

Interview with the directors of the French Youth sector of the French Rowing Federation, Dominique Basset and Olivier Pons. First published in the 2009 World Junior Rowing Championships programme, August 2009. Reprinted here with permission from the French rowing federation.

How do you manage a junior team?

Dominique Basset : Our work with young people should form part of what is done in clubs or regions. Communication with the clubs is essential.

We also pay close attention to the technical and socio-educational supervision of the young people. This is an important part of the “Young Talent programme”. We have created quality circles made up of club managers, families and sometimes director of schools. We feel that it is important to give value to the work done by club coaches, as they have sometimes known their rowers since they were juniors.

Olivier Pons : For the majority of these young athletes, it's their first selection. They still have a lot to learn and need to find their bearings. We are going to help them to remain concentrated before and during the world championships. On site, we will have to help them to manage their energy and stress. This is where seniors are more independent. I think that the team training personnel, comprising young managers, other managers with a great deal of experience and club managers, work very well together in order to ensure the best possible management of these different factors.

What does preparing for a junior world championship event on home ground represent ?

DB : In the main, it's a dream come true. The start of the final training camp will be an important stage. First, we will ensure group rules and training and finalise the technical preparation. Rigour, requirement, discipline and cheerfulness will be the leitmotiv. The juniors have less experience, and are also highly emotional. The coach is an important part of their daily lives. With Olivier and our staff, we want to share our experience.

Over the next few days, we are going to have to gradually win their trust by increasing their motivation, boosting their morale and encouraging them. We are going to have to train them up so as to gradually transform them into warriors. Our role is to enable them to surpass themselves. As the championships are taking place in France, they will be competing at home. We will use this to motivate them even more, but it is also a double-edged sword. We will have to protect the rowers from outside influences, and keep them calm and focused. Nevertheless, participating in the world championships in France will help them to excel.

OP : These championships are particularly attractive. Everybody will be behind the French crews. This is both a help and a hindrance. Their friends and families will be watching them, which will really motivate them.

Nevertheless, we will prepare the athletes as though they were going to participate in a traditional world championship event. The issue of performance remains the

same. We are taking part in the championships to win medals. However, we will have to manage contact with fans and families on a daily basis. We will have to be very careful about outside influences.

What does a junior world champion title represent?

DB : Winning a title or a medal during the junior world championships can mark the start or the end of a career for an athlete. Some have been rowing since they were juniors. If they win the world title, they will have succeeded in their quest for the Holy Grail. Then there is less desire when they are seniors, and making that step can prove too difficult. There is a difference between these two categories and, to be a champion, I would add that, more than talent, you need class.

OP : For me, an elite career truly begins at senior level. However, one should not be concerned about winning titles as a junior. The junior category provides a top-class education and winning medals forms part of this.

What are your best memories as a junior coach?

DB : I had three extraordinary years from 1986 to 1988. They ended in a blaze of glory in 1988. All of the junior sweep rowers won medals at the world championships, completing a successful physical and psychological strategy. We took a gamble on the group dynamic. There was healthy competition and this enabled all of the rowers to raise their game.

OP : More than a specific moment, I remember an atmosphere. A junior team coach has a specific role. He/she is directly involved and education is essential. I remember what the athlete can be taught directly in terms of education and body movements. Juniors have a great deal to learn, and they are adaptable. At that age, athletes are trying to change and they can easily do so. They want to learn and improve. That state of mind and ability can then disappear. As a coach, you can quickly work out what progress has been made: the technical repercussion is real.

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