

Light Blues are on the up - Baker

2009 Boat Race build-up

THERE may not be the massed ranks of Olympians or World Champions, but early indicators are encouraging for Cambridge University in their preparations for the 2009 Boat Race on March 29.

After an Olympics, it is usually the case that the two universities' squads have a fair number of returning stars, and that is true for Oxford.

But it is different for the Light Blues, under the guidance of acting head Rob Baker, who is holding the fort until the arrival of new chief coach Chris Nilsson.

A shortage of coaches has seen Baker gain extra support from Goldie coach Donald Leggett, and some Beijing Olympic medal-winning Old Blues.

"I'm running the show and Donald is doing a bit more with me, and we've had Josh West and Tom James doing some guest coaching," said Baker.

"They are good because they are a little closer to the guys and the action, so it gives you a bit more perspective.

"We've got a bit of power and guys on the up. They are a bit younger than we've had in some years and a bit less experienced, but have achieved something so far.

"We've only got 20, but we're down to the core."

President, Henry Pelly, leads the list of returning Blues and he is joined by Pete Marsland and Tom Ransley, all members of the crew that won the Stewards Cup at Henley and represented Great Britain during the summer.

Ryan Monaghan is also back, along with 2007 Blue and the 2008 president Dan O'Shaughnessy.

Three days before this year's race, Shane O'Mara had to drop out of the stroke seat because of a heart arrhythmia and an atrial fibrillation, but he has returned to trial again. "He has had his heart operation and everything seems to be going well on that front," said Baker.

Rowers with international experience at various levels include Deaglan McEachern (America), Rob Weitemeyer (Canada), Silas Stafford (America) and Hardy Cubasch (Australia), while there are high hopes for 19-year-old George Nash, who was part of the four that won gold at the 2007 World Junior Championships.

And the strength of the squad looks promising based on their two public appearances to date.

McEachern won the student open heavyweight event at the British Indoor Rowing Championships, where the top seven places were all occupied by Cambridge University oarsmen.

But things got even better at the weekend against Oxford's Olympians in the Fours Head on the Thames. Cambridge's top crew of Weitemeyer, Stafford, Ransley, Pelly and cox Helen Hodges won the elite coxed fours division, and secured an impressive fourth place overall, beating all but three crews in an event of much faster boat categories.

Oxford's top boat were 19sec adrift, and only three places clear of Cambridge's second boat, which featured Fred Gill, Marsland, Nash, McEachern and cox Edward Randolph. And Cambridge University V - Code Sternal, Joel Jennings, James Strawson, John Clay and cox Courtney Wilkinson - won the Senior 2 Coxed Fours.

"It was pretty pleasing," said Baker. "We managed to pull in some good results and put the cat among the pigeons.

"It shows the training we've put in has paid off to this point and gives the squad some confidence.

"It's a hell of a long year ahead of us, though., and I know Oxford had some illness and injury in their squad, which hampered some of their boats.

"It's swings and roundabouts - it was not all great but the performance of our top three was encouraging."