸

Brook: "Harry was relentless in pursuit of good technique, and in training he often sat his motor boat right on the tip of your blade with his 'no, no, no, yes, no, no . . . ' for hours on end. He demanded change."⁶⁴⁶⁹

Mahon: "I certainly do not set out to be difficult. I would be really unhappy if I thought I had upset anyone. I guess I see potential and work hard to help someone achieve that. If I did not care, then I would not be so determined to help people."⁶⁴⁷⁰

Brook: "The thing was that you could feel the positive change happening in the boat and the extra boat speed as a result, and as a crew you were determined to build on and hold the extra speed for hours on end. Consistency became the goal, boat speed and perfect balance were all important, and all the time doing it 'with ease.'"⁶⁴⁷¹

Searle: "The experience of working in a crew with Harry coaching was often quite amusing. He would happily have one person from an eight or a four rowing alone until eventually they got it for themselves.

"In this area he had far more patience and also belief in you that you would eventually get it, and in himself, that it was the right thing to do, than other coaches I've worked with."⁶⁴⁷²

⁶⁴⁶⁴ G. Searle, op cit.

⁶⁴⁶⁵ Williams, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁴⁶⁶ Programme, 1998 FISA Coaches' Conference, London, Ontario, Canada

⁶⁴⁶⁷ Williams, op cit.

⁶⁴⁶⁸ Müller, op cit.

⁶⁴⁶⁹ Brook, op cit.

⁶⁴⁷⁰ Qtd. by Stevens, op cit, p. 17

⁶⁴⁷¹ Brook, op cit.

⁶⁴⁷² G. Searle, op cit.

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Sonia Waddell: “One of Harry’s strengths is that he gave you *such* belief in yourself. I found him an incredibly positive coach. As far as he was concerned, you had no weaknesses, and I think he was probably like that with a lot of his athletes. He just concentrated on your strengths and concentrated on doing things well. He didn’t tell you what you weren’t.

“For me, my size [5’9” 176cm 148 lb. 67kg] became an issue with coaches in later years, but with Harry I never knew that I was perhaps not tall enough or perhaps not heavy enough to be a heavyweight women’s single sculler because he never *once* said that was an issue. He just always talked about the positive things, you know, that I had a good power-to-weight ratio and things like that. He very much concentrated on positives.”⁶⁴⁷³

Al Morrow,⁶⁴⁷⁴ Canadian Women’s Sweep Coach during the 1990s: “I think Harry’s success was because he kept it simple, he was comprehensive in his approach, his athletes really liked him, and he did a lot of imaginative drills to teach technique.

“I liked the way his crews rowed. Way back when I was first on the scene internationally with my own crews that were doing well, he said the same thing to me about our women, so obviously we shared some of the same views.”⁶⁴⁷⁵

Watermanship

Martin Cross, longtime member of Thames Tradesmen Rowing Club, described Mahon’s boats as “just ghosting along effortlessly.”⁶⁴⁷⁶ The first time those words were used in this book, they came from the

mouth of **George Pocock,**⁶⁴⁷⁷ a champion London professional sculler at the beginning of the 20th Century, son of the Eton boatbuilder and later a legendary North American boatbuilder in his own right, an eloquent preacher of the **Thames Waterman’s Stroke** to generations of rowers in his adopted home of the United States.

For Harry, too, it was all about listening to and feeling the boat. He would home in on things like tightness in the shoulders, leaning one way or the other, exaggerated layback, slides too fast or too slow . . .

Harry Mahon was teaching **watermanship!**

Brook: “Martin Cross described the NZ eights of this era as ‘ghosting along,’ and I think this description is accurate. The lock, drive and pressure on the foot stretcher from eight pairs of legs and lower backs was uniform and powerful, whether it was 24 rating or 38 rating.

“It looked and felt comfortable as the boat was accelerated on the drive phase and the boat was allowed ‘to do the work’ on the recovery phase as you ‘floated forward,’ letting it run under you as you relaxed in anticipation of the next accelerated drive off the footstretcher.

“‘Work, then relax and float’ became the pattern, stroke after stroke, always the same.”⁶⁴⁷⁸

Sonia Waddell: “I guess the main theme of his coaching was about *feeling the boat*. It was about not thinking about what you were doing, just feeling the rhythm of the boat, timing the blade in from that rhythm and moving with the boat. It was always about feeling and rhythm and not thinking.

⁶⁴⁷³ S. Waddell, op cit.

⁶⁴⁷⁴ See Chapter 134.

⁶⁴⁷⁵ Morrow, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁴⁷⁶ Cross, pp. 37, 49

⁶⁴⁷⁷ See Chapter 61.

⁶⁴⁷⁸ Brook, op cit.

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“With Harry we used to do a lot of exercises. He was very big at getting the hands away at the finish, so we used sit at the back stops and just move the hands away as fast as we could and get the blades in the water. It had to be *so* fast. Again, it was all about not thinking about it, doing it as fast as your body and your mind allowed.

“We used to do a lot of rowing in the pitch black, or we would have to close our eyes. We would do *kilometres* with our eyes closed in the quad, and we had to *feel* the boat, and we had to time it.”⁶⁴⁷⁹

Not every aspect of Mahon’s teachings agreed completely with his Thames Waterman forebears, but Harry was truly a waterman at heart. In his own words:

- relaxation – easily said, less easily achieved. Tightness of the body at the finish [results] in poor finishes and awkward body movements.
- encouraging your rowers to sit and feel the boat running. Hence the importance of picking the boat up at the catch with no hesitation on the front stop. Rushed recoveries with knees coming up too soon, [result] in arriving at the front stop unprepared in body and mind for the catch and [cause] unwanted body movements and pauses at the very place that they are not wanted.
- sculling being no different to rowing, and providing the ideal vehicle for interpreting the run of the boat – Watch the stern movement.⁶⁴⁸⁰

The Influence of Thor Nilsen

Keystrokes: “Harry stressed his debt to the influence of **Thor Nilsen**,⁶⁴⁸¹ as demonstrated at the 1981 Seminar, which

helped to crystallize his thinking on both technique and training methods.”⁶⁴⁸²

Mahon: “There was a conference in New Zealand run by Thor Nilsen and Sigmund Strømme⁶⁴⁸³ that taught me a lot about training. We began to introduce long distance work, which had been overlooked in New Zealand until then.”⁶⁴⁸⁴

Xeno Müller: “At some point, information about lactate testing and high altitude training started leaking from East Germany over to the Western world. Thor Nilsen applied these methods to his training of the Italians, and I think we all learned it from them.”⁶⁴⁸⁵

Brook: “Nilsen explained the idea of long distance rows at firm pressure and consistent technique. Harry put it into practice with his 1982 eight and added the ‘Mahon magic,’ the ‘ghosting effect’ described by Martin Cross, which was the ‘hallmark’ of all Harry’s crews.

“The fitness levels built up by hours training on and off the water allowed the crew to move ‘as one.’”⁶⁴⁸⁶

Force Application

Harry definitely taught *Schubschlag* force application:

- Energy expended on the catch is not available for the end of the stroke.⁶⁴⁸⁷
- A large white frothy puddle suggests a waste of energy in that the oarsman is pulling rather than concentrating on a good lock up of the blade in the water. The rowing stroke is a push and not a pull. We must aim to move the boat past the oar, and not the oar past the boat.

⁶⁴⁷⁹ S. Waddell, op cit.

⁶⁴⁸⁰ *Keystrokes*, op cit.

⁶⁴⁸¹ See Chapter 128.

⁶⁴⁸² *Keystrokes*, op cit.

⁶⁴⁸³ Norwegian College of Physical Education and Sport

⁶⁴⁸⁴ Qtd. by Stevens, op cit.

⁶⁴⁸⁵ Müller, op cit.

⁶⁴⁸⁶ Brook, op cit.

⁶⁴⁸⁷ *Keystrokes*, op cit.

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Mahon shuddered when he saw a “lack of finish to the stroke. The power is not finished off with the inside arm. As a consequence, the amount of boat run per stroke is lessened.”⁶⁴⁸⁸

Sonia Waddell: “He used to like you to draw *up* to the chest at the finish of the stroke. On the erg, he used to say that if you were rowing the perfect stroke, at the end of it you could flick the handle up over your head. If you hadn’t timed it properly and didn’t have the right acceleration, you wouldn’t have the ability to do that.”⁶⁴⁸⁹

Modern Orthodox Technique

Harry often stated that he shared with **Thor Nilsen** the overlapping-sequential philosophy of **Modern Orthodox Technique**. He stressed “the sequence of legs, body, shoulders, arms and hands during the drive, and in reverse on the recovery [and] the avoidance of shoulder lift and arm snatch at the catch – the arms merely connecting the oar to the energy source.”⁶⁴⁹⁰

During the early 1980s, the New Zealand Amateur Rowing Association distributed Harry’s description of the pullthrough:

1. The **FEET CONNECTION** is made at the same instant that the blade enters the water. At the same time, the back is connected to the blade. The body is held firm, and the shoulders and arms are kept relaxed. This enables the lower back and lateral muscles to receive and hold the pressure from the legs and water. The rower is ‘suspended’ (hanging) between the oar handle and the seat with tension in the calf muscles. The water pressure is felt in the backs of the fingers.
2. The **LEG DRIVE** commences and accelerates while the rower continues to hang from the oar with pressure firmly on

the back and in the lateral muscles. The **BACK** is actively involved as it accelerates to bring speed to the boat, stopping about 15° past vertical.

3. The **ARM DRAW** commences during the maximum leg acceleration by continuing to pull the handle, with the elbows/triceps maintaining pressure in the fingers, until the oar reaches the body.⁶⁴⁹¹

Yet despite Mahon’s own words, the body mechanics of his athletes were most often *not* Modern Orthodox overlapping-sequential. The majority of his great international champion crews, beginning with the 1982 through 1984 New Zealand crews, did not row this way at all. They rowed with the concurrent legs and backs of the **Classical Technique**, with perhaps some resonance from **Rusty Robertson’s** great New Zealand crews of the early 1970s.⁶⁴⁹²

To confuse the matter further, Mahon also wrote:

- The power must be applied *evenly from all parts of the body*, which is why a relaxed rower is a fast rower.
- The stroke involves pushing with the legs, keeping the shoulders and arms relaxed, and *at the same time* opening hip angle and shoulders to keep the distance between body and oar handle [my emphasis].⁶⁴⁹³

Mike Stanley, stroke of the New Zealand Eight from 1982 to 1984: “I know he was very impressed with the GDR technique and conditioning and spent a lot of time analyzing and trying to find out what they were doing.

“I think he added a slightly more upright catch position to their movement, which allowed a more explosive⁶⁴⁹⁴ application of

⁶⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸⁹ S. Waddell, *op cit*.

⁶⁴⁹⁰ *Keystrokes*, *op cit*.

⁶⁴⁹¹ 1980s NZARA handout posted in boathouses around New Zealand.

⁶⁴⁹² See Chapter 120.

⁶⁴⁹³ *Keystrokes*, *op cit*.

⁶⁴⁹⁴ again, the same word.

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Pieces of Eight

“Hanging off the handle.”

Barrie Mabbott, during selection in 1984

3-seat in 1983 World Champion Eight

3-seat in 1984 Olympic Bronze Medal Coxed-Four

+5°, +25° to -20°, 0-9, 0-9, 3-10, Classical Technique concurrent *Schubschlag*, late arm draw.

power and more mobile movement, but maintained the relaxed posture and movement of the best GDR boats. That resulted in crews which were probably not the most powerful, but they were able to hold their own at the start and then even-split the middle 500s with enough left to lift at the finish.”⁶⁴⁹⁵

The video frames on these pages show a pullthrough with echoes also of the best features of the Ratzeburg Style of the 1950s and ‘60s without **Karl Adam**’s extreme leg compression. New Zealand crews of the 1980s shared with the Ratzeburgers moderate body angle forward at the entry, smooth body swing to minimal layback and a ferryman’s finish. As with their German

predecessors, the intent was to tick the boat along rather than accelerate aggressively, and then to allow time for the boat to slow down on the recovery.⁶⁴⁹⁶

All in all, it seems that Harry was not afraid to draw from anyone and everyone if the result was efficient boat moving.

It is interesting to note that **Mike Stanley**, 1983 coxswain **Andy Hay** and 1983 3-seat **Barrie Mabbot** had all rowed on a Maadi Cup Champion Westlake Boys High School crew for Coach **Eric Craies**.⁶⁴⁹⁷

⁶⁴⁹⁵ Stanley, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁴⁹⁶ Recently, the 2007 New Zealand World Champion Coxless-Four and 2009 Coxless-Pair made use of a similar force application strategy.

⁶⁴⁹⁷ See Chapter 118.

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Arm Draw

Harry repeatedly mentioned the need to avoid “shoulder lift and arm snatch at the catch,”⁶⁴⁹⁸ and there was no hint of either in the technique of the athletes on these pages.

Harry counseled against “pulling the oar with the arms,”⁶⁴⁹⁹ and described the arms as “pieces of string”⁶⁵⁰⁰ or “merely connecting the oar to the energy source,”⁶⁵⁰¹ but this seems to be contradicted both by the New Zealand boats of the 1980s and by many boats from later in Mahon’s career.

Even though the shoulders usually didn’t rise and the elbows didn’t break much until mid-stroke, the arms, shoulders and upper back muscles appear to have been engaged concurrently with the legs and back at the entry.

In the video frames on the following page of **Mike Stanley**, stroke of the 1982, ‘83 and ‘84 eights, the shoulders and lateral muscles were clearly straining in Frames 2 and 3 even though the elbows were still fully stretched as late as Frame 3.

Harry passed away in 2001, and it turns out that until now, not even Harry himself ever attempted to describe once and for all his technique, his “perfect stroke,” perhaps because it represented such a classic example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Words, even Harry’s own sometimes contradictory words, somehow could not do it justice, and he tended to keep his descriptions intentionally imprecise.

Harry’s approach to rowing technique defied specific labels. He seemed less concerned with rowing ideology and more with being in tune with one’s inner self and with the boat.



Harry How, *Getty Images*

Sonia Waddell

“Use the arms as pieces of string.”

Mike Stanley: “Harry was not bound by dogma. He was incredibly inventive, challenging and always looking for the next step up in the quest for an easier, more efficient and relaxed way of moving a boat.”⁶⁵⁰²

Rob Waddell: “With Harry, if there were two different styles, he wouldn’t necessarily be fixed on either. You might have style A and style B, but if the boats looked good and they were moving the boat well, he was positive about both. He wouldn’t say, ‘You should open your body earlier,’ or, ‘Press your legs more,’ or something like that.

“He obviously had the basics, which he stuck to, but he wouldn’t have a specific technique that you should be doing exactly. He would look at a boat and know if it was moving well. He would look at the

⁶⁴⁹⁸ *Keystrokes*, op cit.

⁶⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁰⁰ R. Waddell, op cit.

⁶⁵⁰¹ *Keystrokes*, op cit.

⁶⁵⁰² Stanley, personal correspondence, 2008

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FISA 1984 Video

New Zealand Men's Eight

1982, 1983 World Champion

Stroke **Mike Stanley**

+5°, +25° to -10°, 0-9, 0-9, 0-10

Classical Technique concurrent *Schubschlag*,
delayed arm draw, ferryman's finish

Shoulder definition in Frame 2 indicates
the engagement of the shoulders and lats.

movement of the rower and know if it was doing well.

"What I am trying to say is that he was a really interesting coach."⁶⁵⁰³

Metaphysics

Robin Williams: "Sharing the coaching launch during one of the early water sessions we did, I heard this stream of words come out of the megaphone and found myself nodding, smiling, and agreeing with everything he said.

"I remember thinking that you usually heard people coaching the mechanics of rowing – more compression, less sit-back, drive harder, less washy, etc., so it was a surprise to hear someone talking quite

aesthetically about how the boat should feel and what the athlete should be thinking.

"This was very refreshing to hear, and the crew began to understand the sport rather than just doing it."⁶⁵⁰⁴

Angus McChesney, a colleague of Harry's at Radley College, on the Thames near Oxford: "Harry did have a very clear idea of what he was looking for, but I don't think I could easily put into words a mechanical description of his perfect stroke. Much of Harry's coaching worked at the metaphysical level."⁶⁵⁰⁵

Most of all, Mahon and his crews caused observers to wax poetical:

⁶⁵⁰³ R. Waddell, op cit.

⁶⁵⁰⁴ Williams, op cit.

⁶⁵⁰⁵ McChesney, personal correspondence, 2008

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FISA 1984 Video

New Zealand Men's Coxless-Four

1984 Olympic Champion

2 Shane O'Brien

6'8" 203cm 212lb. 96kg

-5°, +25° to -10°, 0-9, 0-9, 0-10 Classical Technique
Concurrent *Schubschlag*, ferryman's finish

" . . . a man whose whole creed of rowing is focused on the natural rhythm and movement of the body."⁶⁵⁰⁶

" . . . a fine technical crew of the type so favoured by Harry Mahon, with a clean catch, a fine long stroke and a boat which flowed through between the strokes."⁶⁵⁰⁷

" . . . the movement, fluidity and style of a Brazilian soccer team at its best, the awesome speed of a Michael Johnson. Yet they have a gentleness of touch like Tiger Woods as he chips in from sixty feet.

" . . . enough to send shivers down your spine as his crews propel their fragile shells

across water in a way that is almost magical."⁶⁵⁰⁸

The best thing we can do to try to capture the essence of Harry Mahon's technique is look at crews that rowed under his guidance.

The 1984 New Zealand Team

Harry's New Zealand Men's Sweep Team had entered three events in the two years leading up to the Los Angeles Games, and they had won them all, the eight in 1982 and the coxed-four and eight in 1983. All

⁶⁵⁰⁶ Cross, p. 51

⁶⁵⁰⁷ www.theboatrace.org

⁶⁵⁰⁸ Cross, p. 37

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FISA 1984 Video

New Zealand Men's Coxed-Four

1984 Olympic Bronze Medal

Stroke **Ross Tong** 6'0" 184cm 196lb. 89kg, 3 **Barrie Mabbott** 6'5" 195cm 198lb. 90kg,
2 **Don Symon** 6'9" 205cm 216lb. 96kg, Bow **Kevin Lawton** 6'1" 186cm 194lb. 88kg,
Coxswain **Brett Hollister**

Hollister had won Gold in the 1983 Coxed-Four. Mabbott had won Gold in the 1983 Eight.
The others were new to the National Team.

fourteen 1983 individual World Champions returned to try for their ultimate goal, 1984 Olympic Gold Medals.

The coxed-four in 1984 was made up mostly of new faces. Only **Barrie Mabbott** of the '83 Eight and **Brett Hollister**, who had coxed the '83 four, were returnees.

The '84 coxless-four contained three members of '83 World Champion coxed-four, and the eight had all returning except Mabbott. **Greg Johnston** from the '83 four was the new member of the eight, the priority boat for the team.

The 1984 Eight

Despite the Soviet-led boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics, the field in the 1984 men's eight promised to be a strong one. **New Zealand**, the two-time defending World Champions, and **Australia**, the 1983 Bronze Medalists, were returning, and the **United States** and **Canada** had both beaten the 1982 and '83 Silver Medalist German Democratic Republic earlier in the summer.

In fact, the Canadians had set a world record in winning the Saturday final at the International Rotsee Regatta at Lucerne.

New Zealand's qualifying heat included both Lucerne-winner **Canada** along with **Great Britain**, who had also shown good speed in European racing earlier in the season.

Harry calmly spoke to the team before the heat: "I think it's pretty straightforward as to what we've been doing, the same as you've been looking to do the whole time, which is you control thinking to the 500, which sets you up for that technique [second] 500, alright? It's really most important that you think technique all the way through there, and you're going with the crew. You're working hard, but you're thinking technique. You're thinking leg drive and lean [back].

"At 1,000 meters, then you've got the move that's on, and it's a decided break, and it's to be decisive in which you're not going to suddenly hammer the shit out of the thing, but you're going to start to apply *more*

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FISA 1984 Video

New Zealand Men's Coxless-Four

1984 Olympic Champion

Stroke **Keith Trask** 6'3" 190cm 209lb. 95kg, 3 **Conrad Robertson** 6'2" 189cm 201lb. 91kg,
2 **Shane O'Brien** 6'8" 203cm 212lb. 96kg, Bow **Les O'Connell** 6'4" 193cm 196lb. 89kg

Trask, Robertson and O'Connell had won Gold in the 1983 Coxed-Four.

O'Connell had also won Gold in the 1982 Eight.

power and apply more *effectively* than even what you were doing before, possibly.

"The whole thing started in '82 with the move on the Russians, which means the last part of the race is essentially taken care of. If it's not, well, you just have to pull something out. That's all."⁶⁵⁰⁹

Team Manager **Dudley Storey** spoke before the heat: "The New Zealand trait is always to win, regardless. We have this little saying that if you practice coming second, you'll finish second all the time. The idea is to go out there and win the heat, so I'm sure Harry will have been saying, particularly with Canada being so fast . . . and Great Britain, the best way to put the first nail in their coffin is to beat them today."⁶⁵¹⁰

And beat them they did, biding their time for 1,000 meters and then forging into the lead soon thereafter.

Bow-seat **Nigel Atherfold**, after the heat: "You don't really want to be more than two-thirds of a length behind, and I was [thinking] it must be getting pretty close to that, and I'm just sitting, *waiting* for the 1,000.

"He called the move and *gaaaaah*, within about the first five strokes we'd already shot straight back up to them.

"*Bloody good!*"⁶⁵¹¹

Stroke-seat **Mike Stanley**: "How effortlessly was that?! We were doing it so economically, you were almost cruising there. That's how *I* felt. It was just so *easy!*"⁶⁵¹²

There were then several days to wait until the final, but things must have seemed to be falling into place for the New Zealand Eight.

Three-seat **Roger White-Parsons**: "If we did lose, and we'd rowed well . . . losing, then it is a better crew that's beaten us, and that's fair enough.

⁶⁵⁰⁹ *Pieces of Eight, A Quest for Gold*, Television New Zealand, Ian Taylor Producer/Director, 1984

⁶⁵¹⁰ *Pieces of Eight*, op cit.

⁶⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹² Ibid.

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“But I think that if we row to our best, well then the other crew’s going to have to be going pretty fast to beat us.”⁶⁵¹³

The Kiwi Coxless-Four was on the podium receiving their Gold Medals as the eight began its paddle to the start line. The Coxed-Four had already won Bronze. Three years of focus and hard work would come down to less than six minutes of rowing.

Cross: “It was [at Ridley College] in St. Catharines that Harry struck up a life-long friendship with the great Canadian coach, **Neil Campbell**, who was also a teacher⁶⁵¹⁴ at the school. They were to be rival coaches in the 1984 Olympics. On that occasion, Campbell’s crew got the better of Harry’s. The styles of their two Olympic eights were completely contrasting, Campbell relying on a much more aggressive, power-based style of rowing, while Harry’s eight – World Champions for the previous two years – just ghosted along effortlessly.

“The New Zealanders [had] cruised to victory in the heat. On that form, I thought the Gold was a formality.

“The trouble was that Harry probably did, too. Overconfidence must have played a part when, in the final, the Canadians blew



Pieces of Eight

Manager **Dudley Storey** and Coach **Harry Mahon** watch the Olympic Eights Heat on television from the team tent.

them away. The memory of that loss still troubles Harry deeply.”⁶⁵¹⁵

Was it their tried and true “wait for the 1,000” strategy? Canada didn’t wait. They went out lightning fast, and the Americans and Australians followed in their wake. When the Kiwis finally let it rip . . . it was too late.

Don Rowlands, long-time NZ Team Manager during the Eric Craies era: “I was out on the TV boat with **Conn Findlay**,⁶⁵¹⁶ and twelve strokes into the final of the eight, he turned to me and said, ‘No medal for New Zealand today.’

⁶⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹⁴ “Neil Campbell never taught classes at Ridley College. He was a rowing coach there and always coached the boy’s heavyweight eights.” – Al Morrow, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁵¹⁵ Cross, p. 49

⁶⁵¹⁶ two-time U.S. Olympic Coxed-Pair Gold Medalist. See Chapter 82.

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“Harry had taken David Rodger, an outstanding 6-man, and put him in the 2-seat, thus in my view destroyed the rhythm of a once very fast crew.”⁶⁵¹⁷

Seven-seat **Herb Stevenson**: “I’m glad that race is finished. Shows we’re all human, I suppose. We won two and lost one, I suppose.

“Bugger of a one to lose.”⁶⁵¹⁸

Stroke-seat **Mike Stanley**: “It was a huge lost opportunity, but we have all had to live with it.

“I’m not really interested in getting involved in a conversation as to why it happened. To me, that is something between the crew, and we probably wouldn’t all necessarily agree. Having any one person’s view reported wouldn’t be appropriate, in my mind.

“It happened . . . it will happen to others again. Sport’s like that – it’s about risk, and you have to live with the positives and negatives.

“I was privileged to be in a crew that at their peak won two out of three events that mattered. It was a wonderful time of my life, and I have much to thank Harry and all those who raced or got close to racing in those crews, our Manager **Dudley Storey** and Rowing NZ for the opportunity – it was a blast!”⁶⁵¹⁹

Cross: “The New Zealand Coxless-Four won the Gold Medal in Los Angeles Olympics. To me, they were the best crew



Pieces of Eight

1984 New Zealand Men’s Eight
Waiting for the starter’s command.

in the Games,⁶⁵²⁰ and though coached by **Brian Hawthorne**, they rowed in the inimitable Mahon Style.”⁶⁵²¹

The final result for the New Zealand Men in 1984 was Gold in the coxless-four, Bronze behind two extraordinary crews, Great Britain⁶⁵²² and the United States,⁶⁵²³ in the coxed-four, and fourth in the eight, an enviable overall outcome, but nobody seemed to look past the eight.

The Times of London: “When the NZ VIII failed to win a medal at the Olympics in 1984, Mahon was made the scapegoat and found his coaching responsibilities drastically reduced.”⁶⁵²⁴

⁶⁵²⁰ this from a member of the 1984 Olympic Champion British Coxed-Four, the boat that won Steve Redgrave the first of his five Olympic Gold Medals. See Chapter 130.

⁶⁵²¹ Cross, p. 47

⁶⁵²² See Chapter 130.

⁶⁵²³ See Chapter 124.

⁶⁵²⁴ *The Times* of London, op cit.

⁶⁵¹⁷ Rowlands, personal correspondence, 2009

⁶⁵¹⁸ *Pieces of Eight*, op cit.

⁶⁵¹⁹ Stanley, personal correspondence, 2008

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Pieces of Eight

1984 New Zealand Men's Eight

In happier times, training on Lake Karapiro, New Zealand

Bow **Nigel Atherfold** 6'2" 189cm 196lb. 89kg, 2 **Dave Rodger** 6'4" 192cm 203lb. 92kg,
3 **Roger White-Parsons** 6'5" 196cm 198lb. 90kg, 4 **George Keys** 6'4" 193cm 209lb. 95kg,
5 **Greg Johnston** 6'5" 195cm 201lb. 91kg, 6 **Chris White** 6'3" 190cm 207lb. 94kg,
7 **Herb Stevenson** 6'3" 191cm 192lb. 87kg, Stroke **Mike Stanley** 6'0" 182cm 187lb. 85kg,
Coxswain **Andrew Hay**

All nine had been 1983 World Champions.

Cross: "Harry seemed to lose his way in New Zealand after that result. In 1986, Harry's four⁶⁵²⁵ returned to the medal rostrum with a Silver, but he was clearly looking for other challenges. He found it by moving to Europe to become the Swiss National Coach."⁶⁵²⁶

Switzerland

In 1986, Harry became Switzerland's first professional national coach.

⁶⁵²⁵ a crew made up exclusively of individuals from Waikato Rowing Club, per Mike Stanley, personal correspondence, 2008.

⁶⁵²⁶ Cross, p. 49

Quarrell: "Mahon's move to Switzerland was partly the result of his constant search for the secret of rowing."⁶⁵²⁷

Daniel Hornberger, Technical Director of the Schweizerischer Ruderverband during Harry's tenure: "Before Harry arrived, Switzerland was basically sending club crews to compete internationally, and since 1982 no crew had been able to achieve any results anymore at the World Championships or Olympics.

"Harry gave to all Swiss rowers a common technique. That was a hellish job and caused a lot of quarrels with all the club coaches, but the Silver Medal in Seoul for

⁶⁵²⁷ Quarrell, op cit.

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Pieces of Eight

“He was like this bearded guy with a hat and sunglasses” – Xeno Müller

the Men’s Double started a never-before achieved number of Swiss rowing medals for about ten years at World Championships and Olympic Games.

“We had a Junior World Champion Eight in 1993 and the year after a Bronze medal in the same event. The Junior Women’s Double won Gold as well. We won two Olympic Gold Medals in 1996 in the men’s single and the men’s lightweight double, and also a few medals at World Championships in these years.

“Swiss rowing never ever had such a successful time as between 1988 and 1996, and all the results of Swiss rowers after he left Switzerland are still to be seen in a strong relationship with Harry.”⁶⁵²⁸

Mahon had two medalist boats at the 1988 Olympics, the Silver Medal Swiss Men’s Double of **Beat Schwerzmann and Üli Bodenmann** and the New Zealand Bronze Medal Men’s Single Sculler, **Eric Verdonk**.⁶⁵²⁹

⁶⁵²⁸ Hornberger, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁵²⁹ who had done his schoolboy rowing for Eric Craies at Westlake Boys High School.

That year he also began coaching **Xeno Müller**.

Xeno: “Harry first saw me in 1988, the year I was turning sixteen. I was in a little rowing camp in Switzerland over Easter, driven in from Fontainebleau in France where I lived, and he spotted me on the lake of Zug.⁶⁵³⁰ He was coaching these Swiss club elites. It was funny because I was told later on that he spotted me from afar, said, ‘Okay guys, good session,’ and just drove away in my direction.



FISA 1988 Video

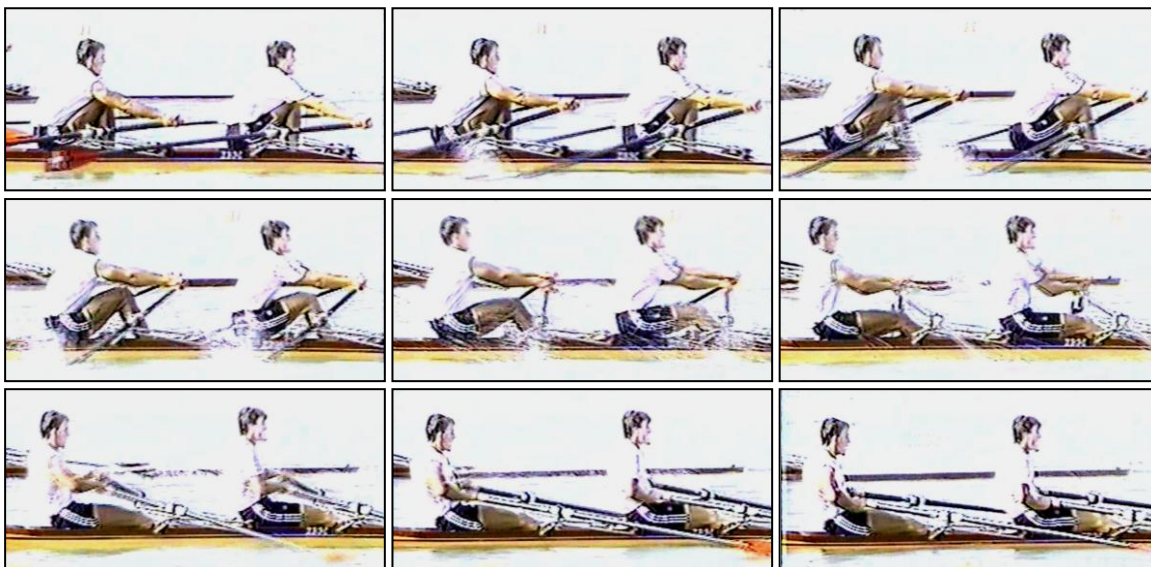
New Zealand Men’s Single
1988 Olympic Bronze Medal, Seoul
Eric Verdonk 6’2” 189 cm 187 lb. 85 kg

“I was rowing along, and all of a sudden this guy was sitting right off my stern, and then he stopped me. He was like this bearded guy with a hat and sunglasses. You couldn’t tell what he looked like. We had heard that he was around, but that was the first time we saw him, and for me it was, you know, very flattering.

“I felt like a million bucks because there I was, almost sixteen, didn’t know how to drive yet, and this iconic figure, Harry Mahon, just saw something. So that was memorable.

⁶⁵³⁰ 30 km northeast of Lucerne.

THE SPORT OF ROWING



FISA 1988 Video

Switzerland Men's Double

1988 Olympic Silver Medal, Seoul

Bow **Beat Schwerzmann** 6'5" 195cm 214lb. 97kg, Stroke **Üli Bodenmann** 6'3" 190cm 187lb. 85kg,

0°, +35° to -10°, 0-9, 0-9, 0-10 Classical Technique

Concurrent *Schubschlag*, ferryman's finish

"He ended up coaching me from age 16 every summer in Sarnen, Switzerland⁶⁵³¹ until 1992 when I was 21."⁶⁵³²

Harry coached Xeno to a Bronze Medal in the single at the 1990 Junior World Championships on Lac d'Aiguebelette. Müller went on to win the 1996 Olympic Championship in the Men's Single under Australian coach **Marty Aitken**.

Xeno: "If someone asks me where does my rowing style come from, I say, well, I had a New Zealand coach, and I had an Australian coach, and we lived close to Italy.

"Leg drive and keeping the shoulders and the upper body relaxed, and relying on the skeletal strength, not the muscular strength, were the most important things."⁶⁵³³

Müller tended to contradict many of the stated precepts of Mahon's perfect stroke.

Relatively short-limbed, Müller engaged his shoulders and arms upon initiation of the pullthrough – see the muscle definition in Frames 2 on the following two pages – his shoulders bunched a bit around his ears, and his elbows bent quite early.

What Müller did to perfection was have good posture ("Sit tall with a strong back."⁶⁵³⁴) and transition seamlessly at the end of the pullthrough to the recovery ("Hands should flow out at the speed they came in."⁶⁵³⁵) and transition again at the end of the recovery to the pullthrough ("The catch is a placing of, or anchoring of, the blade in the water so you can push against it with the legs."⁶⁵³⁶)

⁶⁵³¹ on the Sarnersee, 25 km south of Lucerne.

⁶⁵³² Müller, op cit.

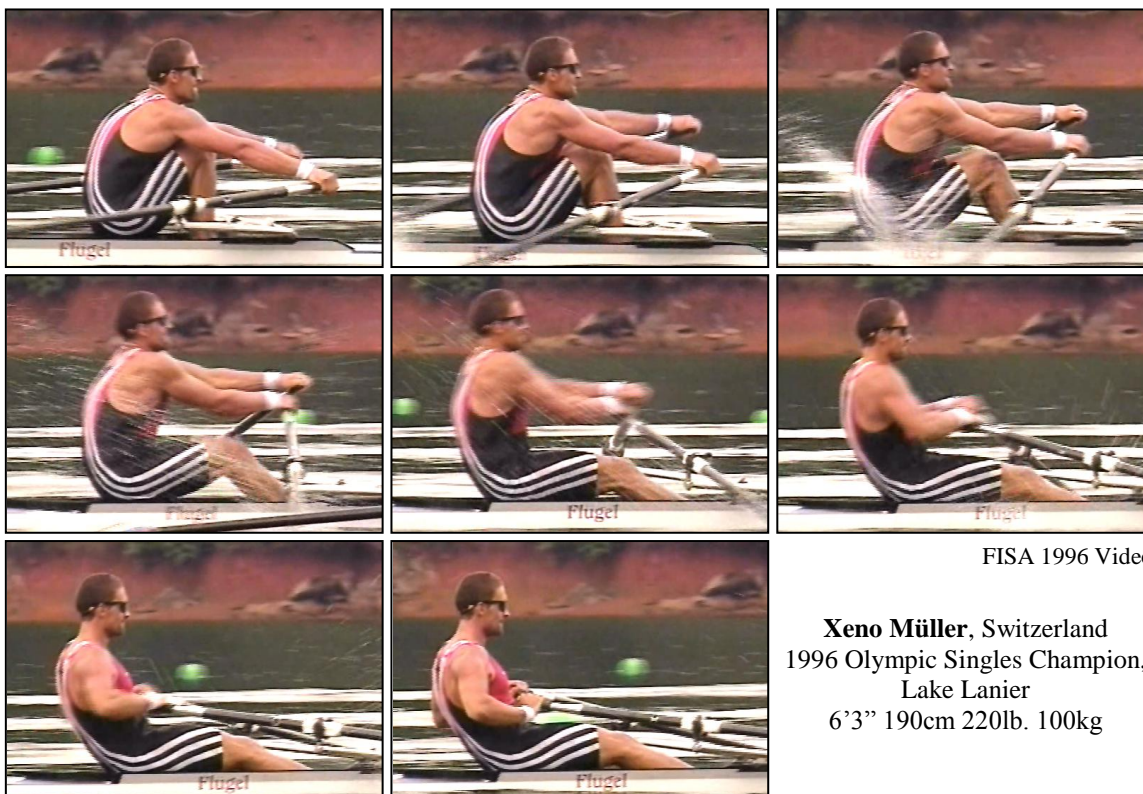
⁶⁵³³ Müller, op cit.

⁶⁵³⁴ *Keystrokes*, op cit.

⁶⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁵³⁶ Ibid.

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT



FISA 1996 Video

Xeno Müller, Switzerland
1996 Olympic Singles Champion,
Lake Lanier
6'3" 190cm 220lb. 100kg

-5°, +25° to -25°, 0-8, 0-8, 0-10,

Classical Technique hybrid-concurrent *Kernschlag*

Back swing from entry, but legs were emphasized in Frames 2, 3 and 4.

Visible elbow bend began in Frame 3.

No acceleration after back stopped swinging.

Xeno: "There were times when Harry wouldn't watch me row. He would watch my stern, and as I was rowing along, he would tell me, 'Catch . . . Catch . . . Catch . . .'. He would be watching the deceleration of my boat, comparing it to the speed of the coaching launch, and when he saw the stern slow down, that's when he wanted me to pick up the boat. What ended up happening is that he would tell me to catch when I was halfway up the slide.

"Later in life I eventually figured out what he was trying to tell me. What was not happening with me was that I didn't get enough hinging at the hip joint. I was a little bit hunched, and I was pushing the body forward first instead of letting the handle go

with the shoulder following and *then* the body hinging at the hip.

"While all this is happening, the boat is gliding . . . and only then do you start rolling up the slide. Once you start rolling, then there's a nice smooth glide of the boat."⁶⁵³⁷

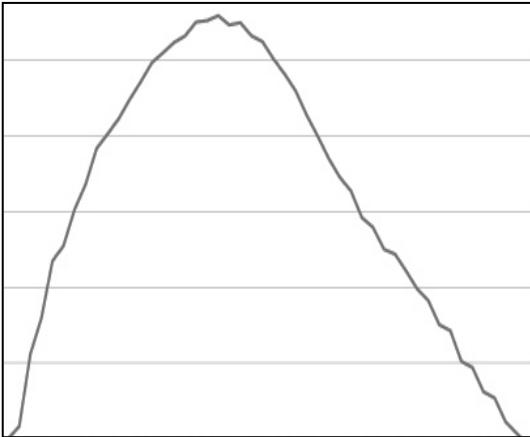
In 1996, Müller's body mechanics displayed a very subtle Classical Technique hybrid-concurrency. Legs barely dominated early and were well integrated with the unifying body swing. Arms were straining early, but the last 10% of the pullthrough was left to them alone. As can be seen on these pages, his force curve was smooth

⁶⁵³⁷ Müller, op cit.

THE SPORT OF ROWING



FISA 2000 Video



author

Xeno Müller

Drawing the arms into an immobile back produced no acceleration and led to a mild *Kernschlag* bias in the force curve.

with a subtle *Kernschlag* bias toward the front end.

Xeno tended to row slightly elevated ratings, ticking the boat along much in the manner of Mahon's 1980s New Zealand sweep crews.

On Lake Lanier in 1996, Xeno contented himself to row back in the pack as

Xeno Müller, Switzerland
2000 Olympic Silver Medal, Penrith
+5°, +20° to -25°, 0-8, 0-8, 0-10, Modern Orthodox
By 2000, Müller compressed his legs more and moved them more sequentially before back swing began.

first defending Olympic Champion **Thomas Lange**⁶⁵³⁸ and then 1993 World Champion **Derek Porter**⁶⁵³⁹ led the way.

Xeno: "The goal was to not get tired in the first 1,200 meters, and that was a really hard battle for me to stay patient, especially because you deal with *pressure* at the Olympics.

"I was already higher than the 33-34 that Lange and Porter and **Iztok Cop** were doing, so it was even harder to be patient the first 1,200 meters while noticing that the others were leaving me behind. It was hard to really trust that yes, it *was* possible to start building in the last 700 meters, and to potentially be a bowball ahead at 250 meters to go. The goal in that last 800 meters or

⁶⁵³⁸ See Chapter 119.

⁶⁵³⁹ See Chapter 134.

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT



The author and **Xeno** in 2009

700 meters was to start adding torque, so I was going with a little less torque, and I was ready to add more.”⁶⁵⁴⁰

Down two lengths in fourth place at the 1,000, Müller smoothly and almost imperceptibly upped his rating from 35 to 36 and immediately began to move. He crossed the 1,500 in third but only a half-length down on Porter in the lead. He then raised the rate one more beat to 37.

In five strokes he was in second. In ten more he was in first.

Xeno: “I knew that Porter wasn’t going to take it up in the last 250 meters because in the semi-final, if he could have done it, he *would* have won against me . . . because it was Porter! He has an ego. He would have brought the fight to me if he could, but he didn’t.

“And you know, I trained to always row the last 250 meters by instinct because every third or fourth workout we would do, we would say okay, let’s just blow out one minute, but only gradually build for that one minute as long as it was efficiently moving the boat. Every fifteen seconds we would increase the boat speed, and by the time we

got to the racing season, we would have 44 strokes per minute by the end of that minute.”⁶⁵⁴¹

With 250 to go, Müller was at 38 and three-quarters of a length ahead. Seven strokes later it was open water!

He got an additional half length in the drive to the line as Porter and Lange fought desperately for Silver, the former ultimately gaining it by inches. Porter especially looked devastated on the awards podium.

Many have described Müller as an explosive sprinter, but that is not exactly accurate. Xeno Müller’s last 500 in 1996 was indeed faster than the previous three, but he had gradually and smoothly wound it up from the 1,000 on in and looked amazingly calm and fluid as he knifed through the field, much like the 1982 New Zealand eight, which had followed the identical race plan.

On the 1996 FISA video, **Daniel Topolski** described Müller as “a very strong, powerful, contained sculler. Very, very horizontal on the drive back, good connection through the back through to the legs.”⁶⁵⁴² Certainly it was his fingers-to-toes connection that carried him through.

Müller was only one of many outstanding scullers that Harry Mahon coached during the 1990s.

The Times of London: “Though [Harry Mahon] found professional success in Switzerland, the blunt speaking New Zealander was never quite at home in the country he termed ‘the land of the cuckoo clock.’”⁶⁵⁴³

Quarrell: “During his Swiss years he began to hop continents, taking short-term coaching jobs and spreading his unique

⁶⁵⁴⁰ Müller, op cit.

⁶⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁴² 1996 FISA Video Commentary

⁶⁵⁴³ *The Times* of London, op cit.

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perspective to crews in America, Great Britain, South Africa and Australia. It didn't matter where: Mahon's only interest was in getting the most speed possible out of the boat, whoever was sitting in it."⁶⁵⁴⁴

It is interesting to note that by the 2000 Olympics, Müller had become more of a Modern Orthodox sequential rower, and he looked not quite as fluid as he was being beaten to Silver by another Mahon protégé, New Zealand's **Rob Waddell**.

Müller: "I had a chest cold during the final. I did not even think that I would medal. I completely ran out of power at 500 meters to go.

"My stroke acceleration broke down."⁶⁵⁴⁵ "I was great for 1,500 meters, and then I died. That was bad . . .

"The commentator said, 'Waddell is pulling away!' but I was going in the other direction."⁶⁵⁴⁶

Xeno Müller barely held on to the Silver behind Waddell.

Rob Waddell

Rob Waddell of New Zealand and his wife, Sonia, also a New Zealand international single sculler, were both coached by Harry Mahon.

Xeno: "Rob Waddell is probably the most modest huge champion that I have ever met. Really good! Hands down! If I'm a fan of anyone, how he copes with things, it's Rob because he's so open."⁶⁵⁴⁷

Rob: "The first time I was actually coached by Harry was in 1994, not long after I left school. It was in the second year, so I would have been nineteen. My brother and I were working and living at home on a farm which was about an hour away from

[Lake Karapiro], and we would drive up, row in the evening, stay the night with Harry, and then go out rowing again in the morning. We did this every second night, so we got to know Harry as well personally as we did as a coach. He often cooked meals and took meals with us. He became quite a family friend.

"He first coached me in the coxless-pair, then in '95 in the four, and again in '96 when I first got into the single. I think Harry had an ability to sort of see a way straight to the top for people and see natural ability and natural athleticism.

"Harry was a mentor, an inspirational kind of character who was one of the first people who got me to believe that I could achieve whatever I wanted to. He put the thought in my mind and got me dreaming.

"The first time I hopped into the single, I did really well in New Zealand."⁶⁵⁴⁸

Rob gradually rose from failing to make the World singles final in 1997⁶⁵⁴⁹ to winning the World Championship in 1998 and '99 and the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000.

Waddell's technique followed the Mahon pattern: smooth, "endless-chain" rhythm, Modern Orthodox hybrid-concurrent legs and back with late arm draw and moderate layback ending in a ferryman's finish.

Rob: "I think Harry will always be remembered in New Zealand as a rhythmical, technical coach. I think he contrasted with some of the coaches around at the moment who are very workload-oriented. He had an ability there to look at things and to finish crews, which I think was his real strength."⁶⁵⁵⁰

After retiring from competitive rowing in 2000 and working as a grinder in two

⁶⁵⁴⁴ Quarrell, op cit.

⁶⁵⁴⁵ Müller, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁵⁴⁶ Müller, personal conversation, 2008

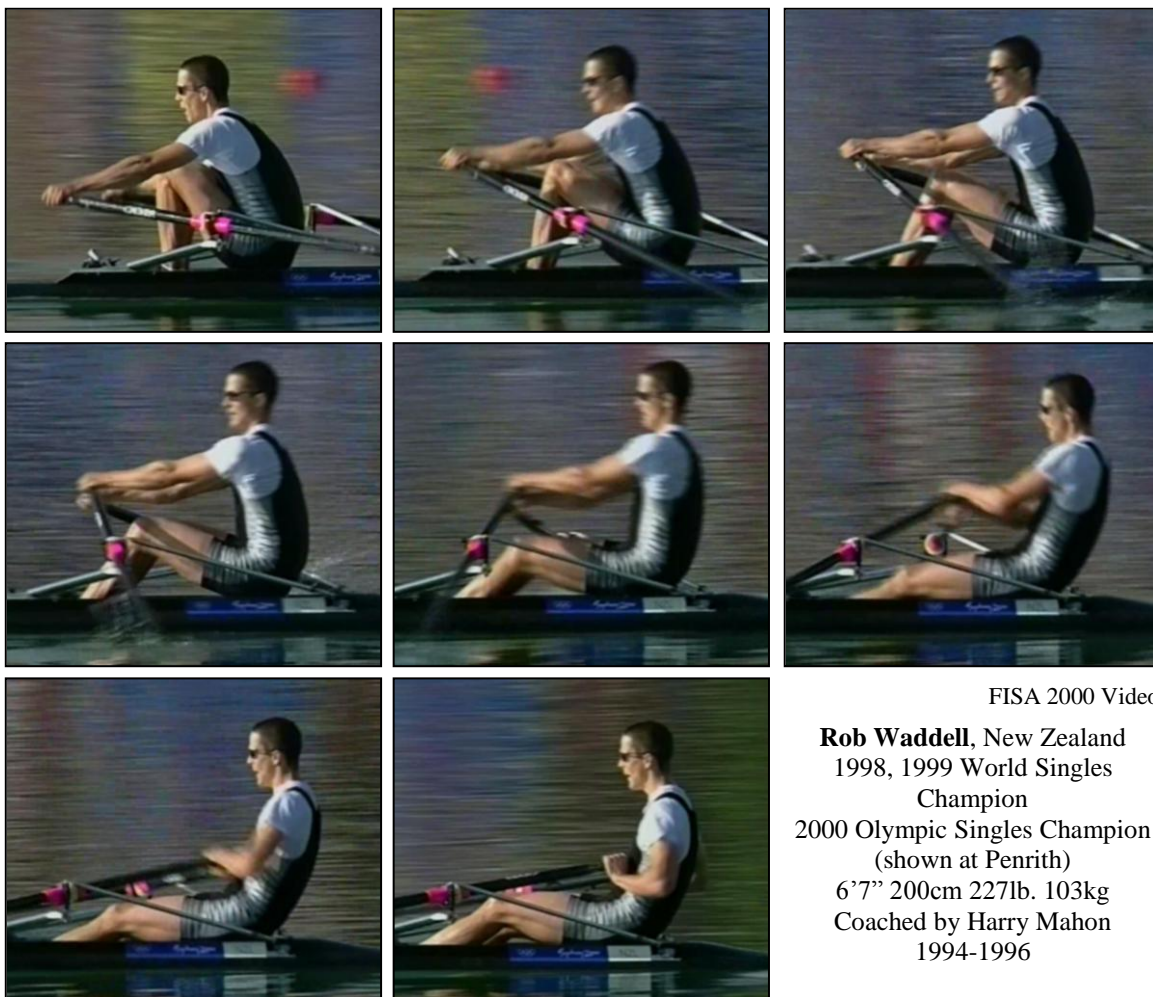
⁶⁵⁴⁷ Müller, op cit.

⁶⁵⁴⁸ Waddell, op cit.

⁶⁵⁴⁹ See Chapter 149.

⁶⁵⁵⁰ R. Waddell, personal conversation, 2008

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FISA 2000 Video

Rob Waddell, New Zealand
 1998, 1999 World Singles
 Champion
 2000 Olympic Singles Champion
 (shown at Penrith)
 6'7" 200cm 227lb. 103kg
 Coached by Harry Mahon
 1994-1996

+5°, +25° to -20°, 0-8, 0-8, 4-10, ferryman's finish

Modern Orthodox hybrid-concurrent *Kernschlag*

Legs dominated early. Late arm draw.

As with Müller, acceleration stopped when back swing stopped.

successful New Zealand America's Cup sailing campaigns, Waddell returned to rowing in time for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. He and his partner, **Nathan Cohen**, placed fourth in the men's double.

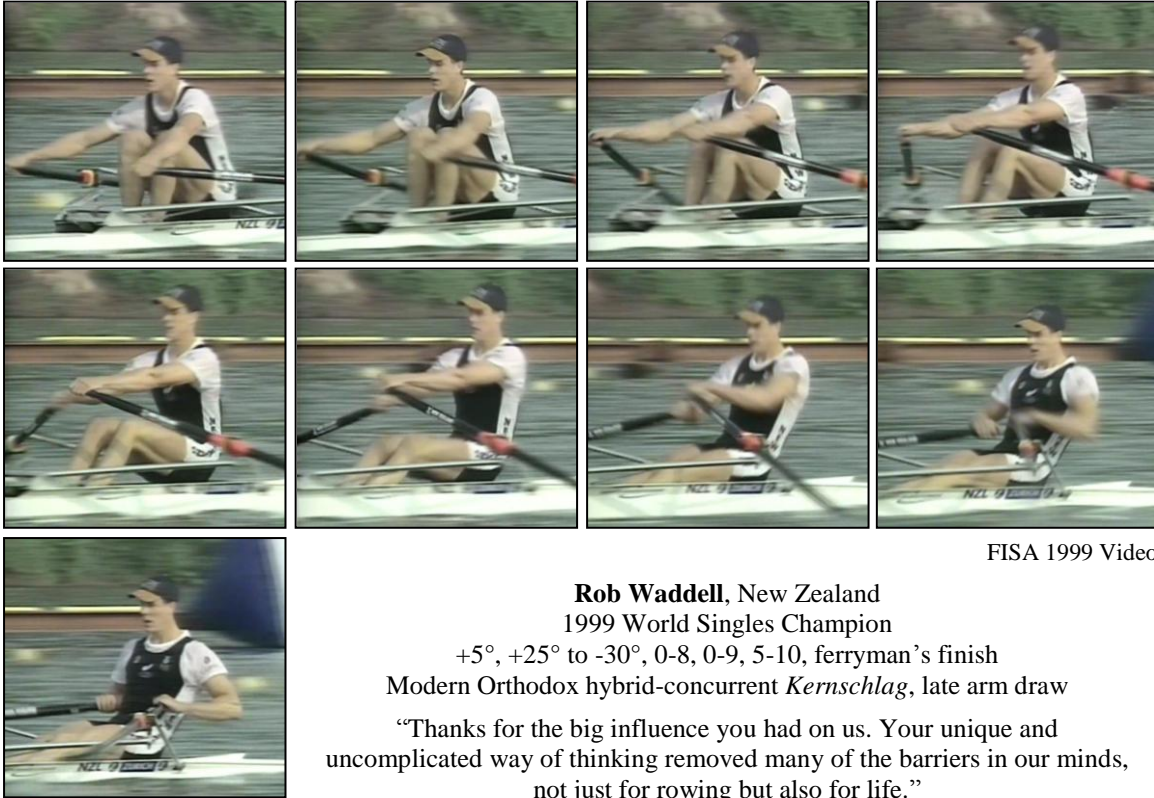
On to Great Britain

By the 1990s, Harry Mahon had become a true citizen of the world.

Quarrell: "For the last few years of Mahon's life, the British rowing community adopted him. In 1993, he was brought in by the Cambridge University coaches to help reverse a losing streak of sixteen defeats in seventeen years.⁶⁵⁵¹ The Mahon magic, coupled with the fierce determination of the entire squad, turned Cambridge into winners that year, and created a system which

⁶⁵⁵¹ under coach Dan Topolski. See Chapter 144.

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FISA 1999 Video

Rob Waddell, New Zealand

1999 World Singles Champion

+5°, +25° to -30°, 0-8, 0-9, 5-10, ferryman's finish

Modern Orthodox hybrid-concurrent *Kernschlag*, late arm draw

"Thanks for the big influence you had on us. Your unique and uncomplicated way of thinking removed many of the barriers in our minds, not just for rowing but also for life."

- **Rob and Sonia Waddell**

maintained their success throughout the '90s.

"England increasingly became Mahon's base, and he coached crews in the British squad, at Cambridge and at Radley in Oxfordshire, between trips abroad."⁶⁵⁵²

The Times of London: "But it was at Cambridge University where Mahon had been coach since 1992, that he exerted his most sustained influence. He joined a demoralized Club and effected what seemed to be an instantaneous transformation.

"In the 1993 Boat Race, Cambridge rapidly established a two-length lead over Oxford, beginning a winning streak that has since [through 2001] been broken only once. The 1994 Cambridge crew – which beat a Leander Club VIII that included Matthew Pinsent and Stephen Redgrave⁶⁵⁵³ – was

regarded by Mahon as the finest boat he has ever coached.

"He took particular pleasure in seeing two of his recent Cambridge protégés, **Kieran West** and **Graham Smith** go on to international success winning Gold Medals at the 2000 Olympics and World Championships respectively."⁶⁵⁵⁴

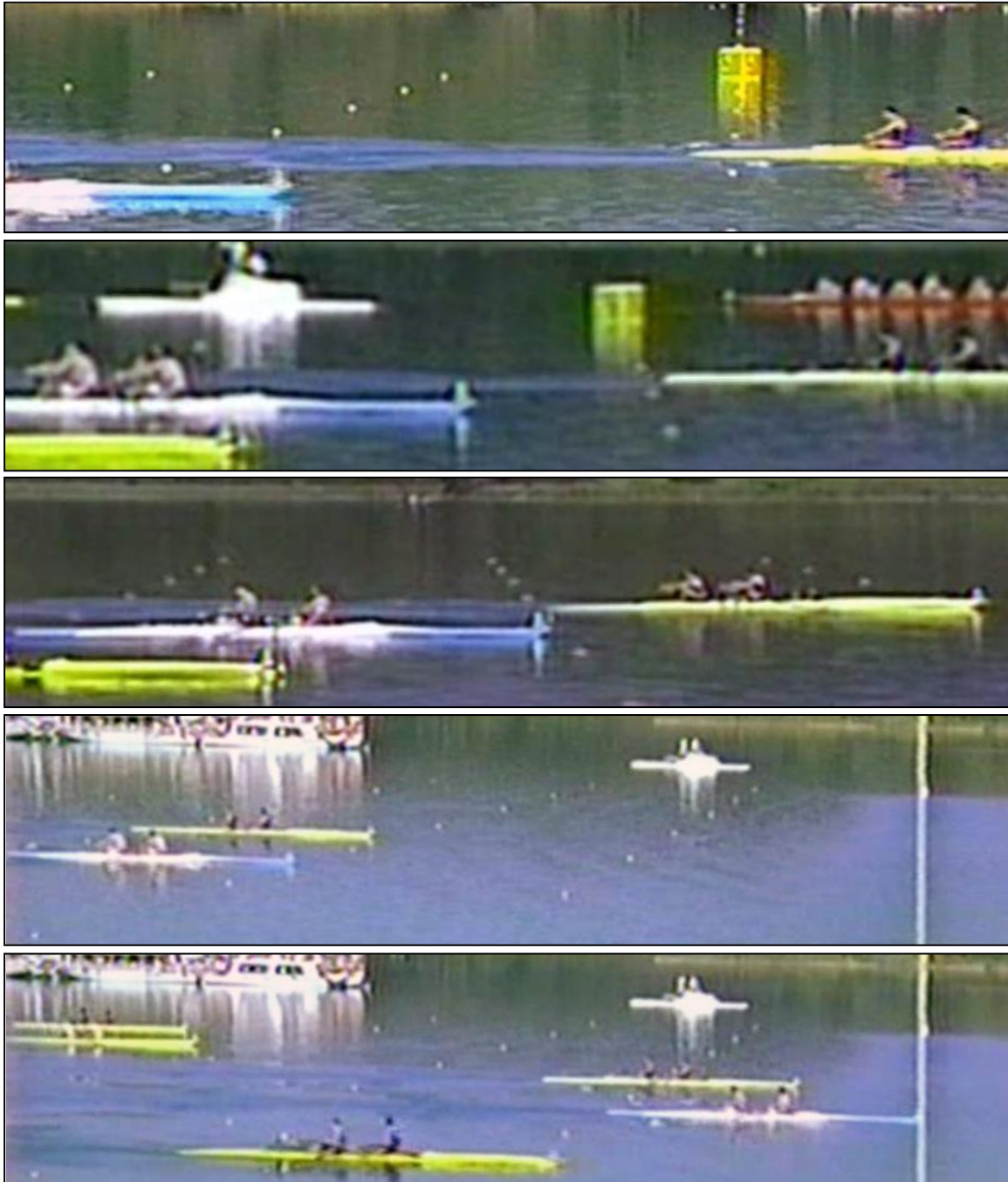
The Guardian: "Mahon was a journeyman coach par excellence, showing up for a weekend with Cambridge and **Robin Williams**, then a few days at Hammersmith with **Martin McElroy** and his Olympic oarsmen, interspersed with regular bouts at Radley College with another Cambridge colleague, **Donald Legget**.

⁶⁵⁵² Quarrell, op cit.

⁶⁵⁵³ See Chapter 136.

⁶⁵⁵⁴ *The Times* of London, op cit.

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT



FISA 1992 Video

1992 Olympic Men's Coxed-Pairs Final

Lago de Bañolas

500 to go, 250 to go, 110 to go, 20 to go, Finish

1 GBR 6:49.83, 2 ITA 6:50.98, 3 ROM 6:51.58, 4 GER 6:56.98, 5 CUB 6:58.26, 6 FRA 7:03.01

The Searles made up one length on the Abbagnales in less than 90 meters!

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“He coached Britain’s scullers from 1997 to 1999, running a small group from the Lensbury Club, Teddington, which included **Greg Searle**.”⁶⁵⁵⁵

Greg Searle

The Searle brothers had already won the 1992 Olympic Coxed-Pairs title in inimitable fashion. **Martin Cross** was watching:

“At first, the boats were just distant dots, but as they passed the 1,000 metres mark I could just begin to make out the crews. Five seconds ahead and creaming the rest of the field were the imperious Abbagnale brothers.⁶⁵⁵⁶ The Italians were flying toward their third Olympic Gold Medal with what seemed like an ocean of clear blue water between them and the rest of the field. That included **Jon Searle**, rowing with his younger brother, **Greg**. The split times showed they were 4.8 seconds behind at the halfway point.

“Then I remembered the words of the Searles’ cox, **Garry Herbert**. When we had spoken about his race the previous evening, he’d said, ‘Mart, I know we can give them five seconds at the 1,000 metres and still beat them.’

“With 500 left, though, what Garry had promised hadn’t happened. Even though they were now challenging for Silver, I was sure they’d left it far too late. With just 100 metres to go, the Abbagnales must have begun to smell the scent of the bouquets that were awarded to the champions.

“Then it happens. With centimetres left, the killer touch. The Searles’ last few desperate strokes snatched the Gold Medal away.”⁶⁵⁵⁷

“The year after Barcelona they again won. It was only FISA’s decision to abolish

their event that stopped them adding another Gold in the Atlanta Games.”⁶⁵⁵⁸

Turning to a coxless-four for their return to Olympic competition, in 1996 the Searle brothers came in third to the **Oarsome Foursome**⁶⁵⁵⁹ and a very fast French crew.

Cross: “To both Searles, the Bronze ‘seemed like nothing.’”⁶⁵⁶⁰

After Atlanta, Greg turned to the single and to Harry Mahon.

Cross: “Greg Searle got a chance to sample the Mahon magic when Harry began to coach him in 1997. That year, Searle became the first British single sculler for almost forty years to medal at a World Championships.”⁶⁵⁶¹

“I went out with him in the launch to hear him coaching Greg Searle. He never stopped talking. I listened enthralled to his dialogue. For me, it was like discovering Mozart for the first time. Not only could I see the effect that his coaching was having on Greg, it was also the way I was starting to look at the sport at that time in my life.”⁶⁵⁶²

As the video frames on this page indicate, Searle shared a number of technical features with Xeno Müller: hybrid-concurrent legs and back, moderate body swing with shoulders and arms engaged early. Again, the impression was of connection and fluid motion.

Greg Searle followed Harry around the world.

Mark Shuttleworth: “In the course of the southern summer of 1997-1998, Harry coached Greg Searle in South Africa. Greg was there to take advantage of the South African Summer and Harry’s presence.

⁶⁵⁵⁵ *The Guardian*, op cit.

⁶⁵⁵⁶ See Chapter 145.

⁶⁵⁵⁷ Cross, pp. 12-3

⁶⁵⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 184

⁶⁵⁵⁹ See Chapter 131.

⁶⁵⁶⁰ Cross, p. 184

⁶⁵⁶¹ Ibid, p. 50

⁶⁵⁶² Ibid, pp. 47-8

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FISA 1998 Video



Greg Searle, Great Britain
 1992 Olympic Champion, Coxed-Pair
 1993 World Champion, Coxed-Pair
 1997 World Bronze Medal, 1998 Fifth, Men's Single
 6'5" 196cm 220lb. 100kg

0°, +25° to -25°, 0-9, 0-9, 0-10

Classical Technique hybrid-concurrent

Very elegant *Schubschlag*, hint of ferryman's finish



Cas Rekers, Rowperfect

Greg Searle

Smooth first half from coordinated legs and back. Flat spot may be due to late arm break. The boat stopped accelerating during the ferryman's finish.

"Harry had taken on the South Africans as a visiting consultant coach, simply because he was asked. I was fortunate to accompany him a few times while helping the SA squad, and following Greg who was just beginning his single sculling campaign. Harry spoke the same way and with the

same attention to detail with Greg as with any of the SA squad, or other rowers who were fortunate to be around for him to take a look at. He imbued a quiet certainty rather than confidence."⁶⁵⁶³

Searle: "Harry also had the ability to work with individuals differently. He knew that I was different from others he'd worked with, like Xeno. Therefore, his model for what good should look like for me was different and very personal and real for me."⁶⁵⁶⁴

Cross: "Rather than getting him to slam his legs down as quickly as he could in a [sweep] boat, Harry emphasized that Greg needed to move more sympathetically with the pace of the boat. It was all about taking more time to feel connected and learning how to use his back as a lever, pulling with

⁶⁵⁶³ Shuttleworth, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁵⁶⁴ G. Searle, op cit.

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his lateral muscles rather than wrenching with his shoulders and arms.”⁶⁵⁶⁵

Searle’s force curve typified the Mahon approach, a *Schubschlag* parabola with smooth transitions and no rough spots. The curve shown was measured on a Rowperfect rowing simulator by **Cas Rekers** at the regatta site of the 1997 World Championship.

In his first year of serious sculling, Greg Searle, already the world record holder on the Concept2 ergometer, “was moving beautifully, completely at one with the boat, unhurried, connected and fast.”⁶⁵⁶⁶

Searle: “Harry made everything effortless and enjoyable, and when I rowed like that, it was pretty special. I keep a diary of everything he said to me. I still try [April, 2001], and I hope I am succeeding, to row in a way that he would teach.”⁶⁵⁶⁷

Greg won Bronze on Lac d’Aiguebelette in 1997 and set his sights on the 2000 Olympics.

The Guardian: “Greg Searle, the 1992 Olympic Coxed-Pairs Gold Medallist, despite eventually failing to become Britain’s single sculler in Sydney, said that Mahon revolutionised his technique and mental approach: ‘He inspired me whenever he coached me, and the way he dealt with his illness inspires me still.’”⁶⁵⁶⁸

Cancer

Quarrell: “In 1997, Mahon was given a diagnosis of terminal liver cancer, and months to live. Using a combination of willpower, exercise, chemotherapy and alternative medicine, he fought the encroaching tumour, and for a while halted its progress.”⁶⁵⁶⁹

The Guardian: “In 1997, Henley Regatta timed Searle’s races to fit in with Harry’s chemotherapy programme.”⁶⁵⁷⁰

Searle: “When it came to his fight with cancer, he was incredibly brave. He would take the treatment without wanting to miss a training session with me. He also seemed prepared to face up to what was happening but be prepared to fight like hell.

“I have videos of me sculling with Harry talking. I didn’t realize it at the time when we watched them together, but I think he was actually talking to the camera and not to me to ensure that his words would not be lost. He knew he wouldn’t be here forever.

“I can now watch those videos and still capture what he wanted me to do with my technique.”⁶⁵⁷¹

Quarrell: “In 1999, [Harry] decided to run the London Marathon to raise money for the cancer-care units which had helped him, and both Mahon and his helpers were astonished by the response from around the world, as donations poured in.”⁶⁵⁷²

The Times of London: “The recent verging of reverence in which he was held by oarsmen was only enhanced by the way in which he dealt with the cancer.

“Undaunted and lacking in self pity, he kept up a punishing coaching schedule with the Great Britain squad, with Cambridge University and latterly with the Radley College crew. Given only months to live at the beginning of 1999, Mahon’s strength of will proved indomitable.”⁶⁵⁷³

The 2000 Eight

Cross: “[In 1999, Mahon spent] the summer giving his expertise to the British eight. Their coach, **Martin McElroy**, was a

⁶⁵⁶⁵ Cross, p. 185

⁶⁵⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 187

⁶⁵⁶⁷ Qtd. by Stevens, op cit.

⁶⁵⁶⁸ *The Guardian*, op cit.

⁶⁵⁶⁹ Quarrell, op cit.

⁶⁵⁷⁰ *The Guardian*, op cit.

⁶⁵⁷¹ G. Searle, op. cit.

⁶⁵⁷² Quarrell, op cit.

⁶⁵⁷³ *The Times* of London, op cit.

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT



Grant Craies

Harry Mahon
coaching **Simon Dennis**, 3-seat
Great Britain 2000 Olympic Champion Men's Eight

Mahon devotee and jumped at the chance to have the great man along to most sessions.

Cross: "The first time I saw the British eight training on the course [at the 1999 World Championships in St. Catharines], it took my breath away. Their stroke looked so long and connected, the rhythm so effortless. They were moving so quickly that they were traveling far more between strokes than I could remember.

"Then the magic of that Kiwi eight in 1982 flashed into my mind, and I knew that the Mahon magic had been at work again.

"Their brilliant final row, where they won a [1999] Silver Medal, was testament to the inspiration of a great teacher."⁶⁵⁷⁴

Technique

McElroy: "Overall, I'd say our technique is based on simplicity. A stroke has to have reasonable effective length, the power

⁶⁵⁷⁴ Cross, p. 54

must come on in a sustainable fashion, and nothing should be done to slow the boat down.

"Our sport is about taking both athlete and boat down the track in the best possible time. The athlete has a finite amount of energy to offer during the race. An effective technique tries to maximise the boat speed that can be generated over this period.

"Without trying to categorise our technique relative to others, I'd say we attempt to row in a natural relaxed fashion. We focus a lot on eliminating extras – if it offers nothing to the speed of the boat, then why do it?

"The momentum of the athletes in the crew is crucial.

The athletes moving back and forth along the slide can be basis of a rhythm. You can either bang off the foot-stretcher and pull yourself back up the slide for the next stroke, or you can spring off the stretcher, just as a good basketball player would to gain maximum height, and then allow the forward moving boat to bring your feet to you before springing again."⁶⁵⁷⁵

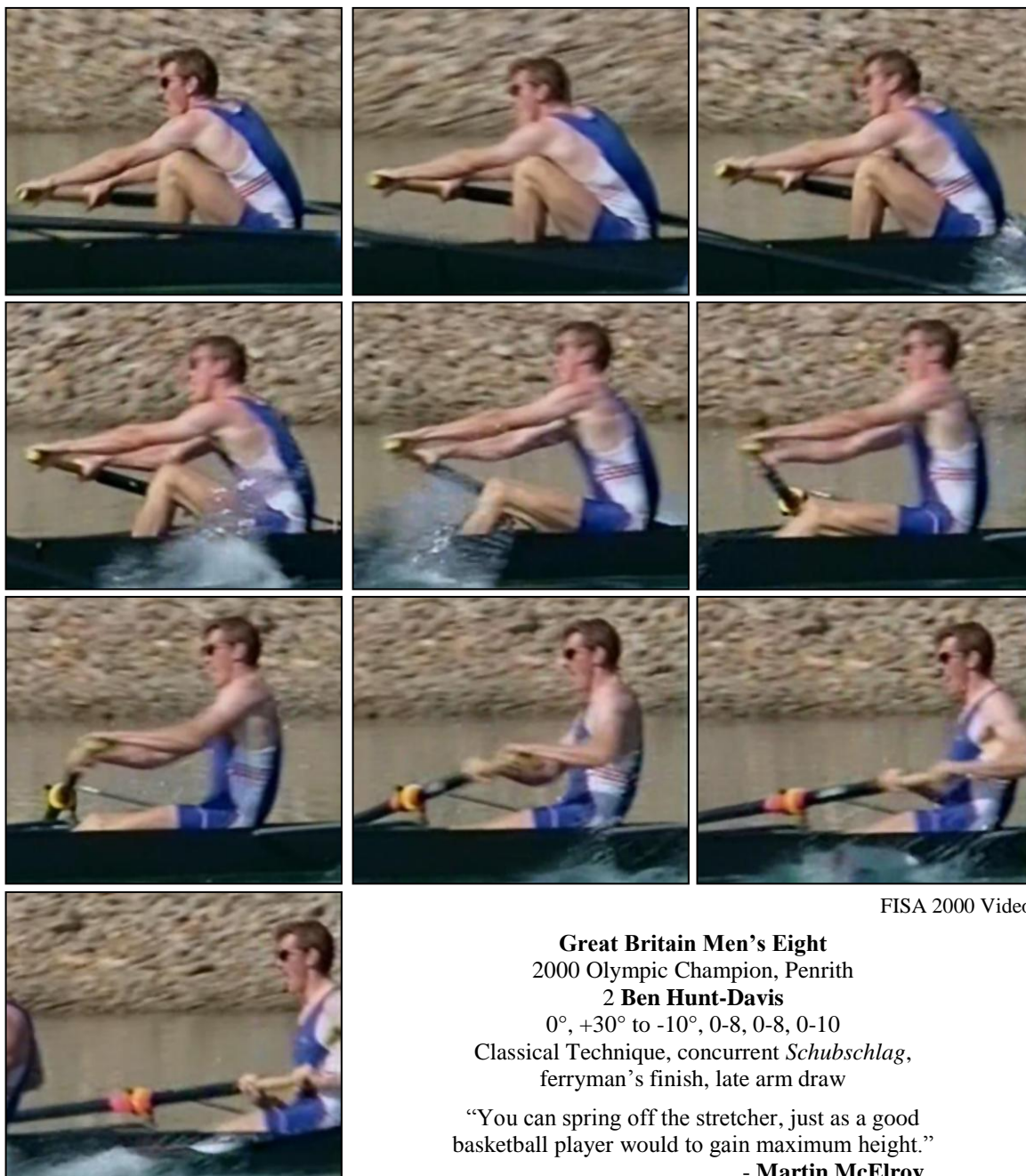
Mahon Force Curve Template

During the 1990s, Harry Mahon associated himself with Rowperfect rowing simulators and its founder, **Cas Rekers**.

Tony Brook, a longtime friend of both, reminisced with Cas: "The Rowperfect is an important part of the Harry story, as in the latter years of his life he 'discovered' it one day, excitedly phoned me and said, 'I have just been on a new rowing machine, and you

⁶⁵⁷⁵ Interview with Martin McElroy,
www.irow.com

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FISA 2000 Video

Great Britain Men's Eight
2000 Olympic Champion, Penrith
2 Ben Hunt-Davis

0°, +30° to -10°, 0-8, 0-8, 0-10

Classical Technique, concurrent *Schubschlag*,
ferryman's finish, late arm draw

"You can spring off the stretcher, just as a good
basketball player would to gain maximum height."

- **Martin McElroy**

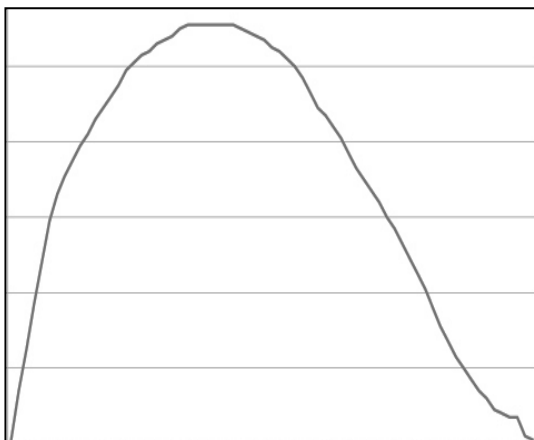
know what? It feels *just* like a boat – you have *got* to try it!"

"And so the wonderful relationship began between us all. I thought it amazing that Harry would put his athletes onto the 'Rowperfect' just before they went out to

race at World Championship regattas. He did this with Greg Searle in 1997 and the GB Olympic Eight in Sydney.

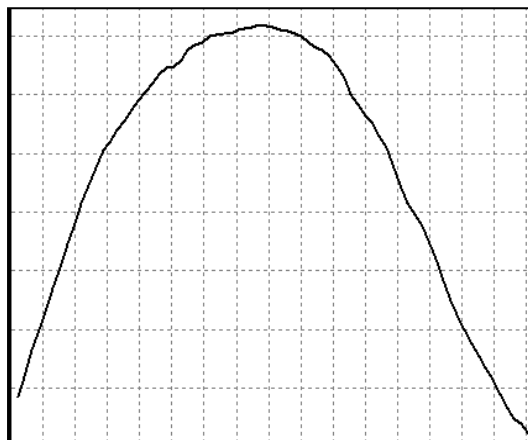
"Do you remember the day Harry coached the Kiwi girl on the Rowperfect in the attic of our house? That was one of the

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT



Cas Rekers, Rowperfect

Cas Rekers being coached by
Harry Mahon, 1997



Cas Rekers, Rowperfect

2001 British Template
Schubschlag parabola

best examples of Harry in action that I ever saw, and you witnessed it at first hand, Cas!

“The sound of the accelerating flywheel becoming more consistent and defined as the athlete began to relax, work correctly and apply the master’s words.

“I can still hear it now . . .”

Rekers: “Harry’s coaching of me personally was limited to about fifteen minutes when he asked me, being the person most familiar with the dynamics of the Rowperfect machine and all its ins and outs, to help him to produce some template curves that he could use. The coaching stopped as soon as I had produced the shape of curve he wanted.”⁶⁵⁷⁶

As it had been with Greg Searle, that shape was a **parabola**, first seen in 1900 at Cornell University⁶⁵⁷⁷ and repeatedly seen in champion crews in the century that followed. Most notably, the parabola was also the ideal curve of the German Democratic Republic.⁶⁵⁷⁸

Redemption in 2000

Early in his career, Harry had been severely wounded by his own failure to lead his two-time World Champion New Zealand Eight to the 1984 Olympic Gold Medal. He must have known that the 2000 Olympics would be his very last chance to complete the journey he had first attempted sixteen years earlier.

The Times of London: “During the [2000] Olympics, Mahon was already in the advanced stages of cancer, and his defiance of his condition was an inspiration to the British crew.”⁶⁵⁷⁹

Cross: “[In 2000,] wins in Vienna and Lucerne were offset by defeats in Munich and Henley. But by Sydney the crew was clearly moving better than it ever had done.

“There was an effortless ease about the way they raced. On the pick-up, the blades disappeared below the surface of the water more quickly and smoothly than any of their rivals.

“A brief hiccup during their opening heat, which saw them lose to Australia, was merely seen by Harry as an opportunity to

⁶⁵⁷⁶ Rekers, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁵⁷⁷ See Chapter 38.

⁶⁵⁷⁸ See Chapter 119.

⁶⁵⁷⁹ *The Times* of London, op cit.

THE SPORT OF ROWING



FISA 2000 Video

Great Britain Men's Eight
2000 Olympic Champion, Penrith
Coxswain **Rowley Douglas,**

Stroke **Steve Trapmore** 6'4" 192cm 198lb. 90kg, 7 **Fred Scarlett** 6'5" 196cm 216lb. 98kg,
6 **Kieren West** 6'8" 204cm 220lb. 100kg, 5 **Luka Grubor** 6'6" 198cm 225lb. 102kg,
4 **Louis Attrill** 6'4" 193cm 209lb. 95kg, 3 **Simon Dennis** 6'7" 200cm 209lb. 95kg,
2 **Ben Hunt-Davis** 6'6" 198cm 209lb. 95kg, Bow **Andrew Lindsay** 6'1" 185cm 205lb. 93kg

remind them how things should be done in the next race.

"Throughout the week, Harry continued to work ceaselessly on their technique, not just on the water but also by having each man row perfect strokes on his beloved Rowperfect rowing simulator before they went out to race or train.

"Harry watched the final from the coaches' van which drove alongside the race. It is difficult to extract from him exactly how he felt during those five minutes or so, when the British eight moved effortlessly out into the lead which they were never to relinquish: joy at the result, satisfaction at the way in which it was won,

or maybe relief that he had laid to rest his demons of 1984, when his Kiwi crew failed to medal. All Harry will admit to was feeling pretty pleased for the boys and Martin [McElroy] that he had helped them achieve something that had been their goal for a long while."⁶⁵⁸⁰

The Times of London: "Just before the starting gun sounded for the Olympic final, one of the crew called out 'Remember, we're doing this for Harry'. The call – and

⁶⁵⁸⁰ Cross, pp. 54-5

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT



Harry Mahon in 1984

Mahon's meticulous preparation of the crew – had the necessary effect.”⁶⁵⁸¹

Quarrell: “As the British eight arranged itself on the start of the Olympic final, the cox, **Rowley Douglas**, got the crew to check all their equipment as usual, and then said, ‘If I had eight men in front of me with the spirit of Harry Mahon, we would win this race by a mile.’

“The crew did win it, by a length, which is tantamount to a mile at this level.”⁶⁵⁸²

The Times of London: “The VIII surged ahead of the field, held the lead throughout the race, and went on to win the first British Gold Medal in the event since 1912.

“[Harry Mahon] was at last able to realise his life-long ambition of coaching the Gold Medal-winning Olympic VIII.”⁶⁵⁸³

⁶⁵⁸¹ *The Times* of London, op cit.

⁶⁵⁸² Quarrell, op cit.

⁶⁵⁸³ *The Times* of London, op cit.

R.I.P.

When Harry finally succumbed to his cancer in May of 2001 at the age of 59, a unique voice was lost.

The Times of London: “Rowing was his life, and he was coaching at Radley to within days of his death.”⁶⁵⁸⁴

Robin Williams: “I remember thinking at the time when he was getting really ill, ‘Why is he still coaching?’

“I think most of us would think of ourselves in that situation in our last few months, and probably not keep getting up at the crack of dawn, sitting in a cold motor boat watching someone else starting off in rowing, tediously making the same mistakes that generations before have made.

“But we are not Harry.”⁶⁵⁸⁵

Mark Shuttleworth: “It is funny how we remember in our minds those with *big* egos, but in our hearts we treasure those more selfless people with *mature* egos.”⁶⁵⁸⁶

In 2007, the rowing approach at Cambridge was still often referred to as “Mahon” style.⁶⁵⁸⁷

⁶⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸⁵ Williams, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁵⁸⁶ Shuttleworth, personal correspondence, 2008

⁶⁵⁸⁷ de Rond, p. 168