

There is a handshake upon which I base my success as an oarsman. It is a secret, upside down handshake known only to rowers who are collapsed and heaving after crossing the finish line or completing a grueling set of intervals. It is also a hard won bonding between athletes who have made no small sacrifice to earn it, therefore rare and prized. If the race was your best; if the sixth 250 meter piece was straight and fast, then comes the handshake. The stroke extends his hand straight back behind him and you take it as you fight for oxygen and try not to flip.

To row the pair is to row with a giant microscope pointed at you at all times. If you don't row well in the pair, there are only two people to blame. If the boat's not going straight at full pressure, someone's getting pulled around or the catch timing is off. If your partner is an Olympian, it's probably you. If you pretend it's not you and start looking around for the third rower who is screwing things up, then you flip.

Steve and I started rowing the pair in preparation for Master's Nationals in 2003. We're both big guys with a lot of experience, both ports who rowed 4 seat in college, and neither one of us is too bright, so we thought this would be a splendid idea. I spent a few months learning to row starboard and we trained in a fairly beat up but much loved Hudson. After a tune up at NW Regionals, we lurched our way down the course for a Bronze at Master's Nationals. I don't remember the margin of victory, but when we crossed the line Berkeley Johnson and Craig Webster had already showered and dressed, and were on their second margarita.

Now, two years later and five days before the Masters World Games, I sit behind Steve, gasping for air in a shiny new Hudson pair after our sixth 250. He extends his hand and I accept it readily. Today we are straight and fast and we both know it. I'll be looking for that hand again in five days, and I'll try not to flip. We will race the A pair, even though next year we will be a C pair. 4 seat oarsmen should not try to tackle complicated math.

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