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## **Cushy? Not the brutal life of a Boat Race cox**

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THE quarter of a million people who will crowd the banks of the Thames to watch the Boat Race this weekend - and the 400 million people watching it on TV round the world - should spare a thought for the coxes. One of them is my brother, Peter, coxing for Oxford, and, along with his Cambridge rival Eleanor Griggs, he will play a little-understood and undervalued role. Coxes are believed to have an easy job, sitting in a boat and shouting, lazily enjoying a free ride at the expense of their more energetic colleagues. The reality is more complex and more brutal. On the day of the race, the coxes take to the water halfstarved to keep them light, weakened in mind and body, with their hearts beating too fast and rushes of adrenalin surging through bodies which have dangerously low blood-sugar levels.

They carry an enormous responsibility. Unlike a rower, except in the most extreme circumstances, a cox can lose a race by themselves. A steering error can take a boat out of the stream or into the opposition and, either way, out of the race.

Despite the pressure it's a fabulous experience. Coxes are always advised: remember to look behind you. You'll remember the scene for the rest of your life.

If they look over their shoulders they will see an enormous flotilla of launches, full of coaches, family, TV crews, press and rescue boats, whose passage will create waves that will wash down the river for hours after it passes. All those eyes, they will think, will be focused on them. Having calmed the crew and taken an eternity to aim the boat in precisely the right direction, they will start. For the four and a quarter miles of the course they will have to battle the other cox for control of the stream, a narrow current of deeper water that runs faster than the river around, following it as its course subtly shifts from being closer to the Surrey (Barnes) side of the river for the first half of the race to being closer to the Middlesex (Hammersmith) side for the last half. They will control a rudder no bigger than your hand that must be used as little as possible. In their desperation to squeeze the last advantage from the stream the coxes will bring the crews close to disaster as the tips of the oars pass within centimetres of each other. All that time the coxes will talk to their crew. They will talk about technique, correct errors and describe how the race is going. Above all, they must inspire. There is one further burden

that the cox carries, the burden of knowledge. Often the Boat Race is decided by the time the crews reach Hammersmith Bridge. A crew a length down is unlikely to win. The rowers will have an idea of the situation but only the cox will have the full picture. He will have to lie to them, telling them that victory is possible. If they lose the cox will bob up and down, depressed, on the river. If they win their immediate reward will be to be thrown into the foul waters of the Thames. Doesn't sound so cushy does it? Live on BBC1, Saturday, 2.10pm