ROWING TALES 2020

Stories about rowing
that'll make you smile.

Rebecca Caroe

In reference to Rowing Tales 2019

"It was such a delight to read the varied stories of rowing enthusiasts. We all come to rowing from different paths, but once there, we are immediately, instantly, family. Each story was relatable and inspiring. That is a good thing for those of us preparing for the long 5 months of indoor winter training. Such history in these stories as well. I learned different perspectives to the "Boys in the Boat" story, the history of the Head of the Charles, and the Royal Henley's many rivalries. It was also super fun to read 3 stories from women that row in my own club!"

Nancy Mack
Masters Rower and Coach
Any Boat, Any Seat, Anywhere, Anytime

" Rowing is very much like life and the friendships you make. Having worked with the lovely Andrew Probert for five years, I left for New Zealand and kept in touch via Facebook. By accident, I befriended his friend Rebecca, who edits Rowing Tales. I expected the book to be out of reach for a humble spectator and one-season novice rower. How wrong I was! The stories from amateur adult rowers reflect mine. It's a treasure trove."

Jade Badcock

A technical author in the New Zealand public service, rowing fan and an awful rower.

" Reading Rowing Tales is like going to a family reunion - aunts and uncles, parents and siblings sharing incredible stories over beers and laughter. Some funny, some inspiring, all of them important, as part of the history we - the members of the rowing clan - share. And all of them inspiring us to get back on the water or keep our hand in the game, so we can write brilliant stories of our own. Read it to remember why you row."

Charles Sweeney
Masters Rower

A Haiku for Rowing

"Rowing Tales 2018?
Magnificent Memories,

Beyond the Rainbow!”

Martha DeLong

Old Lady Rower

"Rowing Tales is a collection of anecdotes from all over the world ranging across a whole variety of topics - nature, physics, self-healing - and from learn to rowers to Olympic champions. You may, like me, have relatives and friends who wonder about your strange obsession; this would be a good book to give them which might help explain it."

Christopher Anton

Cox, rowing administrator, regional chair, NGB

member and FISA umpire

Rowing Tales

Rebecca Caroe

Rowing Tales

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Dedication

For my Mother, Mary Caroe, who loved a good story.
She understood that embellishments enhance the re-telling.
The Covid-19 tragedy became personal when she died in April.

From the Editor

The utter weirdness of 2020 has made me cling to the familiar and to celebrate normality. Most of us have been forced off the water at some time during the year, some several times. Fortunately this led to many folks sharing rowing anecdotes.

Producing *Rowing Tales* again was hugely simplified by the generosity of rowing groups online and my guests on the RowingChat podcast.

Among this year's gems are a letter Rob Gibson received from Joe Rantz (The Boys In The Boat 1936 crew) while he was a student. I fortunately spotted his tweet of the facsimile. Defectors from Eastern Bloc countries may be a long-ago memory; John Nunn played an active part enabling a rowing defection during the Montreal Olympics - they got to share a drink together many years later.

For the first time I've compiled very short stories from multiple authors into single chapters. The ones from race umpires (referees) and the comedy racing they have supervised is a delight. Who else has started a race with three athletes with the same surname?

Coastal rowing is fast-growing both as a competitive and a recreational part of rowing. I feel privileged to share tales from two leading lights - Ben Booth whose ability to 'feel' the sea and then write about it is akin to poetry - and Guin Batten describing her crew's adventure expedition row along the south coast of Britain.

My heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed.

Spellings for US and British English are used interchangeably depending on the nationality of the author.

Above all, keep rowing, keep coaching, keep coxing, keep recruiting new people, and keep supporting our wonderful sport.

Rebecca Caroe
Auckland, New Zealand
1 November 2020

Introduction

The RowingChat podcast network is one of my principal sources of great rowing stories. I started broadcasting in 2013 doing interviews with coaches and athletes and found in the course of these leisurely chats that people are incredibly generous with their time, their insights and knowledge. The stories just seem to fall out of a broader discussion on rowing.

During 2018 I decided to expand the podcast into a network of rowing-related podcasts and this has had the delightful side-effect of surfacing even more rowing stories. My co-hosts of the many different shows have been fantastic detectives helping to interview so many folks and encourage them to tell their stories live on air.

There is room for many more voices in the network. We welcome new perspectives. Do join us as a listener or a host.

https://rowing.chat/

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Roger Milne

Roger Milne is a multi-lane umpire for FISA who was on the team running the Rio Olympic regatta. He enjoys looking out for the New Zealand crews and getting them the recognition they deserve.

What Robert Treharne Jones Says

Robert Treharne Jones, was the on-course commentator at Rio.

When we saw him at the course I gave him a piece of of paper with the word “Whangamomona” on it and said, “Robert, can you say this?”

He looked at it and being quite good with phonetics he said “Wonga - Mom - Monah”.

“Yes,” I replied “you’ve got it, Robert. that's good.”

Now, we all know that the Olympics is a big event. People have come from the four corners of the earth to be at this regatta.

We told Robert that people have even come from the place that is the home to New Zealand's most remote hotel, Whangamomona. And the girl who lives there is in the bow of the New Zealand womens eight.

To the astonishment of Kayla Pratt’s parents, who were sitting next to my wife Lesley in the grandstand at the regatta, Robert said exactly that, live over the commentary on the course.

“People have come from the four corners of the earth, including from Whangamomona.”

And the Pratts looked at Lesley and said “That bloody Roger!”

Denny Tait

Tubs is the local name given to clinker-built rowing shells which are heavy and stable and so were often used for beginners learning to row.

Denny Tait is from Australia and here he recalls his early years rowing at Saint Ignatius' College.

What Were They Thinking?

I rowed when I was in year seven of school and I rowed at Riverview.

We had to row in tubs.

And when there was a local regatta we had to row to it. Our races are held up the Blanco River and then up Parramatta River.

It was a fair way, about 10 kilometers.

So on race days we'd have to get to the club at six o'clock in the morning, row all 10 kms around to the regatta site and when we got there it was time for our race. We would turn around and our race would start (remember we'd already rowed 10 kilometers) and we'd row the race.

BANG! Off we would go.

And then we would get to the end of the race and the coach would call "Keep rowing."

And we had to row ten kilometers back all the way back to the boat shed without stopping.

And then occasionally in the afternoons in summer we would be out rowing and suddenly the wind would come up. So we're out in the middle of the Parramatta River and we'd sink. It happened twice.

We sank in the middle of Sydney Harbour and we were just thirteen years old.

What were they thinking?

Rebecca Hutchinson

Rebecca Hutchinson lives and rows in Spokane, USA.

“Watch That Duck!”

Rowing on Lake Union in Seattle as a teen, every starboard oar of our 8+ hit the same poor duck as we went by.

Cue lots of crying teenage girls on starboard and confused ports and cox, and a coach screaming “WHY DID YOU STOP ROWING?!” as we turned sharply into shore.

No idea how the duck fared.

Chris Madell

Chris Madell started coxing at Oxford in 1974, did Blues trials in 1977-78 and wound up coxing the university lightweight VIII. He retains an enormous store of rowing anecdotes which sometimes make it out into the public view.

Rowing Away from Trouble

I may have told you of my rather nasty experience of being buzzed by a cob swan when I got too close to its nest (with female swan and cygnets) when I was waiting to take an VIII through Godstow lock. I shared this with a dear friend Carolyn, who until the US boycotted the Moscow Olympics had been stroking their women's VIII.

Carolyn rather "trumped" my story with this one.

At some point when Carolyn was in college, she was stroking an VIII on Long Island Sound, New York, USA. They were easied, when a nuclear submarine surfaced about 50 yards astern of them.

Apparently the cox, who was unaware of the submarine, couldn't understand why the crew had taken off at a rate of knots without her telling them to row!

I also shared this with Stephanie Bailey Cooper whose reply clearly also beats my best story!

Stephanie explains.

I was at 7 in a bow-loader, and we had just finished a piece and were sitting easy, when suddenly a scream went up from the cox “back down, back down hard.”

It transpired that a cow had fallen in the river, had swum up to the boat and

was trying to get on to the bows! Luckily, although the cow was swimming after the boat, in backing down we had moved to shallower water and the beast was able to find its feet and get on to the bank."

A somewhat squeaky bum moment.

Who ever said rowing wasn't fun...

Irene Allen

Irene Allen rows in British Columbia, Canada.

Personal Rowing Style

A former sweep rowing teammate of mine had false nails (mid-length, not talons) that she claimed didn't impact her rowing in the sweep boats.

The first time we went sculling, it was a different story.

We hadn't gone far before she started cursing, ripped them off with her teeth, and spit them out.

Eva Sullivan Conlon

Eva Sullivan Conlon is a high school teacher and coaches in Washington DC, USA.

Swimming Animals

When I was coaching a girls' eight on the Anacostia, I had to slow my launch so as not to wake another boat.

When I caught up with my girls, I was upset because they had stopped rowing completely when they were supposed to be doing drills.

They waved at me to stop. I couldn't believe what I saw!

Sitting on the upturned oar of the bow seat girl was a juvenile beaver that had been swimming across the river and just needed a break!

Henry Law

Henry Law rows with Agecroft Rowing Club in Manchester, Great Britain and is an active contributor to online rowing discussions.

Mid-Air Refuelling

At bow we had a new guy who said he'd rowed before, about ten years ago.

I expected him to be out of practice but he was completely away with it. Rowing totally out of time (and banging me in the back), rowing continuously when he was asked to take one stroke, gripping the blade so tight that he went in under-square and then catching enormous crabs every stroke for minutes on end... seemed totally unable to learn from his mistakes.

Our coach in the launch could see that he wasn't getting anywhere and was getting stressed so after trying to sort him out with advice eventually swapped places with him (manoeuvring the launch alongside the eight and stepping from one to the other... like air-to-air refuelling) he told the new guy to motor slowly back to the boathouse.

But it turned out that he had not the faintest clue on how to steer a launch, kept opening the throttle wide, and spent several minutes roaring round in tight circles nearly colliding with boats (ours and a senior mens' four), bridge piers and the bank.

He got the engine stopped, but despite what seemed to be clear and sensible instructions on opening the throttle only a little bit, seemed incapable of doing anything other than freezing at the controls, neither steering nor reducing power.

Eventually our coach (now at bow) got us manoeuvred alongside again and joined the guy in the launch, taking his blade with him.

They then returned to the boathouse with the coach in command, and we carried on with seven.

All this in freezing wind, strong rain and with a new cox.

Glenda Howard

Glenda Howard came to rowing as an adult and has persevered with learning the finer points of sculling through many adversities including first having her boat vandalised and another smashed in a hurricane. We became acquainted through the Faster Masters Rowing program which I teach. Her longstanding phlegmatic good humour has created opportunities for her rowing which few others would see - she is a true oarsman.

Wet launching is American vernacular for wading into the river or lake before getting into the boat. It's used when there is no pontoon dock available.

Rowing Through Frustration

I am not sure where we would share our rowing journey on the program, but I wanted to share with you what I did today.

I had signed up to go out with a crew this morning. Our coach reached out to me last night and asked if I would be okay in a single. She said she would reserve a Maas 21 for me in case conditions were not ideal for my Hudson. She would be working with some newer rowers. "No problem" was my reply.

I live in the southeast of North Carolina and row with a club in Wilmington on the Cape Fear River. Ordinarily in February we don't get many mornings where conditions are good for single sculling. We get a few mornings where we can layer up and go out in an 8 or a 4 without too many safety concerns. This morning was very unusual. It was 70 degrees and the wind was calm. We had a bright 3/4 moon for a morning launch. What could go wrong?

1. I arrive at the boat house and find our floating dock had come off its submerged moorings. It was floating at a weird angle, but secure to shore. Not ideal but manageable. I could wet launch instead.

2. I observe we have a bit more shoreline than on a typical low tide. I thought

the Army Corps of Engineers must be playing with the locks and dams after last week’s rain to control flooding. Good on them. I still have enough water to row.

So I look at the flat water sparkling in the moonlight and grab my oars and my trusty Hudson that I have affectionately named Red Rover. (You know, Red Rover Red Rover, don't let Glenda tip over.) I left the 21 reserved for me on the rack.

Off I go. I had worked through my warm up and was just starting to get my rhythm when I feel a bit of a bump. It isn't unusual to scrape submerged logs and I know to slow down and try not to get my skeg ripped off by such hazards.

I maneuvered away and started to row again but my seat had got off track. I slid off the seat and inspected the wheels. They were fine. I tried to get the seat back in the tracks and my bottom back on the seat. But I just couldn't manage to get the seat to roll right.

I felt a moment of sadness and defeat.

I had precious few minutes left to row before I had to go to work. Wrestling with the seat was wasting my precious time. I turned the boat back toward the dock. I stared out over the stern as the sun was just starting to brighten the sky.

That is when I had a spark of inspiration.

I pushed myself back off the seat and decided to do a nice long arms and back rowing session to clean up my tap out. I rowed back to the dock doing the arms only, then arms and back, taking some pauses in between the different body angles. It was a good exercise and the flat water was ideal for such practice.

Now, in the midst of Covid-19 it may be weeks before I get to take Rover back on the river. Who knows how the technique practiced today will translate when I’m rowing next time?

What I know is, I felt like I accomplished something instead of feeling defeated by circumstances.

And I got to my work on time… just barely.

Alec Sparks

Alec Sparks is a masters rower in Vermont, USA. He describes himself as 6’ 9” tall and a ‘lifelong athlete’. He says that almost everyone has a disaster story about rigging. However, he bothered to take the time to tell me his story.

Must You Be Mad to Row?

I was out for the first time in a new-to-me but actually rather elderly single 3 days ago when I realize quite quickly that the rigging is catastrophic.

My handles are in my lap. I have no tools and no snap-off adjustment rings so I load up and make for a short drive home.

Taking the boat off the roof rack I noticed the repaired rigger is not repaired and must be re-repaired.

For a reason now I can’t even remember or explain, I twist the pin in half attempting to remove the oarlock top nut. It breaks. After a long search I find a supplier who will supply imperial diameter pins.

I make three attempts to repair the rigger with fiberglass before throwing in the towel and repairing with 3750 psi epoxy.

I also make a three hour round-trip to buy the imperial diameter replacement pins.

Back to the workshop, I replace the rigger and pins but realize the shaft of the pin is probably too short to raise the oarlock to the height that I need.

Figure I will just test things out gingerly with the top oarlock screw not strongly tightened down and leave home with the boat on the roof rack upside down on my truck.

I drive around for 1/2 an hour looking for sheltered water from an unusual south west wind.

When I find a nice spot, I take the boat off the truck rack and carry it down to the water where I notice that during my drive one of the top oarlock

nuts that wasn’t super tight had backed out and an oarlock had fallen off during my drive.

Swallowing my frustration, I carry the boat back up the hill, replace it onto the truck rack and then notice the screw and oarlock laying in the bed of my truck.

Well at least I hadn’t lost them.

But I now admit defeat once again and go home.

Early the next morning I take a trip to the hardware store where I secure the necessary nylon spacer and longer screws to adjust the oarlock height and still be able to properly tighten the fasten screw on top.

Back down to the lake this morning and find during a trial run that I still need to come up higher with the oarlocks. Having cleverly brought enough tools with me today to build a nuclear power plant I quickly address the problem and relaunch.

Did I mention I wet launch? Walking even in neoprene booties on the sharp rocks which constantly drive into my feet cause me to involuntarily buckle about every fifth step.

Oars in place I am ready to roll and realize I have massive negative pitch and can’t figure out why raising my oarlocks would affect the pitch so dramatically and of course despite having a tool chest the size of a Mini Cooper with me I do not have my pitch spacers.

Load boat, go home, unload boat and immediately ascertain I had the gate backwards on both oars.

Reload boat onto my truck and spend the next hour online searching for “sports psychologist” online... When will I learn?

Andrew Blit

Andrew Blit is a rowing umpire (referee) living in the East of England. This story exemplifies some of the unexpected fun shared by umpires.

The Umpire Is Pure Comedy

Sudbury Regatta, known comically to the locals as "The International" (never let it be said that we don't understand irony) is our local club event.

We have but a narrow river and so send races down in batches. We also run sprint 8s off an intermediate ("short") start.

Picture the scene, British Olympic umpire **David Biddulph** is the umpire stationed on the short start and my colleague the lovely **Lydia Swift** is waiting patiently on the "Long" Start.

She has a race attached and ready to go once the 8s race had naffed off (and not hit the bank after 5 strokes. Done that, got out and walked back).

I am playing his stentorian tones over the PA while commentating for the listening spectators.

"Attention," [pause for dramatic effect], David raises his flag "GO."

And lo they goeth amidst much spray.

Over the umpires' radio comes Lydia, "David, you've started my race as well."

To which Lydia Swift replied:

Sometimes my friends ask me why I umpire. Amongst many more noble reasons is the real reason, for these moments of pure comedy...

Continuing our review of the sport from the umpire / referee's viewpoint, these examples could all be collated into a manual - Things they didn't teach you in umpire school!

A free start is a British term referring to races where the crews line up roughly in line without having the boat stern manually held in place. An all-in-one is British English for a row suit/zootie/trou.

Comedy of Errors Starting a Race

Andrew Blit

Chiswick Regatta circa 1976 I was in a 3 abreast race with a free start. All three crews were trying to take advantage.

Tapping it up, "Just trying to get straight, Sir." The usual excuses!

The starter, Peter Coni (for it is he) said "I'll start you whether you're ready or not. GO."

Dear reader, we won

To which he got an immediate reply.

Ken Plumb

Andrew, I was once in another three boat race where all three coxswains are named "O'Leary."

The starter only knows one of the coxswains by name.

"O'Leary! bring your boat up 1/2 a stroke."

Fun ensues for quite a while until he realizes that all the cox'ns have the same name!

And Andrew shoots back.

Ken, I umpired a race in which a chap was (loudly, illegally) coaching from the bank.

I didn't intervene as I knew BOTH the scullers involved were called Ellie.

Michael Richardson-Bach

This one is a third- or fourth-hand referee story.

At a college rowing championships, an 8 gets to the start early and locks on very smoothly.

The coxswain keeps giving their crew a pep talk. After a minute or two the starter says “Llane x, please check your point."

The cox had pulled bow in to the stakeboat!

Margery Mark

Does any rower NOT have a few great tales? Here’s one (disclaimer: I was not in the boat).

A newbie high school cox was training with club men’s eight, getting all calls solidly down in practice.

They go to the start line at a summer state championship regatta, the race starts, and she has a complete brain fart/shutdown.

Somehow the men do their start without her saying anything and she starts shouting

“Omigod you’re LOSING!! Just go!! You’re LOOOOOOOSING!!!” for 2,000 meters.

They were laughing too hard for 2,000 meters so they did indeed lose.

Walter Martindale

This didn't happen to me…

The women's Senior 1x final on Ruataniwha, New Zealand. The woman leading the race tipped out about 20 meters from the finish line.

The woman who had been in second place hit first woman's boat and tipped out herself.

The woman who had been in third, crossed the finish line to win.

The former "second" place athlete raised her hand to protest interference from the former "first" place.

The Umpire looked around and remarked... “Sorry, you were in her lane - if you'd been in your own lane, no problem, protest not upheld.”

John R. Dundon

Mens open 1x final - I was in lane 3 in Winnipeg, Canada 1994 on the Red River.

I was hit by a drunk jet skier head on... The dude's name was Daryl Numchuck.

He fled the scene only to be found passed out on a remote beach several hours later. The flotilla of craft in pursuit of Mr. Numchuck was quite remarkable...

Richard Cabana

I hot-seated a single for a 500 metre sprint, got myself to the start of the race and when the race started, did my half/half 2/3 slide, then gave it all I got, except the person in the boat just before me was about 14 cm shorter, so when I slid full and hard, my seat and I were ejected out of the boat.

I didn't tell you the worst.

I was very well known to the umpires following the race as I was involved in a lot of organizing committees for regattas, so one of the judges came up to me with a sly grin, and she asked me if she should throw me a line for a tow!

Murray Litvak

I was coxing a Danish crew in a four at a regatta where I am both the secretary of the event and an umpire.

Before the start I tell my crew to speak in loud Danish and I'll keep quiet.

We get on to the start and the umpire then has a minor meltdown that he has a foreign crew that can't speak English. (they can, fluently, but we aren't telling the umpire or opposition that!)

I know the umpire but maintain my incognito appearance because I have a Danish all-in-one on, dark glasses and a baseball cap so he doesn't recognise me.

He spends 5 mins going through the start procedure in slowly enunciated English with the other crew getting really annoyed.

My crew are ready to go.

I even get fed up so enquire why we can't just start - at which point the umpire loses it again as he now realises it's me - he then executes the fastest "fast start" procedure known to mankind catching my oppo unaware and we blast off.

The real kicker is my crew normally row in big clinker sea-going coastal boats. And get into a fine boat four once a year at this regatta... Such oarsmanship!

Grant Craies

Ukranian national womens quad at Henley Royal Regatta circa 2003 was drawn against the Tideway Scullers Club crew I was coaching. It was the first round of the event.

The Ukranian coach was in the umpire's launch driving to the start. On the way the umpire asked the him if the crew could speak English, he replied "Yes, one girl speaks it very well."

The crews line up.

You will recall that at HRR the umpire explains the start procedure to the crews (in English) before each race, miming the action with the flag rolled up furled so the crew know this is a rehearsal.

"When I can see you are straight and ready, I will start you like this. Attention, Go." As he holds the flag up in the air and drops it down.

At this point the Scullers crew were sitting there relaxed and the Ukrainians were sitting forward ready to race... and off they went!

My girls sat and let them go - bemusedly smiling.

Needless to say the umpire looked at the coach and the coach looked at the umpire. Words were not needed to translate - I thought you said they understood English!

Dale Parenti

Dale Parenti rows in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA and she contributed this piece about a near disaster while racing the USA Masters National Championships.

Hot-seating is a local American term meaning to swap rowers quickly into the same boat between races.

Sharing the Boat

Four of us took a double up to Masters Nationals in Worcester one year.

We all used the same shell and raced it as the lightweight womens D grade double, the mens D double scull, the mixed C double scull and the mixed E double scull. So that boat was used for a lot of races.

It was all going well until about 3 races in, we were hot-seating from the mixed to the men's race when the bow man asked "Why do we have the seat on backwards?"

We had done three races and none of us noticed the mistake!

Adam Turinas

Adam Turinas was a Furnivall Sculling Club member in the 1980s and has a fascination with boat names.

He started a discussion thread on the rec.sport.rowing group which was greatly appreciated by the membership.

Codger is British slang for a mildly eccentric, older person.

What’s in a Name?

I am looking for great boat names. Preferably with a good story behind it. Here's my first example:

"Pony Off A Lemon"

This was a quad scull at a Furnivall Sculling Club whose club house is at Hammersmith Bridge, London, UK. This club was full of great London characters.

They bought a new quad scull and were going to do the expected thing and name it after a venerable, longstanding club member calling it the "Fred Smith" or some such name.

Instead a couple of codgers at the club had a bright idea one drunken night after a session in the local pub.They decided the boat deserved a more inspiring name. Something that described the boat in racing action. They settled on "That boat goes like sh*t off a shovel.”

Realising that this was a little long and probably unseemly reading for an innocent passersby on the banks of the Thames they translated it into Cockney Rhyming slang instead.

And so the name became "Pony Off A Lemon"

(Pony & Trap = Cr*p; Lemonade=Spade).

You can imagine the reaction at the boat unveiling when everyone was expecting it to be called the Fred Smith and there was the gold italicised moniker "Pony Off A Lemon" painted on its bow.

Any more great boat names welcome to add to this thread.

And thus, the rec.sport.rowing group took up the challenge.

In the thread are other examples of boat names with the contributor’s name in bold below.

WOFTAM (Waste of F**king Time And Money)

and another Annapolis boat, perhaps not suitable for rowing, but very appropriate for sailing:

Where Egos Dare, commonly referred to as simply "Egos"

And as an interesting side note, a name originally suggested by the women of the crew was "Ego Testicle.”

Matthew Fremont

A four that used to row at Oregon State in 1987-88 named their personal boat “Das VI Danya” although it was in Russian and my English spelling may be off.

Das v'danya is Russian for "see you later," or something like that. The name on the boat was actually done in Russian letters, and was misspelled in that language.

Andy, OSU '85-'88

Two others come to mind. Back in the golden days of French racing commands (remember Êtes vous prêts?), the Wisconsin women had an 8 entitled "Ne prez"which they interpreted as born ready.

Also, a sculler in our club had a 1x entitled So notare, I can swim.

Clyde W. Voigtlander

St John's University Crew (Collegeville, Minnesota, USA) has an eight named Ex Omnibus Unum (loosely translated from Latin, "Out of many, one").

It isn't the funniest name I've ever seen, but when the boat is filled with novices...

David Jay Lynch

While at Amherst College, we had a boat, an old, indestructible Pocock, which was used by novice rowers named the R. B. Trary VIII.

And my pairs partner has a single called This way up.

It was written upside down, of course.

William Wadsworth

Chris George

Chris George is a passionate rower and triathlete whose sport has taken him racing from North Wales to Kona. Here he recalls a more innocent time at the Tideway clubs in London, UK.

Unflappable

In a discussion thread about whether juniors should have separate shower and changing rooms from adults at rowing clubs...

Robert Pinckney remarked:

Back in the early days at Vesta Veterans Head Of The River race some of the foreign women coxes showered with the men. There were no female facilities then!

Chris George replied:

Rob, remind me to tell you about the German lady who used the men's shower after a race when it was all steamed up and complimented our unflappable veterans crew on being so "modern."

Chris Jones

Chris Jones is a Welshman who now lives in New Zealand. He fondly remembers coaching crews at his university where winter sporting code teams often pulled together an eight for the fun of competing in a summer sport - the university bumping races. Here are two of his anecdotes from his time spent trying to teach rowing to rugby players.

St Edmund Hall is a student boat club at Oxford University, nicknamed Teddy Hall. A ‘blue’ is awarded to anybody who represents their sport in the annual match against Cambridge University.

Rugby Crews

St Edmund Hall in Oxford was not famous for its rowing, but it was famous for its rugby.

One year I had agreed to coach the rugby eight and was trying to teach it some of the basics of rowing.

I was out on the river at six o'clock in the morning. It was a beautiful misty morning.

And as I was talking to the stern end of the crew about a fine point of rowing technique, suddenly there's a waft of smoke passing down the boat.

The bow man was an Irish fella and the captain of the blues rugby called Ces Shaw.

I looked up towards the bows in the direction the smoke was coming from and

Ces was sitting there with a very large cigar, puffing away.

I said, “Ces what are you doing?”

And he replied, “Well, you keep telling us to relax. Relax, relax.”

This is another Teddy Hall rugby eight story.

We had a guy in there called Phil Phillips who was a monster. He was a really big man.

He had played number eight for the England under 19 team. He was a

huge guy.

So they are rowing along and I’m on a bicycle on the towpath coaching. After a while I said

"Phil, I think things will go better if you take your hand off the side of the boat and put both hands on the oar."

And so he moved his hand.

A few strokes later I said

"Phil, You really must keep both hands on the oar and don't hold the side of the boat. It won't help.”

Eventually, I had to stop the crew because his hand was back on the side of the boat. I said,

“Phil. What is the problem?”

And he looked at me and said,

"I can't swim.”

Peter Davison

Peter Davison rows at Glasgow Rowing Club, Scotland on the River Clyde. The club is a Community Rowing Club who reach out to all age groups and who actively seek to assist the local community around the Gorbals, Glasgow.

When the Landscape Wins

The Nithsdale Regatta is in Dumfries, Scotland. The course is a 2 lane, 700 meter stretch of river with just after the finish an arched bridge. At the finish, in front of all the world, I swivelled around to make sure that I was not going to hit the bridge but the button of my oar snagged in my one piece. Needless to say I swam the last 20 meters.

As this is becoming a confessional, I will unburden myself of one more disaster (I have more).

Picture the beautiful but frigid waters of the Scottish Clyde in December.

Through the mist glides a vision of harmony in motion, my double scull, power and grace personified. Well that was what clearly befuddling the mind of bow as we took out a tree that had been there for the last 60 years.

Its overhanging lower branches acting like a spring threw us instantly into the cold water.

On the bank my bow was clearly the worse for the experience so rather than trying to re-boat and risk a second dipping I flagged down a passing novice eight, swapped my crewman into a stable platform and for myself took the decision to walk back along the riverside path to the boathouse.

A pleasant stroll back having a nice chat with a companion, the evictee of the eight, was marred when through the trees I spied flashing blue lights at our club.

Fearing the worst for my bowman, I picked up my heels and ran.

As I approached I was met by fire fighters and a paramedic. In fact 11

emergency vehicles were in attendance. The crews were clearly disappointed that I needed no help, so they called off the second river rescue team who were 200 miles away and preparing to drive over in double quick time.

Yes my bow was okay, though with mild hypothermia.

Lessons learnt:

1. Trees usually win
2. Don't underestimate cold water
3. Poor communication resulted in a waste of first responders’ time.

Claudine Ferguson

Claudine Ferguson rows at Weybridge in the UK. The “blue light” services include police, fire brigade and ambulance services.

Call the Boys in Blue

My 2x partner and I were out training one evening ahead of the World Rowing Masters Regatta in Bled, Slovenia.

Next thing we know, we’re wedged fairly spectacularly with a coxless quad.

By the next morning the incident is on the local news, reporting that all the local Blue Light services attended us plus two not-quite-so-local specialist rescue crews after, apparently, receiving the call that “four to eight rowers are in the river” but hearing there are “forty-eight rowers in the river...”

The shame, profuse thanks and donations followed the next morning, after what was thankfully a self-rescue the night before!

Richard Tomczak

Richard Tomczak rows in Geelong which is near Melbourne, Australia.

Boatie Banter

It happened on the Maribyrnong river at the Footscray regatta in Melbourne Australia.

The course is adjacent to the Flemington race track where they run the Melbourne Cup on the first Tuesday in November (our significant horse race as yours is the Kentucky Derby).

There is often much humorous banter at the start of these eights races. There were 4 crews lined up with my crew (Barwon Rowing Club from Geelong) lined up in the centre lanes alongside the Melbourne University crew with the "young crew members" on board.

And so the banter began.

At the start of our masters eight event I looked across to see stroke and 7 of the crew next to us looking suspiciously young.

I yelled out "Let's see your birth certificates." and got a reply from the back of their boat..."Half way down the course you'll see my death certificate!"

The end result was that we won the event in spite of the obvious "stacking" of the uni crew but you can imagine the laughter when the old fellow down back offered his death certificate half way down the course.

When you know your coach leader should be leading by example but reality bites.

Hey Coach!

Eric Whipkey

This season, while coaching, I had two instances of demonstrating some technique concepts with the paddle for the launch.

I ended up dropping the paddle in the water. Of course, I had to spend the next 5 minutes trying to retrieve it.

Embarrassing.

Hamish Roots

As a lad I was coaching was boating for the second session of the day, I offhandedly said “Looking good last outing, keep it up” as I walked to the launch - he looked up to say “Thanks” but it just happened this broke his usual boating routine and he forgot to lock his gates, leaned to push off and rolled his 1x.

Warm weather and waist deep water but still made us laugh, thankfully he saw the funny side too, hopped in and smashed the outing.

Julie Hogg

When I was coaching my juniors (also my history pupils) how to scull and forgot I’d tied the boat to the bank.

I took a stroke and I kept going whilst the boat didn’t.

The river had just been dredged so I emerged looking like a creature from the deep. Never lived that one down!

David Martin

Introducing myself as “the thunder from down under” on day 1 at the Craftsbury sculling camp only to have one of the college kids politely inform me my T-shirt was inside out ‘Sir’...

Melissa Valte

Stuck on my Oar

Back in college while practicing on the river in an 8, I noticed a condom was stuck on my oar near the blade spoon.

Disgusting!

We came to a stop and while the coach was instructing us. I started flopping my oar around to get it off.

Naturally it was messing up with the keel of the boat.

Coach called me out and was like “MELISSA WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?!?!?”

I was like “Ummm. Uhhh. Ummm.”

And everyone in the boat started laughing because they’d noticed the condom too.

Needless to say talk about an awkward moment when I replied “Coach! There is a condom stuck on my oar!! And I can’t get it off!!”

Bruce Watson

Bruce Watson joined a discussion about winter rowing in which he told this tale from his High School, FD Roosevelt High School Rowing Team from Hyde Park, New York, USA.

Memories of Cold Water

Oh the memories of rowing on the turbulent Hudson.

Waves knocking knuckles into the gunwales and landing in your lap, icy cold.

Water running out of my coxy's megaphone as he choked on the water, which I had a front row seat of as the stroke!

I don't know how the coxies survived the early spring, just sitting there freezing while we rowed on rough water when it was snowing or raining icy cold!

Reminds me of a Mid Hudson Invitational High School Regatta in the 1970s when my older brother was racing.

In the varsity race at the end of the regatta, during the roughest time of day, only the two slowest boats finished the race.

The other four boats swamped and went under. Starting with the lead boat, FDR's crew of course!

Valerie Reeves and Kimberly Fenton Thompson

Valerie Reeves and Kimberly Fenton Thompson told this story in a thread about bloopers - one kicks off tagging the other who is quick to come back with her version. Demonstrating the bond between rowing friends and crew mates.

Bonded, as Only a Pair Can Be

Valerie: I was out for a private 2- lesson in heavy chop. My oar goes a little deeper than expected but I muscle it to the finish.

Bow was, unfortunately, ejected from the boat.

I stayed in and round side down.

Coach watches in wonder as bow climbs back into the boat as I set it level.

Invincible!

Kimberly Fenton Thompson: Ha ha. I was just about to tell this story myself.

It was a thing of beauty, followed closely by our near flip at Quaker when my oar got tangled in river grass causing us to both have over-the-head crabs at the same time!!!

Good times.

Health and Safety on the water is very important nowadays. I can't help thinking that those who draft the regulations must have read a few of these rowing tales and thought... Can't let that happen again!

A lot of people contributed to this Rowing Tale, their name is beside the anecdote.

Daft Things We've Done

Ann Cobb

Our first ever ladies masters 8 race. The men made us rig our own boat. We mixed up the 2 seat rigger with the 7 rigger and those two girls were completely unable to row.

They just moved up and down the slide with us.

Patricia Pinkerton

So many stories... warming up for a race on one of those gray slightly foggy days where the water and the sky are the same color.

I was in the middle of a power piece when I ran ashore with a light speed to send up the shore and into a small tree; suspending me about three feet above the ground.

I managed to climb out; pull my boat out of the tree and relaunch.

I was sharing the boat at that regatta and the other rower asked "Why are there branches in the number clip?"

Giuliana Turchetto

While rowing down the river Po in northern Italy we were literally

"assaulted" by tens of fish which jumped out of the water and into the boat often smashing us in the face or bumping against our arms!

It was funny but also scary since they can hurt you.

The smell was horrible on board. Eventually we had to throw each of them into the water again and put a cover over our bags.

Awesome adventure indeed!

Alana Morrison

My greatest embarrassment came in my single scull.

Listening to my ipod and thinking no one else was around, I was singing at the top of my lungs (I can not sing) and being caught out by the Australian mens 8+ training on the Nepean River.

Kimberley Strange

I was at my first training session with a new crew at 5am in the dark.

After half an hour of rowing, the sun is starting to come up. I could then see my oars were upside down and back to front.

The others were too polite to say how badly I was rowing.

Jorge Han

Winning a race in a double scull and then we both at once raising arms victoriously and flipping the next second.

Carla Laureano

There was the time I decided to change the height on the oarlock in a 2x while on the water, but I dropped the washer which then got carried off by the rather swift current.

So my partner and I spent twenty minutes chasing it across the lake like a couple of idiots until we gave up and had to go back to the dock to get a new one.

By the time we got back we were laughing too hard to row.

I was glad there was no one out to witness that... I do wish I had've turned on my GPS so I had a record of that "route" though.

Leslie Gaudreau

During an early morning college practice I got the jumbo size old wooden sweep oar caught in my front pocket sweat shirt (OK to my defense no one

told me!) and was launched out of my seat onto the coxswain.

I am not sure who was more surprised me or him! Insert face into stomach. Who thought pouch pocket sweatshirts were sensible rowing attire?

Mindy Welch

Sculling at a high powerful rate in a mixed quad last summer , we heard someone say “Watch out!”

Our bow guy looked back and thought it was a “talking buoy.”

Turns out we almost ran over that “talking buoy,“ who was actually a bald guy swimming.

Richard Cabana

Richard Cabana was introduced to rowing as a master in 1999 and has been rowing ever since. Born and raised in Montreal, Richard rows out of the Aviron Lachine Rowing club. Richard is a National Umpire for rowing, and is past vice-president of high performance for the Quebec Rowing Association. A full-time security architect in computing, Richard will have also completed a bachelor's degree in English Literature (Hons) in the fall of 2020. In 2013, he published a book on the 150th anniversary of the Lachine Rowing club's founding.

The Lachine Rowing club was founded in 1863 on the shores of Lac St. Louis, 12 minutes from downtown Montreal. The club operated for 99 years, playing host to the first Canadian Henley Regatta, the rematch between the Paris crew and the Cambridge crew led by James Renforth and the famous race between Ned Hanlon and James Courtney, to name a few illustrious events. After a thirty-five-year hiatus, the club re-opened its doors in 1997. This story takes place around 2008.

The Sculler and the Sailboat

I live about 20 blocks away from the Lachine Rowing club, which is situated about twelve minutes from downtown Montreal, Canada. Members row on Lac St. Louis, part of the majestic St. Lawrence River. I started rowing in 1999 when one of my neighbors convinced me to give the sport a try. It was love at first stroke, and I have been an avid part of the rowing community ever since. For a very long time I have been comfortable with rowing in any type of configuration, however this short story has to do with a misadventure I had while rowing a newly acquired skiff.

When our club first opened in 1997 after a thirty-year hiatus, we had very few boats available, so for several years new members were taught to row by sweeping in either an eight or a four. Gradually a couple of the master's purchased singles, and we also added a couple of doubles to our fleet, so along with the one club single, we were able to scull as well as sweep. The club quickly gained a lot of new members, enough that we had rowers in the morning and early evenings, along with a fledgling scholastic program. In the summer of 2008, I had the opportunity to buy a second-hand World In

Motion skiff from a dear friend at the club. Built in 1994 with a distinctive half-moon shaped rigger, the boat was offered to me at a wonderful price, and I thought to myself it would be a great way to perfect my sculling.

That summer there was a lot of rain, however through persistence and quite a few involuntary baths in the lake, I learned how to row my single efficiently and got really good at getting back into a flipped scull.

Sometime in September I woke up and looked down the street at the lake and saw that it was flat as a mirror. The sun was barely up as I dashed to the rowing club, got out my oars and brought my single for an early morning row. The club is situated roughly 4.5 kilometres from Dorval Island, making it an ideal destination for a 9 kilometre row, especially in the early morning before the motorboats come out. By this time in my rowing experience, I had been to the Island and back countless times, usually in a four or in a double, however this would be my first time making the journey in my newly acquired skiff.

Rowing on a lake can be exhilarating. When you're on the water in the early dawn, there are no other craft on the water except for the odd fisherman, we have blue herons which stake part of our dock for their own and there are tendrils of light mist which rise from the water, everything feels muted and calm.

I made pretty good time getting to Dorval Island, and stopping for a few minutes to drink some water, I turned my skiff around and headed back towards our clubhouse. Perhaps 1,000 meters from Dorval Island heading eastward towards our club, there is a sailing club for retired navy veterans. They moored their boats in the open water, using a dinghy to go back and forth. For the rowers, the presence of the sailboats let us know we were close to Dorval. On that particular morning, the sun was particularly bright as it glinted off the still, flat lake and I had to squint with my eyes barely open as I checked my bearings every forty strokes.

I hadn't been rowing very long when I looked back and to my shock, I was on a collision course for a beautiful wooden sailboat, about 10 metres in length! The sun had completely masked the sailboats from my view and I badly misjudged how close I was to their moorings.

I had absolutely no time to think as my bow was already fast approaching the starboard side of the sailboat, and all I could think about was the damage my oar would cause to that beautiful boat's paint job. Instinctively I just pulled my oar handle slightly in towards me and swung the blade all the way

over to rest almost on top of my shell, while simultaneously lying back as far as I could to keep that oar tucked away.

Time slowed down as I had the chance to count down every plank of that sailboat's hull, making it the longest 10 meters of my life! At last my stern passed the end of the sailboat and I was finally able to get both oars back in the water, where I took a few moments to catch my breath and wonder out loud how I managed to stay dry and on top of the water.

I made my way back the rest of the distance to our docks and when I arrived, there were other rowers getting ready to head out, so I had help bringing my skiff back in and found some time to laugh at myself and my near misfortune.

Today the club has a healthy membership with over 150 rowers, and the sailing club at Pointe Picard has been closed for a couple of summers now. For years right afterward however, when I passed that beautiful blue and yellow painted hull on my way to Dorval Island, I always gave that sailboat a nod and grinned to myself.

Jacs Rush

Jacs Rush is a rowing photographer and enthusiastic club member at Aaramoho Whanganui Rowing Club in New Zealand. Telling me this story she showed me the little “RIP” card which she’d made for the club prize giving - which is not needed any more.

She mentions KIRS Kiwi International Racing Skiffs, a local boat builder, and also OneAustralia. This was a challenger for the America’s Cup sailing race which broke in two during the 1995 semi-finals.

Brenda, the Red Rocket

My father's first rowing boat that he bought was called Brenda.

It was named after his mother, my Nana, Brenda Rush. He had used money from an inheritance she left him to buy a rowing boat. It was a red KIRS and he called it the “Red Rocket” because it went really fast and he was very happy with it, and very proud of it.

And soon everyone on the river knew Trevor’s red boat, Brenda the Red Rocket.

One Christmas our club set out to do our traditional long Christmas row. We wear Santa hats and we take Christmas mince pies and eggnog with us in the boat. And we row up the river to an agreed location where “raft up” the boats lashing them together so we can sit in the middle of the river together as we eat Christmas mince pies, treats and chocolates and then we row back and feel very, very ill and happy.

This particular Christmas row there were a couple of eights. And there was one person left over from the group and Dad said I'll take my single, that's fine.

And so Dad, wearing his Santa hat, sculled downstream past the other club, Union Boat Club, Whanganui. Once around the corner, one of the eights turned around and didn't go onto the other side of the river and Dad who can't hear very well was coming down in his single, Brenda, and they

ran into each other. The rigger of the eight pierced Brenda's shell, and she did a "OneAustralia" and folded in half and sank with my Dad sitting in it wearing his Santa hat, looking very forlorn.

And so Brenda was basically in three pieces. She was broken into three complete sections of the boat, she was no good.

So Dad walks back to the club carrying the pieces of his boat. And I made a little Rest In Peace sign for Brenda the Red Rocket for our prize giving as a memorial.

Later, Dad got an insurance payout for Brenda because she was insured. And so he bought a new Red Rocket boat. It was also a KIRS, the same boat design but newer, and he called it Brenda Two because it's also named after my Nana.

He asked the insurance company,

"What are you going to do with Brenda? What are you gonna do with the boat?"

And they said

"We're not going to do anything with it, it's a write-off."

And he said,

"Can I have it?"

And then, they said

"Yes you can. Sure, no problem."

So he took the three pieces of Brenda it back to his shed, and he spent about a month, I think, building a straightening bracing block for her. And like a jigsaw puzzle he pieced together the honeycomb of Brenda. Which was in three complete bits, remember.

He now re-assembled the hull, braced it up with wood to make sure it was straight and stuck her back together.

After he'd checked that the boat actually went straight and didn't go around in circles, he donated it to Stephanie my sister and I. We had to decide what to call her. Because you can't really have a Brenda and Brenda 2, because that's not quite right.

And as you know, you can't rename a boat because it's bad luck.

We haven't renamed the boat.

We've called it Nana, because Brenda was our Nana, so there are now two red boats, Brenda 2 and Nana. For the boat name decal I got her signature traced out into a font. It was taken from a card we'd kept that she'd given us. So her signature is now on both the boats.

And we've got the two little red boats now. I'll show you them when you visit Whanganui.

Chris Madell

Chris Madell gives us another of his delightful tales about a time he was coaching and coxing a womens crew in London down the River Thames in London, UK. Hammersmith is a prominent suspension bridge around 2 kilometers from Putney.

I’ve Covered Every Eventuality

This may amuse folks - it’s another tale from the ‘unfortunate rowing experiences’ department.

I learned from speaking to my ex-wife, Belinda, that a gal, Gill, who rowed with us in the 80s had unfortunately succumbed to cancer after a tough fight.

Belinda had rowed in the Oxford Women's Blue Boat, i.e was a pretty good oar... Gill however, really wasn't.

We used to boat from Putney and go upstream to Chiswick for our outings.

On the way back on an outing/practice we get as far as Hammersmith.

All of a sudden Gill who was rowing in bow stops rowing and the boat veers off course and we nearly hit one of the bridge pillars.

We easied, and I assumed it must be an equipment failure. So I stand up in the coxswain’s seat and call "Gill is everything alright?"

"Chris, thanks for asking everything's fine.” she replied.

“But I was tired, so I thought I'd stop for a while"

As the former President of the Oxford University Coxwains' Society, and having rewritten their rule book, I thought I'd covered every eventuality.

That one somehow blew me away...

John Nunn

John Nunn contributed this story about two athletes he knew on the US Rowing team.
Alternate is the local name for the spare man for a rowing team.
On the paddle is the American rowing command for rowing light pressure.

The Alternate Sculler

We were doing all this interval training up in Colorado. The alternate who was a member of our club, a guy by the name of Tom McKibben, was rooming with this kid from Princeton. I think his name was McCoy or something. He was also an alternate. And so, they put the alternates in the same room.

Well, Tom was a very light sleeper. If you turned over or coughed in bed, you'd wake him up. He had a hard time getting to sleep. And then, once he woke up, he couldn't get back to sleep. He had real insomnia issues.

Anyway, this guy is in his room. In the middle of the night, all of a sudden, this guy starts panting. Tom wakes up and goes, "What the heck?"

This happened a couple of nights. This guy would start panting in the middle of the night, and Tom didn't know what to do!

I guess it was the second or third night, he said, "This is ridiculous."

He figured out what it was - the guy was panting because he was rowing in his sleep!

So, he says, "On the paddle!" and the guy exhales slowly. He goes on the paddle!

That was pretty good.

When you are training so much, you're rowing in your sleep.

Eva Blanger MacLeod

Eva Belanger MacLeod used to row on the Charles River in Boston, MA, USA and has recently switched to open water rowing at Winthrop-By-The-Sea on the ocean near Boston’s Logan airport.

Ernestine Bayer was a pioneer of rowing for women in the USA.

Birthday Row

The Ernestine Bayer Race at the Head of the Charles was on my birthday one year, so I thought it would be festive to tie one of the helium balloons I'd received to my single while I raced.

A few strokes after launching, the balloon touched the water and then dragged like a 100 pound anchor behind my boat. (There's a science class I seem to have missed.)

I couldn't reach the string to rip it loose. I decided to ask for help and as I headed towards a runner on the Boston side while screaming for help and praying to all the saints to forgive me my stupidity, the balloon mercifully popped.

I was able to queue in time for my event and enjoy 3 miles with the relatively moderate drag of flaccid balloon bits and string behind my boat.

Alison Barr

Alison Barr published this poem during the height of the April 2020 Covid-19 lockdown after a friend said that she should post rowing poems as a pleasant distraction in these challenging times.

Master Blaster

Poisson d’avril, this can’t be real,
by hecky this is a crummy deal.
Masters rowers across the world,
united at a time absurd.

The sun still rises, the sun still falls,
counting the days one and all.
The best we can do is wait it out,
support one another, just give a shout.

Sharing and kindness rule the day
As we while the time away.
Our boats lie silent on their roosts,
When the time is right they’ll all be loosed.

Singles, doubles, quads and eights,
Determination, compassion make us great.
Hopes, dreams and passions put on hold,
Pink cherry blossom, sunsets gold.

Eat well, keep fit, go read a book,
Or recite some silly gobbledygook!
Folks on this feed give company and hope,

It’s not a time to sit and mope.

Our thoughts go out to all who grieve,
In strength of human spirit I do believe.
At times we’ll feel a little low,
This time will pass, new winds shall blow.

Across oceans and time we row our boats
Rivers, cities, canals and spots remote.
Rowers of the world unite
To beat this thing we all shall fight.

Equality and love will win the day,
more than medals, who can say?
And now bye bye, it’s time for tea,
Another step closer to when we’ll all be free.

Good health and cheer to one and all,
Now sit up straight, heads up, look tall!

Marlene Royle

Marlene Royle is a masters rowing coach and my partner in the Faster Masters Rowing business.

Oarsmen vs. Rowers

What is the difference between an oarsman and a rower?

Aside from definitions of nouns, most of us in the sport intrinsically know that there is a difference. Anyone who is experienced in our sport will have an opinion on this topic. But what is the true definition of an oarsman or oarswoman?

Your rowing philosophy is the key.

An oarsman is someone for whom rowing is a way of life, it's their philosophy and their outlook on the world. It is more than just part of your identity. Being an oarsman explains how you look at the culture and etiquette of rowing.

This gives insights into how individuals approach their participation in the sport.

Rowers are those who come and train at practice, and they train hard and race hard. But when they leave the boathouse, rowing isn't on their mind and isn't part of their life until they come back to row again.

Living the philosophy of being an oarsman.

What do you do? How is your attitude framing your participation in the sport of rowing?

When races are cancelled – as now – you can tell who are the oarsmen and who are the rowers. The differences are clear. Oarsmen take this in their stride. They are okay waiting for the next regatta. This is what we do – we'd prefer to be racing now, but it isn't possible. But fundamentally it doesn't change our life-view.

The athletes who are stressing about missing opportunities due to

lockdown and feel a lack of goal and lack of focused objectives. Their attention could be shifted towards thinking about the “greater being of rowing” at this time. Oarsmen aren’t going to give up this part of life just because a hiccup happens.

This is what you love doing; what you do every day and so we continue to enjoy the sport.

So when you are out with your crew – ask them what they think.

Patricia Carswell

Patricia Carswell is better known by her blog moniker, Girl on the River. She describes herself as a “pint sized” rower and is much loved by an international readership. She rows on the English / Welsh border at Monmouth Rowing Club.

“Easily” verdicts are given at Henley Royal Regatta when the winning margin is over six lengths.

The Secret Race Plan

It was during my first cycle of chemotherapy that the idea came to me. To my delight, I’d found myself feeling well enough to get back on the river, and as I paddled up and down with increasing confidence the thought popped, unbidden, into my head. It took life, and grew into a plan.

To celebrate the end of my chemo, four months later, I would compete at Ross Regatta – my first ever race in a single.

Needless to say, I had to keep my hair brained scheme to myself. Most people thought I was daft to be rowing at all during my treatment. To be considering racing—with all that that involves—would be sheer folly.

What nobody could really understand, though, was the miraculous effect that rowing was having on my body and on my mind. For one glorious hour, as if by magic, my chemo side effects would vanish. My head would stop itching. My eyes would stop watering. The sores in my mouth would recede. I’d forget that my fingernails were coming off and that my hair had fallen out. For one glorious hour there was just me, the light on the water, the occasional flurry of swans, the endless quest for the perfect stroke and the life-affirming feeling of doing what I loved.

Rowing helped me feel whole again. It connected me with my friends and reminded me what my body could do. It was my happy place. And to have a regatta to look forward to made me feel that life hadn’t lost its rhythm. With my diary a jumble of cancelled plans, time had lost all meaning, and it was hard to see beyond that final infusion. Until I added that one date at the end

of August.

There was, I'll admit, a second, less worthy motive to my plan. Racing in a single is a risky business. There's every opportunity for public humiliation. One misjudged stroke and you could capsize, enduring the shivery ride of shame in the rescue launch. A slightly skewed line and you could hit a buoy or crash into the bank or get yourself disqualified. The possibilities for disaster are endless.

So, I figured, what better time to put myself to the test than when everybody felt kindly towards me? Rock up with a bald head and a story of courage, and nobody would judge me when I flipped the boat in the first 100 meters or lost by a country mile.

Once I'd made up my mind, I figured I'd better start training. If I was to survive 750 meters without the additional humiliation of an "easily" verdict, I couldn't just turn up and hope for the best.

And so it was that during each outing, I'd find a stretch of water with nobody around, and secretly do a piece. Not flat out, not exactly race pace, but firm pressure, enough to get my heart rate up and my lungs heaving. Then later in the outing, if I still felt OK and the river was quiet enough, I'd do another. I started with three minutes and worked up to four (the time I reckoned it would take me to cover 750 meters when in a depleted state).

It felt amazing.

There was a price to pay for my illicit training. The following day I'd be exhausted, face down on the sofa, fit for nothing. But that was OK. After all, I wasn't going anywhere. And, face down on the sofa, I'd have a small, knowing smile on my face.

As chemo progressed and race day approached, I realised I'd better check in with my medical team. I could see my treatment was having a cumulative effect on my body. My muscles were getting stiffer thanks to the drugs I was on, and my energy levels were dropping. Some days I was as weak as a kitten.

My chemo team seemed happy with the idea of "strenuous exercise", so long as I was careful (whatever that meant) but I doubt they really understood what was involved.

My GP, who knows me better, was less impressed. She gave me a stern look and after a long pause said I could do the race if I promised to go at no more than 50% effort. Both she and I knew that on the day that would mean 80 or 90%. Or, you know, 100%. But definitely not more than 100.

So far so good. But I hadn’t counted on one other element – the weather.

On the morning of the race my phone rang. It was our ladies’ captain, calling from the regatta site and pleading with me not to come. “The conditions are terrible,” she said. “I really don’t think it’s safe.”

Right enough, the rain was coming down in sheets and the wind had picked up overnight. It was far from ideal. But after all that planning and training, I couldn’t back out. I just couldn’t.

“I’ll come along and take a view when I’m there,” I said, delaying the decision and hoping the wind would drop.

It didn’t. As I arrived at the regatta site, I was immediately surrounded by friends urging me not to compete. “It’s just not worth it,” they said. But it was. Wasn’t it? Ignoring their protestations, I rigged my boat and warmed up. “I’ll decide when it’s time to boat,” I said.

And then something extraordinary happened. The rain stopped. The wind dropped. There was a glimmer of light in the sky – not exactly sunshine, but definitely not the black clouds from earlier in the day.

The Gods of Rowing had, it seemed, decided to bless my lunatic plan, and as I pushed off from the bank I said a silent prayer of thanks.

The race itself is all a bit of a blur. I do remember questioning my sanity somewhere around the 500 meter mark, when I felt there was nothing left in me to propel me through the final third of the race, but somehow the cheers from the bank carried me to the end.

I lost, by a perfectly respectable three lengths, and had to be lifted out of the boat at the end. I knew it would take me days to recover. But none of that mattered. As I stumbled back to the trailer, with my friends carrying my boat aloft, I held my head high. I’d done it. I was back. And that was all that counted.

Daniel Spring

Daniel Spring is a formidable Henley and World Rowing Championships race pundit on his Fat Sculler blog. This story came in a thread about mishaps while racing.

Are You Tired?

Not exactly a blooper, but years ago my pairs partner and I raced the summer sprint regatta season in the UK. We decided to race both as a M2- and M2x.

In one M2x final we were about half a length up on our opposition when we heard their bowman call out

“They’re tiring, we’re coming back on them!”

My partner, sitting at bow, said

“Hey Dan, are you tiring?”

To which I replied

“Nope.”,

“Me neither” said my partner...we went up 2 points in rate and won by 3 lengths.

Ben Booth

Ben Booth is an open water sculler who I interviewed on the RowingChat podcast about his boat building search for the perfect salt water rowing boat design.

Rough Water Zen

Rough water is pretty much my thing in coastal rowing. It’s what drew me to coastal rowing originally, and it’s what keeps me inspired. When I look out at the sea, I can’t help but visualize myself finding the sweet lines of playful descent on the breakers or imagining the leaping flood of energy that pulls me over their ephemeral peaks.

I’m drawn to get out there and feel.

Rowing in large waves is an emotional experience. It’s a mind-altering stimulation. Joy mixes with adrenaline—a thrilling cocktail that creates a state that might be described as revelatory ecstasy (using Oxford’s second definition of ecstasy of course, which is: “an emotional or religious frenzy or trance-like state, originally one involving an experience of mystic transcendence”).

This “mystic transcendence” is the most profound effect of rowing in very large waves.

Bombing a boat through wild frothy peaks blasts every last shred of mundane thought from my head. There’s an instant clarity that a temple full of Zen monks would throw down their robes for.

Things happen fast out there.

With no room for thought, I become merely a being intertwined with its environment. There is a purity to wave riding which is primal and beautiful: it’s an intimate connection with the world. Perhaps it's even akin to the Shamanic experience of entranced immersion in nature - an immersion so deep that the world feels magic again, and the ocean alive.

And when we feel the world that powerfully, we free ourselves from a life of sensory dullness.

To the extent that it provokes such liberating escapes, we could characterize rough water rowing as a revolutionary act. By rough, I mean rough. Like overhead breakers, whirlpool rip currents, howling winds. Or, it could also mean venturing out of the harbor for the first time.

“Rough” is a fluid concept.

Guin Batten

Guin Batten is a powerful advocate for coastal rowing having devised the Beach Sprints regatta format, she is chair of the FISA Rowing For All Commission and pushes for its inclusion in future Olympic Games.

This is the first of three tales covering a multi-stage row she led across “The Foot Of Britain.”

The most western point of the English mainland is Lands End in Cornwall. It’s a symbolic land and water journey start point.

Lands End

Sennen Cove to Porthcumo Cove
7.2NM (nautical miles)
504.304 N 005 43.215W
Weather: calm
Departure: 17:15 approximately
Judith and Guin

We left the rocky beach of Sennen Cove, just by the lifeboat station, late afternoon. It had been a mad last few days. Work meetings right up to wire and even though I had packed my personal stuff days before, I was still doing the team safety gear late into the night. I was happy I had taken the time, I owed it to the team to make sure we had covered everything.

Timing was running well, and while we couldn't hang about, we were on schedule to pick up the inshore tide around Lands End.

There was no emotion, no staged beginning. Judith and I just got into the boat and pushed off. We paddled out between the rocks and waves, and headed around the corner. 500 meter in I had to stop, I had no room at the finish. Judith took on the steering and I moved my feet toward the bows, it was better but still c**p. I had to move them again, using every inch possible; it was clear something was wrong with the riggers I just wasn't too sure what.

Well we couldn't spend time wondering what, we had a serious tide to catch, in an exposed and treacherous seaway.

The sea was wonderful, the swell deep and immensely powerful, I felt energy pouring into my soul. I thought to myself this is why I do this. I felt at home, at one, but alert to any potential danger. Lands End was everything I had dreamt of.

We were traveling at the same speed as the wind so it was hot and the sun was the milky warmth of early evening. We stopped roughly 500 meters before the imaginary line of Lands End, knowing that the rest of the crew were high up on the cliffs looking down at us, waiting to start the ‘clock’ on the row. As we sat there in the double scull the underlying swell was about 2 meters of solid waves coming from the west Atlantic Ocean, the wave power was evident as we rose and fell with the peaks and troughs. The wave pattern was far from clean, the bounce-back off the steep black rock and underwater reefs meant the wave pattern was chaotic. It was fun and exciting.

For about half an hour we rowed steadily due south, waiting for the cliffs to open up to the east. I didn't want it to end, we were making great progress and it was so special being in a place so few rowers have ever been. Judith and I shared stories and talked about the waves, the power of the real deep Atlantic waves.

Over my shoulder I could see we were gaining on two yachts, we were 250 meters away from the closest as we turned east and cut inside the Runnel Stone buoy. The lifeboat crew in Sennen had advised us not to cut inside, but the water was ok and more importantly we now had some great waves to surf.

The waves sucked down hard on the hull, pulling us back before the moment of release, added by an extra push from the oars. We caught some perfect sets, ploughing hard down the face of the waves and clicking off 21.9 kmph on the GPS.

Over the last mile I had been aware that my left forearm was very sore and my hand was getting some blisters. Now I could see, it was so b***dy obvious, the riggers had been put on wrong. We had some fun shouting out to the empty water, how stupid we were to make such a silly mistake.

“We don't have a blame culture, BUT WHO's FAULT WAS IT?”, we shouted.

We were happy and so alive.

Suddenly from nowhere we came up to Porthcumo Cove for the first crew change of the challenge, so quickly, so soon. The water was an emerald green

and sky a warm blue. As we came in to shore a short biting wave kicked us broadside just as I left the boat, and dumped me on my back with my feet trying to stop the boat landing on me. The boat filled with sand that would stay with us all the way to Portland.

The Foot of Britain row had started. We had ticked off one of the big heads with no great difficulty and morale was high.

Guin Batten

The Lizard is the southernmost point of the English mainland.

The Boa is a shipwreck and popular deep sea dive site.

RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) is a charity who run the inshore and coastal lifeboat services.

Butty is an informal Northern English word for a filled or open sandwich. Traditionally they are made from eggs, bacon or chips (french fries).

Rounding Lizard Point and the Manacles

Mullion Cove to Porthallow Cove
19.1 NM
Caro and Guin

It was an early start and we were on a tight schedule to meet the tide off the Lizard, our earlier delay in launching at Porthleven Harbour due to the lack of water and the size of exposure around the Lizard meant there was an air of seriousness in the bus as we pulled up to Mullion Cove.

The air was crisp and while it was light the sun was only just starting to climb up into the sky; it was yet to reach the village.

I stripped out of my warm dry kit and jumped up and down as I put on my cold wet kit. Caro and I did a cross check on our safety gear and I then walked down to the Cove to find the best place for the crew change.

10 minutes passed and there was no sign of Anna and Helen, I climbed up onto the edge of the harbour wall, and scanned the horizon with the binoculars all the while thinking they should have been here by now. Has something gone wrong?

I kept scanning the horizon. Suddenly I could see them as the boat rose up on the waves about 1 km offshore. They had missed the Cove and were heading straight past towards the Lizard. I called across to Carrie who was on

the visible part of the sea wall, it was crucial that she got their attention, “Shout and wave” I called.

I jumped back down to the shore and grabbed the VHF radio. We couldn’t make a phone call as there was no mobile reception.

I am not sure how we got their attention but they turned and started to make their way towards Mullion Cove. Relieved, I walked back up to the van to get Caro. It was time to get ready for the change.

Anna and Helen arrived with much excitement and lots of stories of their leg; it had been hard to spot Mullion Cove from the sea, until they were past it, especially as the view was straight into low morning sun.

Pushing off out of the little harbour, we passed between the rocks of Mullion Island and The Vro, making our way south. The water was clear and mischievous, boiling over the rocks and swirling as the current moved over submerged ridges and deep channels. We paddled past Predannaock Head, where we could see the rough water running over the Boa 500 meters out to sea. As we cut east we could see the rocky outcrops of Man of War and Taylor’s Rock sticking up, we could go close to these, but beyond that it was important we picked the narrow channel between the overfalls and the Men Hry Rocks.

In planning Helen had managed to get her hands on an old RNLI notebook on navigating the inshore passage. Most yachts wouldn’t think of taking the route where we were going. Personally I had fond memories of the last time I had seen the Lizard, 12 months before in the fading light it had been the first sign of land we had seen since leaving New York 48 days before in a 8 meter ocean rowing boat. This time it was daylight and rather than a force 5, the air was still and breathless.

We were a good 1/2 mile offshore and I had to stop a few times to use the Garmin to keep us along the edge of the depth contours. Despite there being no wind the water was alive and hard to read. We were working a narrow line of about 50 meters wide on the edge of the deep underwater cliff and the rough water of the overfalls, which extend miles offshore. We were being pushed along very quickly and it felt more like lining the boat up in a river than being at sea. We hit a 100 meter band of standing waves and as the boat bucked around, we kept the speed up and scooted through.

As we came parallel to Bumble Rock, we turned due north and headed into Lion’s Den and Housel Bay. Out of the tidal current we paused to relax and take a few pictures... before rowing on to find Housel Cove and the location

for the crew change. We were surrounded by a huge wall of rock, being top of the tide, we couldn't see a beach anywhere... we rowed in closer and still couldn't see anything remotely safe. Then a faint call came from the cliffs, looking up we could see Morag and the team running down a cliff path. We shouted but got no reply, we tried the radio but couldn't make out the message.

It looked impossible... and it was.

We rowed on thinking it wasn't the right cove. We whipped round Bass Point, cutting inside Vrogue Rock. The bay opened out and it was clear we had missed the planned change spot. Just to check we waved down the only fishing boat we could find and he confirmed that the headland on the far side of the bay was Black Head.

Before each leg each crew would memorise the navigation features and roughly work out the timeline so it was easy to know where you were. In the boat we also had laminated crib sheets of the landing points. On my phone I had the marine chart and on the Garmin a GPS plotter.

You would have thought it would be easy to work out where we were. But it hadn't worked out this time.

If a stop was missed our agreed plan was to row on to the next stop; for us this would mean Coverack Harbour. We had rowed 6.5NM from Mullion Cove and it would only be another 6.3NM onto Coverack, another hour or so we thought.

The headland of Bass Point came and went, smooth swirling water and the excitement of passing within touching distance from the shore of Hot Point. Our new problem was the names on the chart didn't match up with the names we had used on our crib sheet.

I was tired, frustrated and I needed to give up just for a moment.

We had been going for 2.5 hours and Caro agreed we needed to stop to have a longer rest and eat everything we had. We shared our energy bars; sharing the fishes and I somehow got it into my ridiculous sense of humour that we had sinned and getting lost was our atonement.

For 5 minutes we laughed and forgot where we were. It was everything I needed to regroup and try again to find our way.

Little did we know at the time, but we were actually sitting in Coverick Cove, the very place for the change. Standing on the shore was the support crew, seeing us come around the corner at Dolor Point, they must have had a sense of relief and fired up the stove to welcome us in with bacon butties.

Had we been a few hundred meters closer to the land, we would have heard them screaming to attract our attention. For 5 minutes they watched as we sat there, waving and trying to make contact. Neither the VHF radio nor the mobiles worked.

We rowed on, we had only expected to be on the water for an hour, we were pushing into our third hour. Tired, we powered our attitude with humour and crazy stories, laughing along another 5.3 NM, to find Porthallow Cove.

The water was so smooth and as we approached the infamous rocks of the Mancacles, we chose to cut right in tight between the Point and the Shark's Fin. Rowing slowly between the rocks only 10 meters apart it was invigorating, exciting and a privilege.

We cut into every cove we came across; hoping each one would be the right one for the crew switch. We had stopped laughing now!

My phone started to ring, it stopped. I called back, nothing.

We had come back into mobile reception. I tried a range of numbers - each went to answerphone.

One worked, it was Lou, she said we needed to row straight into the shore, we were at Porthallow!

I didn't believe her, I asked again, "You mean you're on the shore".

"Yes" she said.

"Well I am only coming in if you have bacon butties." was my reply.

We had rowed over 19 NM some 35km, 20km more than we had expected... but more importantly we had passed the biggest crux of the whole expedition. We had passed the Lizard. Everything else would be easier now, or so we thought.

Guin Batten

Guin continues her tale about rowing around the south coast of Great Britain. Dungeness is a long gravel spit known to the public for its nuclear power station. The British Army maintains a training estate, Lydd Ranges, across Romney Marsh and the cuspate foreland at Dungeness. Public access to the coastal path is allowed when live firing is not happening. Lydd Ranges are used for live firing with a danger area extending out to sea.

Dungeness

Camber Sands to Lydd-on-Sea
9.5 NM
Ave speed 6.9 knots
050 54.308N 000 58.1991E
Weather: windy
17 Aug 2017
Guin and Morag

I couldn't get the thought out my head that I had made a poor decision. The words rattled "This feels wrong. F**k. S**T. I can't believe I let myself take this risk, after I had been so careful up to now. Guin, this feels WRONG."

Only 20 minutes before I had been drifting in and out of sleep in the warmth of the mini bus, waking to watch how the crew were doing or to glance again at the weather station update on my phone. Thinking if we don't go now in this weather window, we will be on the beach until Saturday.

We had been waiting all afternoon for a forecasted drop in the wind that was due to come in just after 4pm. If we were to go, I needed confidence that the drop was actually here, the pressure to go was strong and I didn't trust my judgment. So I had been watching the online weather station from Lydd Airport, which was only a few miles away.

At 8pm the weather station update clicked through, it was the third

consecutive drop and the first time the wind had gone below 20 knots since we had stood on the beach at 5am that morning. The weather window was here. We had to go. We had to go NOW, as we only had 60 minutes before we lost the light. Being stuck around Dungeness in the dark wasn't going to be fun.

I looked across at Morag and said it was time to go. We pulled on our wet kit, life jackets and PLB and headed for the toilet together. I had been looking out for Morag all afternoon and thought I had picked up some trepidation, or perhaps I was seeing my own.

We quickly readied the boat with the safety gear and re-fixed the satellite tracker to the little mast that held the navigation lights. We picked up the boat and walked into the sea, the surf was messy, but the beach was shallow. Morag was in and Anna and Caro were acting as our boat holders, as I jumped up, Morag started to row. Like an idiot, in getting in I had pulled off my seat and it was loose in the boat. I called to Morag that I was out of action and she needed to take us out through the surf rowing on her own. Fortunately, I managed to get my seat back in as we were being thrown up and backwards by the waves. I could still sense Caro in the water at the bows keeping us into the waves. The bows were moving up and down by 2 meters and I hoped she had the sense to keep out of the way of the bow, as it crashed back down after each wave.

My seat was in and together Morag and I made our way out through the break, as we got to deeper water the waves got bigger and we needed more momentum to get over them. But by 750 meters we were clear and we could recover and catch our breath.

We pointed the bow towards the headlands and started to get a feel for the water movement for the 90 minute row to Dungeness.

While the wind had dropped, it had been blowing hard for over 12 hours and the waves had been building up for hours. We were 20 minutes into the row and starting to pick up big 4 meter waves running clear from beyond Beachy Head. They were standing up tall as they stacked up onto the shallow water off Dungeness.

I had failed to account for this in my decision making, the waves were coming from the side, exactly the same angle that Anna and I had experienced in training, where we had been swamped and experienced a sudden drop in stability that could have easily capsized us. Luckily, only one in five of the waves were topping out with white water, it was essential that

we didn't get side-swiped by one of these. They were frightening to look up at, and it was not much better looking down at them either!

My overriding feeling was I had neglected my duty as the leader and I was failing the team.

I had to get the thought out of my head because it was not going to make the situation any better. I needed my full concentration to read the water and to hold the line as the boat kicked and bucked across the waves.

All I could do was to process the facts and work with Morag to do everything we could to move forward. We couldn't turn back, we were fully committed.

In my head I started to talk it through. First I asked what would happen if we capsized, I spoke to Morag and shouted “whatever happens we need to stay with the boat.” Then I thought about where would we end up if we failed to cope with the conditions. Again I called to Morag “if we can't make it around Dungeness, it will be ok, we will be blown onto the lee shore along with the boat, when we get 10 meters off we should get clear of the boat and swim for shore.”

I don't really know what Morag was thinking at the time but I am sure my words highlighted the seriousness of the situation we were in. I hope it didn't put the fear of god into her. I could tell she was tense and working her brain and her body hard, when a couple of times she pulled round on the wrong oars to steer the boat.

We both needed to concentrate and work closely together to steer a clean track through the bigger sets of breaking waves and ride out the squalls that were coming in, the closer we got to the nuclear power station at Dungeness Spit.

Gradually we relaxed and we shouted positive calls to each other, even whooping on bigger surf, but mainly we rowed in silence.

At 8:50pm as the last light faded I looked at our electronic equipment for the last time and called the time and our ground speed which was quick at nearly 7 knots. We were now rowing blind electronically, as there was no feasible way I could stop to touch the buttons.

We lined up our stern on the tiny red harbour light of Ryde, the lighthouse off Beachy Head and our bows on the distant light splatter that looked like a Christmas tree that was Dungeness nuclear power station at the tip of the headland.

Light faded into complete darkness about 15 minutes off the head, the

waves started to align more towards our stern and we started to surf and stall. Morag took on the task of holding our line while I tried to locate the navigation lights. I had to look many times as I could only spot them when we were at the top of the waves.

It was hard to pin them down, until I was sure, I decided to treat them like other vessels. It would be sheer good luck if we were the only boat rounding the headland.

We were surfing and struggling to hold a clean line, I was trying hard to pick a line so we weren't swept past the head by the power of the current and the following seas. Repeatedly we teased the bows round so the waves were coming over our stroke quarter and slowly pulled our way into calm water under the lee of the land.

By 9:30 pm we had made it in, the relief was instant and I wanted to cry in gratitude. Despite my lapse in confidence, our skill under pressure had meant we had been able to handle everything the conditions had shown us.

A little voice in my head asked “are you getting too old for this?”

Approaching the lee shore in the dark it was calm and erie with creeping baby breakers sneaking up through the never-ending blackness of Roar Bank. We stopped, got out of the boat and hugged each other, with big grins on our faces.

The shore team were nowhere to be seen, so we stood knee deep in mud and water and put the emergency strobe on and waited for nearly 2 hours. We didn’t care how long it took them to come, we were happy knowing we had achieved something special.

Our adventure had been matched by the shore team who had only been able to convince the army to stop live firing 2 mins before we had entered the range. After initially rejecting the offer of a weblink link to our tracker, they finally accepted it when they realised their heat seeking detectors couldn't pick us out in the large waves.

At 12:00 with the boat safe above the tide line, we piled into the bus and drove onto Deal and the shortest night of the trip, 1hrs 30min of precious sleep. F**K we had made it, we had unlocked the key to the last part of the row.

Pauline Peel

Pauline Peel is a former British Olympic oarswoman who won her place in the British senior squad aged 16.She represented Britain from 1974 to 1986 including two Olympic Games. Coached by her father, she rowed both traditional skiffs as well as fine boats.

A skit is British english for a joke.

Banned Women at HRR

And this is the story of my partner Astrid Ayling and I entering at Henley Royal Regatta in 1978, which was long before women were officially allowed to row at Henley. The context was that Astrid and I were rowing on the British national team at the time and were based at Kingston Rowing Club, which is in southwest London, not far from Hampton Court.

The idea came about really just as a silly joke.

During winter training we were complaining to the club captain at Kingston. What we could see were fairly unsubstantial mens double sculls being allowed to race at Henley. And obviously at the time we were not.

Which rankled a bit.

It probably wasn't the biggest thing on our minds at the time because we were basically training for selection. We were hoping to go to the World Rowing Championships which was in New Zealand at Lake Karapiro. It was obviously going to be an amazing trip. So there was going to be lots of very strong competition to get onto the team and probably not much in the way of funds, so very few crews could go.

And In in the end, Astrid and I were the only womens crew that actually went to New Zealand.

Anyway, winter training is terribly dull. So we had this bit of a skit going on for a while and thought nothing more of it really. We were just sort of busy with our training and trying to get ourselves selected to go off to New

Zealand.

However, when the Captain, Angus Gate, came to make the Henley entries for Kingston Rowing Club. He said to us.

“Listen, that thing about you entering at Henley. What about it? Do you want to do it?”

And we just said “Yeah. Why not. Let's let's do it.”

I don't think we had really thought through the implications of it.

I don't think either of us had really thought that it was a huge feminist protest or anything of the sort.

Astrid had rowed on the German team until 1976. when she married Richard Ayling and came and rowed in the UK and I think she found Henley a bit of a puzzle at the time to be truthful. And she couldn't really understand why women weren't allowed to row there.

I think the general idea was that women should sit on the bank looking pretty in a hat. And importantly the regatta was all about the men. She didn't get that at all because that really wasn't how rowing was arranged in Germany.

I have to say I was a bit resentful at the time that we weren't allowed to row at Henley because I would like to have done so. There is a certain kind of acknowledgement of you as a person, as a rower, when you're allowed to row at the premier rowing event in the country.

Our scheme was scuppered at a very early stage., Richard Burnell, one of the Stewards who was also an international rowing correspondent, noticed our maiden names on the entry form.

Both of us were married. I was married to Mike Hart who was on the national rowing team as well and Astrid to Richard Ayling.

Astrid’s maiden name was Hohl and we were entered as Bird and Hohl.

I was working at Midland Bank in Kingston Market Place at the time. I went out to lunch and came back to find a pile of ‘Please Call’ notes from journalists who all wanted a comment on our ‘feminist protest’.

There was a lot of fuss about it at the time as the news spread. We got quoted in the newspapers. I was on the front page of the Guardian newspaper.

A grovelling apology was written to the Stewards by the Kingston Captain as the price for all Kingston RC crews not being disqualified.

Astrid was one of the first women to race at Henley when the World Cup sculling races were held there so the story has a happy ending for her.

Meghan O’Leary

Meghan O’Leary is a former US national team rower who set aside her career in TV to take a shot at the Olympic Games. She is an ambassador for the Women’s Sports Foundation and on the board of US Rowing.

I Want My Sport to Look More Like My Country

To the rowing community,

Early in my rowing career, I was focused solely on improving myself and my abilities in order to excel. Now, my focus has somewhat shifted. With the 2020 Olympic Games less than eight months away and as I near the sunset of my elite rowing career, I’ve also begun to think about how I can help to improve the sport.

By all National Team and Olympic Team standards, I came to rowing very late in life. There’s nothing unique about trying something new as an adult. What made my experience particularly rare was that I would go from novice to making the National Team in fewer than three years, and then become an Olympian another three years later. I can definitively say that the sport has completely changed my life.

After a two-sport NCAA division one collegiate career at the University of Virginia as a softball and volleyball player, I picked up rowing for the first time after a Google search landed me on the learn-to-row lessons at Riverfront Recapture rowing club in Hartford, Connecticut. I was 25 years old at the time, working my dream job at ESPN.

A few months later I joined an elite rowing group. Having held an oar for all of three months, I was by far the worst rower among my peers, which comprised National Team members, medalists, and “real” Olympic hopefuls. I was still learning how to correctly pick my boat up out of the water.

During my first winter training camp, we traveled to South Carolina along

with the clubs' top high school rowers. At times, I wasn't skilled enough to work with the elite adult athletes, so the coach put me in with the fifteen-year-old rowers who proceeded to destroy me on the water.

There I was, a former D1 college athlete and high school All-American, and these girls, who were all 10 years younger than me, had absolutely embarrassed me.

Fighting back the tears alone in my hotel room, I thought to myself, "Why am I here? And what am I doing with my life?"

A few weeks later I doubled down on defeat and decided to enter the 2011 USRowing National Selection Regatta to compete for a spot on the U.S. National Team. I lined up against Olympic medalists and World Champions and perhaps unsurprisingly, finished dead last. Some would have thrown in the towel right then and there. Instead, the disappointment fueled me.

When I started working at ESPN, I had it all planned out and was on the path to become a successful television executive. Five years into that promising career, I was faced with the ultimate decision of having to give up one dream to pursue another. I knew that if I wanted to be successful in rowing and if I was going to make the Olympic team, I would have to prioritize it above everything else.

I started using more of my resources, putting more of my time and energy toward my training, recovery, and extra sessions on the water. That summer I rowed with any and every club or athlete that would let me. My strategy was that the more opportunities I had to fail, the faster I would learn.

The commitment paid off. In April of 2016, almost exactly five years from that South Carolina training camp spent getting pummeled by high schoolers, I competed at the U.S. Olympic Trials in the women's double sculls event.

When my partner, Ellen Tomek and I crossed the finish line in first place, I was overwhelmed by the realization of having achieved this huge, audacious goal I had set for myself. I remember hugging my parents and letting it all sink in, relieved, overjoyed, and proud.

To live out that dream and follow through to make it happen, was empowering. It opened up a whole new world of confidence for me and my understanding of what I was capable of accomplishing.

It made me feel like a badass. I was proud of who I was as a person, beyond just who I was as an athlete.

That new self-confidence I found was a breakthrough for me.

Growing up, sports were a safe haven for me, a place where I could be

who I wanted to be, and feel good about that person. I was fast. I was strong. When I had a ball in my hands, I felt invincible.

But outside of sports there was an increasing sense of unease and confusion about the world around me. I grew up in the south of the USA, spending the majority of my teen years in Louisiana in a conservative community and fairly conservative family.

Realizing I was gay was one of the toughest things I have ever faced. I think in my own way, I was a bit homophobic, which for a very long time fueled the gripping self-hatred and shame that kept me in the closet for years.

Where I am from at that time, “gay” basically meant that you were going straight to hell.

For a long time, I kept my sexuality quiet because I couldn’t even accept myself after being conditioned to believe that being gay was wrong, a disorder and an imperfection. I didn’t come out to myself and others until college, and even then I was still weighed down with an unshakeable shame. However, largely in part through my continued involvement in sport, my self-esteem continued to grow, I found community, and that shame began to transform into self-acceptance and confidence.

At the Rio Olympics, my evolving comfort level with being more open about my sexuality became very apparent. A friend invited me to a party celebrating LGBTQ Olympians and I immediately agreed to join him. Cameras flashed and reporters asked questions, as I opened up during an interview, sharing that I had never really come out publicly until that moment.

When I walked away, I said to my friend in shock, relief and excitement, “Wow, that felt really good!”

In many ways, achieving what I had on my journey of making the Olympic team helped me to fully embrace who I was. And as I have continued to grow as a person, along with my success in rowing, so has my awareness of the problems that exist within the sport.

While rowing has given me so much, it is also a sport with a lot of issues.

I am white. Most all of my teammates are white. Rowing is traditionally thought of as an elitist sport, historically reserved for the Ivy League rich, white kids who come from affluent backgrounds. The sport as a whole looks nothing like our country and that’s a reality we should all want to change.

The beauty of a sport like rowing is that it doesn’t matter what your sexual orientation is or the color of your skin, if you come from generational wealth

or if you're a first generation American; if you put in the work and pull hard, you can be a great rower. Sport is the great equalizer. People of all races and backgrounds should feel that they have a place in the rowing community, and yet our sport isn't the easiest to access.

There are a number of barriers of entry with rowing. You need a substantial amount of water and space to house expensive equipment, coaches, motors for coach launches, trailers to transport boats, and the list goes on. Due to operational costs, clubs often charge very high membership fees and high schools or communities can't afford to support a local rowing program.

To be an advocate for positive change and work to create more access, I became an ambassador with the Women's Sports Foundation and joined the board of USRowing.

In 2016, I started to become acquainted with Row New York, a non-profit organization that in-part, provides opportunities to row for young people regardless of background or ability and who otherwise might not have the chance to compete in the sport.

Row New York is in the heart of New York City and they are 'walking the walk' to diversify our sport and in that process, are changing lives for the thousands of young people who have matriculated through the program since it began in 2002. I have seen it firsthand and felt the powerful energy of a boathouse made up of rowers from many different backgrounds.

Recently, my boat partner, Ellen and I went to Queens to row with some of the young athletes there. After we finished on the water, one girl approached me with a list of prepared questions – everything from what we ate before races to what we thought about at the starting line. Her dream is to be an Olympian and she had a plan, inspired by her involvement with Row New York.

I told her, "Girl, you got what it takes. Just keep working hard and you can do it."

And I meant it. She can be an Olympian thanks to the opportunities she is receiving through an organization like Row New York.

Many of the other girls talked about wanting to row in college, knowing that their hard work could earn them a scholarship to help pay for tuition.

Organizations like Row New York are setting the standard for change in our sport, but it's up to the rest of the rowing community to use this example and help bring that change across the country. Being from Louisiana, I have a

dream to help create a similar program in New Orleans.

To do this, we need coaches and athletes to donate their time, boathouses to lend their resources and donors to support youth development.

We need to change the face of our sport and the exclusivity that's been emblematic of our community for too long. This is how we build a space where every type of person can feel safe, grow, be successful and achieve their dreams.

At 35 years old, my career as an elite athlete will soon near its end, but my contribution to rowing is far from over. I am incredibly proud that I lived my dream of becoming an Olympian and forever grateful for the skills and life-changing confidence that I developed in that process.

However, now I have another mission, which is to help ensure that our sport progresses to reflect the world we live in today, and that the rowing community is one where all kids and all people have the resources and opportunities they need to cross any and all finish lines.

I am ready – Are you?

Joline Esparza

Joline Esparza rowed for USA and later founded and sold the JL Rowing clothing brand.

I Never Cared What They Thought Until...

There we were, around the table. Adults with a purpose and each of us contributing. I punctuated a concept with a wave of my hands and there it is...the man across the table - his eyes shift perceptively as he registers that this woman has furry pits.

And this woman always has had. When I started training with my then-track and field star husband in the early 80s, his teammates would tease Ken that he would get his butt kicked since I had more underarm hair than he did, a nod to the typically masculine association of body hair to power. While JL simmered on the back burner and I worked a “real job” at a commercial real estate company, I wore only sleeved professional tops - until I was entrenched…then off came the protective cloak and the (mostly male) floor had to just deal with it.

Being furry has somehow worked as a barometer professionally - it has been illuminating to witness the inner strife that this grooming choice causes in people as I pass through their line of sight. Despite my own self-confidence, the questions still linger: Am I instantaneously being judged or defined? More likely, am I a threat? In our age of “othering” as a debate strategy, am I one of a dreaded THEM?

People’s reactions infuriate my husband, but decades of furriness and bold display have provided quite the education. A seemingly-benign flicker of surprise is one small example (dust-mote size) of what many in our world experience on a regular basis. When we “other”, we add bricks to walls.

For so many, rowing provides a safe, challenging, rewarding, exhilarating…you fill in the blanks here.

Even though I no longer row in boats, I still enjoy (by osmosis and by memory) benefits. When I am immersed in personal and business challenges, I am constantly moved by the efforts of those who are working to broaden our community to embrace all comers. While I have actively chosen my differences, there are many more who are born into boxes we never even knew existed. Boxes we are only now coming to understand or unpack - requiring more active compassion than ever.

My challenge to you is this: Look around you. Until your boathouse, your club, your boat - looks like our country, we have work to do to be able to call ourselves a sport that doesn't discriminate and is actively in pursuit of inclusion. Please see Meghan O'Leary's article so appropriately named... "I want my sport to look more like my country"

First, challenge those who relish the belief that the sport is just one more privileged gate to enter…those who still think that "Those People" should be grateful for our help. The ones who actually say…"Those People."

Then, for inspiration on going forward, look at and reach out to the dedicated individuals hopefully at your boathouse, and certainly at programs like Pocock Foundation; Pioneer Valley Rowing Assn, Philadelphia City Rowing, GLRF, Row New York, Seize the Oar Foundation, CRI, Delta Sculling Center, Dallas United, Wabash Valley Crew, and The Foundry...just to name a few.

On a larger scale, the conversation about privilege rumbles (or rages) all around us.

Rowing may seem like it exists in a bubble, but we all know what happens to bubbles.

YOUR ACTION LIST

- Invite someone who is different from you to a Learn to Row session. Or into your boat!

- Sign the Rowers Pledge - a global initiative to promote inclusion and acceptance.

- Contribute your time, expertise, or financial support to one of the outreach programs in the link list above.

- Embrace what is different in you, and practice acceptance of the

spectrum all around you.

Myself flawed and yet hopeful,
Joline.

Charles Sweeney

Charles Sweeney came to rowing as an adult and so has to combine his rowing alongside his busy work schedule in Washington DC, USA.

The announcement that Paris would get the 2024 Olympics reminded him of a trip to Paris at a time he was trying to stay in shape for a “critical” 2k, and how hard it must be to be a rower in France.

Erging in Paris

You can tell it's Paris because the hotel’s erg room looks like it should be a wine-cellar: small and dim with a stone ceiling vaulted gracefully over the modest assortment of exercise equipment. The bottled water is Vittel (“reVittelize!”) and the post-erg carbohydrate load is a banana and paté en croute. With training options like this, you’d think that the French crew would have a greater presence on the international rowing scene.

Perhaps the post-workout showering facilities are holding them back. You can tell it’s a hip European hotel because, in addition to the lithograph of an extremely naked woman over the bed (I wonder if straight women and gay men get annoyed by the number of naked hotties in hip interior design), the bathtub is separated from the sleeping area by a four-foot drop and a glass wall, which isn’t bad as long as you’re travelling with someone you like to look at while they’re bathing. (Though, it still strikes me as an odd design choice -- don’t we all travel with "just friends" sometimes?)

But the bathtub-as-theater isn’t the problem.

The problem is that there is no shower, just a bathtub, and the bathtub is not long enough to fit a national-team sized rower (probably not even a lightweight) so you can’t really actually bathe. And the hose on the nozzle you might want to rinse with as part of a makeshift shower only reaches about five feet up from the tub floor, so if you want to shampoo anything higher up than your chest you have to adopt the sort of awkward crouch on

slippery porcelain that leads to career-ending injuries and to your travelling companion looking at you and saying to him- or herself, “this isn’t someone I want to look at while they’re bathing after all.”

It’s also possible that the Parisian lifestyle in general interferes with rowing achievement.

I couldn’t help but think of journalist and bon vivant AJ Liebling’s rowing career. Libeling, who is chiefly remembered today for his boxing and food writing but who also earned the Legion d’Honneur for his work as a journalist during World War II, was in search of a regular exercise program while a student in Paris in the 1920s. Having been recruited by a M. Barbolle for the prestigious the Societe Nautique de Paris, he approached his first day on the water.

“I learned from a young man named Morin…that the crews of the Societé practiced only on Sundays when the weather was pleasant; there was consequently no time to waste on elaborate dinners…So we had, as hors d’oeuvres, only a crock of duck pate, a crock of pate of hare, a few tins of sardines, muzzle of beef, radishes and butter…After the hors d’oeuvres, we had potato soup, then a Buisson d’eperlans, a mound of tiny fish, for each of the societaires. After that, a leg of mutton with roast potatoes, a salad, cheese and fruit. Red and white wine were to be taken at discretion, and most of the societaires had a brandy with their coffee as a digestive.

“Naturally, one did not attempt violent exercise after such a meal; it would not be healthy," M.Barbolle explained. A societaire named Leclerc, the chef de nage, or stroke, of the senior eight, said that he didn’t think he’d row that afternoon. “What the devil!” he said. “One works hard all week, why sweat when you don’t have to?”

I had a similar thought the morning after a visit to the legendary Tour d’Argent. A night spent spend sipping old Burgundies, noshing on foie gras, frogs legs and (per tradition) duck, and generally having the sort of luxury that once got you guillotined poured over my body like a gently warmed crème anglais, argued forcibly against the sort of “violent exercise" that competitive athletics demands. Better to put one’s energy into perfecting l’art de vivre, rather than spend chilly sunrises on the water. One works hard all week, why sweat when you don’t have to?

You don’t even need a Lieblingesque feast or a late night sipping Burgundies to find your training regimen undermined in Paris. You could, for example, spend a perfect afternoon bicycling along Paris’s Promenade

Plantée (16 years older than, and the inspiration for, New York's High Line) to the somewhat grungy neighborhood of Bercy -- stopping occasionally to curse your phone and its lousy sense of direction, possibly even to consider smashing the stupid thing with its insipid voice and poor grasp of geography to bits -- in order to tour the Musée des Arts Farains (Translation: "Museum of Really Cool Carnival Stuff").

After a couple of hours in a converted wine warehouse riding antique carousels, waltzing to a giant clockwork music box and marveling at the mechanical and artistic details of fascinating and largely functional carnival antiquities, you could go to a park to relax among the young and beautiful and in love and – through the transitive property of exquisite spring evenings– become young and beautiful and in love yourself once again.

And then, you're back on your bicycle, riding along the quays to the hotel and its erg room when, without warning, two people at the perfect café table -- overlooking the houseboats and the strollers and the flaneurs -- get up and leave. Well, you can't really help but take their place and sit and sip or maybe swill a liter or so of beer and let the sunshine and the joy and the view carry you someplace extraordinary.

Naturally, through no fault of your own, the workout afterwards gets shortened somewhat. It's a small thing, but there can be so many small things over the course of a season, so many shortened workouts. And then you have to deal with that goddam bathtub again, risking injury and humiliation.

But you can tell it's Paris because the post-workout carbohydrate load is an extraordinary couscous and a tangine served by an initially irked Moroccan Frenchman who starts the dinner by pointing pointedly at his watch. We were all of eight minutes late though, admittedly, it was 10:25 and we were the only customers. But he warmed to us when we sprang for a bottle of good red wine and explained in bad French that the website said they served until midnight (drawing a decidedly Gallic shrug: "oui, mais c'est dimanche…" yes, but it's Sunday) and that we had read that it was the best couscous in Paris.

When we left, it was approaching midnight and there was someone's carryout bag waiting for pickup at the bar (so it wasn't just us keeping him there) and monsieur left his buddies and probably an animated recounting of neighborhood gossip and recent football matches to bid us warmly goodbye.

You can tell it's Paris because before this trip is over, you're already planning what to do, when you come back – regardless of its effect on your

training.

Arnaz Mehta

Arnaz Mehta is a Canadian transplanted to New Zealand where she's embraced the community sport participation ethic with enthusiasm. In past Rowing Tales we have been blessed with getting stories of races from different participants (Oxford and Cambridge alumni in New York). Here's a local event, the Bennett Shield Regatta who put on a special quads event for families.

There were five entries - the Brake Family (Michael Brake rows for New Zealand in 2-); The Logans, The Erdmanns, The Quinlans and the Henrys. A handicapped start was invoked to great hilarity by the starter.

Family Racing

I've been a rowing parent for the past six years, dutifully cheering my three children on from the sidelines throughout their high school and club rowing seasons. After years of driving in car pools at ungodly pre-dawn hours and having family holidays and weekends hijacked by regattas and summer camps (not to mention all the fundraising and parent committee work that goes with it), I would have thought that I would be relieved to have some sleep-in time on weekends once the rowing season ebbed. But not so.

About one year ago, I decided to try rowing along with a group of other rowing moms, most of whom were at the tail end of their high school rowing parent careers. We all had different reasons for learning to row - some of us wanted to become fitter, some had aspirations or rowing an eight at the Head of the Yarra across the ditch in Melbourne, some had never had the experience of being part of a team or the sensation of breaking out in a sweat that wasn't brought on by the onset of menopause. We all knew how close rowing mates could get and I suppose we yearned for a little of that connection too. One thing I never expected myself was to have the chance to race in a boat with my children.

My daughter was a lightweight rower back when the category still existed, my middle son is soon to be rowing for a university in the US, and my

youngest is a high school rower, stroking in the puddles of his older siblings. I was not brought up in a rowing family (I didn't even know the sport existed where I grew up in Canada), but somehow by luck and circumstance we became a rowing family shortly after arriving in New Zealand, a country where the sport is a serious undertaking beginning at a high school level and has a long-standing history of national pride.

When the opportunity for a novel family race came up at a local regatta, I pitched the idea to my children of racing bow ball-to-bow ball with other families. I expected my proposition to be met with groans and eyeball rolling, but to my surprise they were totally up for it. Perhaps they could sense my excitement, which was palatable for days before the race (which just happened to fall on the weekend of my birthday).

We didn't have time to train together as my daughter arrived from out of town the night before the race and in my nervousness I briefly imagined the horror of single-handedly flipping the boat in mid-water, which thankfully never happened.

On the day of the race we collected our quad skiff from the boat shed and at the pontoon we raised our boat over our heads and rolled it gently into the water. I did my best to convince myself that it was just a normal day of training to quell my oncoming nerves. Not ever having rowed together, we thought it might be a good idea to practice some race starts….1/2 slide, 3/4, full….but after a couple of attempts we prudently decided to take it easy otherwise I would have lost the plot. I asked that we set a reasonable race pace that I could sustain over the 900+ meter course, which I knew to be a mere fraction of what my kids would normally achieve over the same stretch of water, and they graciously agreed. We gently rowed to the start line, wished the other families good luck, and suddenly my heart started beating furiously.

Next thing I knew the horn blew and we were off in a flutter of activity. We made it past the start and soon settled into our race pace and I foolishly began to marvel at our speed, which resulted in me losing focus and catching the first of several "crabs" during the race. My children stopped the boat while I untangled my blade from the water. I was so grateful that everyone remained calm and my son who was sitting behind me in bow seat offered me words of encouragement and praise though I knew that not all were deserved. During the race I felt like my blades were slicing through air (because sometimes they were) but undaunted throughout it all my children kept the

balance, power and drive. We might as well have been flying to the moon, or summiting Mount Everest!

The feeling of racing together in the same boat with my children was intoxicating. For the first time in my life, I felt like they were the ones who were supporting me to the finish rather than the other way around.

As we kept rowing my lungs started to burn and my hands were slipping off the handles and it seemed that the finish line would never come. Just when I thought my legs would give out, the horn blew once more and I collapsed with relief. I could hear the spectators cheering on the banks of the lake and when I turned to look, to my surprise a crowd of parents were waving, clapping and shouting from the finish line. Suddenly, my heart swelled and I felt like the luckiest mother in the world.

The feeling of rowing with my children was nothing short of exhilarating. I play that race over and over in my mind and each time I can’t help but smile. I hope that other rowing parents can one day feel the same joy of rowing with their children. It was the best birthday gift they could have ever given to me.

Jackie Quinlan Dorbeck

Jackie Quinlan-Dorbeck wrote about her learn to row journey in the 2019 Rowing Tales.

Our Family Race at the Bennett Shield

The Bennett Shield is a smallish rowing regatta held on Lake Pupuke in Auckland. This year a new event was the family quad race (four in a boat with two oars each). Having a large family we had enough rowers living in the country to enter.

Five of my children had rowed as they grew through their teenage years. We had watched them all grow into competent rowers, attended many regattas, heard their dreams, nursed them through anguish and delighted in their many successes. I envied the camaraderie and the athleticism in their boats.

Since March 2019 my dream of being a rower started to come to fruition for me when a group of Westlake High School parents entered into the learn to row programme at North Shore rowing club. Since then we have become a squad that rows each week, mainly in an 8, 4 or quad. We are called The Flying Swans. My rowing family have been extremely supportive with tips, feedback, maintenance on boats, praise and even coxing and coaching our squad. I have been to one regatta and that was at Lake Karapiro.

So when I heard that we could enter a race as a family, I was excited. I hadn’t rowed with any members of my family and here we had an opportunity to all be in the same boat.

Our boat crew started to arrive. Sheree, our squad’s coxswain, had said she would cox us. Judith and Oscar had a debate about who was the most qualified to be stroke of the boat. This discussion was based on medal wins!

Then they decided that, as I am rowing the most at the moment, I should be stroke. I didn’t think so, not with Maadi medal winners sitting watching

me. After a bit more debate about seats we eventually settled on reverse age order – Oscar stroke, Judith 3 seat, Harriet 2 and me in bow. I was happy there. No-one was observing me from behind.

The girls put their socks on and I sat there thinking about how I used to watch them getting into the boat when they were younger, and wish I could be with them. I was so delighted that I was sitting in a boat, for the first time ever, with my children. As we pushed off with the help of my husband and grandchildren. I let out a whoop and wave. I was so carried away that I missed Sheree's call to number off. It was exhilarating being out there and rowing with my family.

Race day dawns. Harriet had our uniforms ready. We were rowing in singlets from the law firm she works for – Anthony Harper. We took some photos, had a few laughs and then set our serious faces on. Time to get the boat out.

Our fellow competitors, the Erdmann's (Arnaz rows with me and she had organised her family boat) helped get the Kotuku boat out of the boathouse and onto dumps. I noticed Harriet and Judith checking their gear. They have been taught well! One of the officials directed us as we got onto the water. A competitive boat in our event, the Brake family, passed us. They all had Hawaiian shirts on. This frivolity was not enough to cover the fact that they have a family of excellent rowers, including one Olympian and medal winner at World rowing championships. We turned back and pulled up near other boats full of North Shore rowers waiting for events. There was a lot of smiling and "Yo Oscar" style comments were heard. Harriet recognised a friend in one of the boats. I think I must have been nervous as I was feeling quite numb.

Our race was called to line up. Judith and Oscar were telling Sheree what to do and then apologised to her. She was the coxswain. But "no" she said "I am happy that you do so as I have never raced before." The kids had been in many Pupuke races so were confident about how to get into place. I looked across the starting line and saw the Erdmanns next to us. They looked strong. The Brakes as well. My husband Michael, was in one of the umpire boats and was working at keeping that on track and away from other boats at the start.

We were told our order of starting. It was a handicap start. We were the only coxed quad and were to be in the first group to go.

All was looking good until the official told us that bow seat had to hold the starter ball that is attached to the start line. One of our crew is a vocal person,

so there was a bit of yelling about how stupid that idea was. As for me, I thought it was a REALLY stupid idea as I had to try to hold the ball and be ready to row away at a pace far more rapid than I have ever done before. “Mum” the kids shouted at me, “oars ready.” The whole start process was different from what I had done before and I wasn’t up with it. It seemed that the calls we had practiced in the Flying Swans boat were not the same as today.

I can’t remember the starter bleep, shout, gun! I have no idea. It was just a blur. What I do remember though, is this huge power surge through the boat as we launched into our start. And then at the second stroke, coming to an abrupt halt and oars being wrenched around the boat and out of our hands. The starter ball had gone along the boat, hit everyone on their heads and then got caught around Oscar’s footstretcher pulling us in mid power-surge to a complete stop.

The other boats all took off. Although the Brake’s boat apparently had a bad start as they were so busy laughing at us! What were they doing looking at us anyway? What happened to eyes straight ahead, you lot?

Very quickly we re-organised. Our vocal person screamed a number of obscenities (which I agreed with!) and we leapt out of the start. Oh Sheree, I do love your calm attitude. “Jackie” she called in a most delightful manner, “turn your oar around the right way”! In all the kerfuffle my oar had flung around. Right, we were away and we very soon settled into a nice rhythm. I know that I was shocked by the start though. Later Michael realised why we had encountered the ball problem. Because we were in a staggered start the other crews were holding the balls down. This meant that the ball was a lot lower than it usually is when everyone lets go at once, therefore allowing it to wrap around our crew.

I smiled as Sheree said that we had made a great start and that we were holding out well against the crew handicapped to start well behind us. I knew that this was very positive thoughts from Sheree, but highly ridiculous as they were just absolutely mowing us down.

By halfway through the race I was starting to lose energy. I was thinking this is so hard, what am I doing here? It is like childbirth. You do it more than once and don’t remember until the event that it is really hard work. By then it is too late – you are in the middle again and there is no going back. Sheree called “We are halfway there. You are doing really well. Let’s do another ten strong strokes.” Apart from those comments I remember nothing Sheree

called.

As Oscar said later, she was calling the whole way and if she was silent we would notice. It was just all a blur though. 300 metres from the finish Oscar called to Judith “Let’s pick it up Jude.” So we did. We were roaring along!

As we drew up to the banks at Sylvan Park where all the spectators were, we heard lots of shouting. This was terribly exciting. I could hear people yelling to Oscar. I tried to row the best I could. I didn’t want to stand out as the weak link in the boat! The finishing bleep went but I didn’t realise it was for us. I thought we still had a bit to go. Sheree called for us to finish.

We had done it. No crabs, no lay-down Sally. We had rowed all the way and done ourselves proud. Like childbirth, it ends and then there is a wonderful feeling of exhilaration that you have achieved. Even now I can feel pricks of emotion at my eyes. So proud!

How cool to be able to do this. I am looking forward to the day my family are all in the same country and we can get the rest of our rowers together to form an 8.

Tony Martin

Tony Martin is a self-confessed lifelong learner. He has written regular blog articles about his rowing journey and shared them on the Masters Rowing International Facebook group. We enjoy his courage and storytelling skill.

My First Regatta (December 2018)

Tomorrow is my first regatta. I'm standing in front of the mirror, wearing the Shellharbour City Rowing Club team uniform. Its racing Lycra. A yellow tank top and blue shorts. Figure hugging in all the worst places. It doesn't look pretty on a Masters Rower.

There’s the sad bulge of my stomach. I can hide it under regular clothing, but the Lycra reveals all. I can see my nipples clearly standing to attention. I never wear sleeveless shirts, so the tank top exposes lily white skin, like I'm wearing an invisible T-Shirt. And the less said about the whole crotch area the better. Please don't draw attention to it.

I walk out to the lounge room to ask Denise for a second opinion. She can't stop laughing long enough to give me an answer. I'm having second thoughts about this Regatta already.

I change into my regular clothes and drive over to the clubhouse. We are loading sculls onto a big trailer for the drive to Penrith tomorrow morning. I'm here to "help.” My Dad is a retired truck driver, but I can't even tie a knot. I have no clue how to secure or tow a trailer.

My father comes from a world of cars and mechanics, plumbing and power tools. To my teenage-self, it all seemed so mundane. I spent my days in the imaginative worlds of novels and computer games. The world of the mind. A world of drama and elegance. Everything my father tried to teach me seemed so... earthbound. Dirty, practical, tedious. I would not listen to him.

So now, when there is any kind of practical work to be done, I stand around like a useless lump. I'm reduced to the role of fetcher and holder, while proper adults do the work that needs to be done. Right now, I'm following James around like a clueless apprentice, trying to figure out how I might be useful.

James teaches welding at TAFE, and is studying Engineering at Uni. He is deft and sure with his hands. I am clumsy, gangly, uncertain. Why did I never listen to my Dad? He was (and still is) so patient and willing to teach me this stuff.

I can't detach the rigger off this scull. No matter how much I jiggle it. My coach Heather comes over to help. With a single, one-handed jab of her palm, it comes away cleanly in her hand. One smooth motion. That's what physical competence looks like.

We get the trailer loaded, and I head home for an early night. I'm in bed by 9pm, but my restless brain won't allow me to sleep. I'm too excited and anxious about my first ever race tomorrow. I toss and turn past 2am. Every time I think about rowing, I get a hot flush of adrenalin and have to kick off my blankets. When the alarm goes off, I'm exhausted and bleary.

Race 1 - Men's Novice Singles

The 'Reindeer Regatta" is held in December at the Sydney International Regatta Centre. It's the same place where they held the 2000 Olympic rowing events. It looks very swish, expensive and formal compared to our small club in Oak Flats.

Denise and her mother Suzanne are coming with me to support me. We leave home later than planned and get caught in a traffic jam. I'm tracking the time and Google Maps nervously because my race "Novice Single Sculls" is one of the first races of the day.

Lucky for me, my coach Heather and the boat trailer arrived at the venue early. I'm in constant contact with Heather over text message. They have already unloaded and prepped my scull at the water's edge. When I arrive, Denise drives me directly to the jetty. I step out of the car and, like a rock star, my crew is waiting with everything set up and ready to go. I head directly for the water and climb straight into my scull.

I'm full of embarrassed apologies for my late arrival, but Heather dismisses it immediately. Heather taught me to row about a year ago, and has been preparing me for racing over the last 3 months. Now Heather just wants

to get me in the right mental state for competition.

My teammates hand me my oars and help me get set up. Heather talks calmly. She doesn't want to overload me with last minute instructions, so she just goes over a couple of things we've been talking about for months. Then they push me out onto the water.

It's still 25 minutes until my race. So I have plenty of time to warm up as I row lightly towards the racing area. The Sydney Regatta Centre is purpose designed for this type of event. So athletes have a whole separate small lake to warm up on before the race. When I'm feeling good I head over towards the racing entry.

There's a sign attached to the front of my scull that says "N5." That means I'm in lane 5, race N. I spot a few other sculls with the letter N and pull up beside them. This is a Novice race. We are all either first-time racers (like me), or at least, first time racing in a single. One of the other competitors looks like a weightlifter, a couple of the others look like Uni students. It's comforting to see that most of them look even more terrified than me.

Today the Regatta Centre is hosting over 100 races involving hundreds of athletes. There is a race starting every 5 minutes on a single 9 lane racetrack. Achieving this requires a remarkable logistical operation.

There's a Race Official standing on a hill near the racing entry. She is waving rowers through, one at a time. Athletes who turn up early are asked to pull aside and wait, leaving room for latecomers to push through.

Once we are signalled through, we pass under a footbridge, where another race official, this time in a motor boat, checks us off on his iPad and directs us up the side of the racetrack. The next 3 races are preparing in this area. So I row far enough back to line up well behind the athletes that are starting 5 minutes ahead of us (race M).

After lots of shuffling, I think I'm in the right lane. I'm N5. Ahead of me is M5. To my left is N6 and to my right, N4. I'm where I should be. I can breathe now. But there's no time to relax. A third official in a motor boat putters up beside us and tells us to slowly move up towards the start line. I'm shaking from nerves.

The Race Official with the hardest job in the entire place is the guy who talks to us now over loudspeaker. This guy has less than 4 minutes to arrange 6 nervous rookies into a straight line at the starting line. On moving water. He executes this near impossible task with extraordinary skill and authority.

"4, 5 tap forward, 2,6 check, 6 check hard, 5 tap forward, 4 check, 5

check."

I stop trying to track where the start line is. I am simply a remote drone, awaiting the next instruction from my controller. When he finally stops talking, I look to my left. And see that we are all lined up perfectly along the starting line.

"Attention." beeeeeep. I'm racing.

To explain what I'm thinking, and how I am feeling, at this moment. First I have to explain what I'm normally thinking about when I am training back home on Lake Illawarra.

When I'm training, my stream of consciousness might look something like this:

"Fast hands away, don't rush the slide, pivot at the hip, don't slouch, control the slide, chest proud, time the catch, check my Strokecoach, don't bury the oars deep, shoulders relaxed, loosey goosey, hands relaxed, engage the core, driiiive, spaghetti arms, fingers-not-wrists, control the slide."

I don't think all those thoughts on every stroke. Or even on every practice session. But I'm always consciously working on my body mechanics like this to try to improve my rowing efficiency.

Now, as I'm racing, all I can think is:

"I'm racing! I'm racing! OhMyGodOhMyGodOhMyGod!"

That is the entire contents of my brain at this moment.

I feel like I'm drugged. Squinting through a fog of adrenalin, searching for any semblance of rational thought.

So I reach for my security blanket. The Strokecoach. It's an expensive GPS designed specifically for rowing. It tracks and records my every stroke. It displays my speed, stroke rate, and distance rowed.

I was a nerdy kid growing up. I didn't play much sport. And certainly nothing resembling athletics or racing. The language and concepts of racing are foreign and new to me. But the Strokecoach is something I understand. Numbers, Graphs. Science. This is my domain. This is my comfort zone.

I have a race plan. A plan I've been practicing for months. Push hard for the first 250 metres, settle into a nice loping stroke for the middle 500 meters. Sprint again for the last 250 meters. It's a comforting plan. A scientific plan. In Sports Science I trust.

I look down at my Strokecoach to check my speed. And my stomach drops. Its stuck in a menu!

In all the frantic excitement of the start line, I left the Strokecoach sitting

in menu mode. I forgot to start it! I can't see my speed, or stroke rate, or how much distance I've covered. All I can see is a menu, and the words:

"Start Workout? Y/N."

I'm flying blind.

I haven't rowed without the Strokecoach for months. And I've never practiced for a race without it.

In a panic, I consider how I might let go of an oar long enough to reset the Strokecoach. But that is madness. Like trying to fly a plane with only one wing. I have no choice but to fly blind the entire race.

I've got no idea how far I've rowed. Or how far is left to row. The Strokecoach always tells me that!

Think. Think. Work brain, start working, I need you. OK OK. Someone told me there are distance markers on course. But where are they? What do they even look like?

At this point, I should probably look around. But I CANNOT do it. I'm suffering from extreme, adrenalin fuelled tunnel-vision. All I can see is the lane markers behind me. Turning my gaze left or right feels like an impossible task. Row! Row! Row! Go! Go! Go!

My brain is on a hamster wheel. I can't look left or right. I can't consider my predicament. All my brain can do is scurry forward as fast as its tiny hamster legs can carry it. It is thrilling and instinctive. It is in no way rational or considered.

The good news is that I'm keeping the boat straight, rowing straight down the middle of my lane. I normally row on a big open lake, no obstacles. I've never rowed with lane ropes before. The very small capacity my hamster brain has available is dedicated to keeping the boat straight.

The bad news is that I still have no idea how far I've rowed, or how far I have left to row. No distance. No time. No plan.

Again I consider looking around for signs. But for my one-track-mind, this seems impossible. I've got no idea what the distance markers look like. And even if I stared directly at one, I'm not sure my hamster rain would even be able to read it.

I check the Strokecoach again:

"Start Workout? Y/N."

Now I hear a crowd. There’s a crowd near the finish line! That’s a clue! But the crowd sounds muted and distant. Does that mean the crowd is still a long way off? Or does my tunnel-vision also come with tunnel-hearing?

Through an act of sheer, heroic, willpower, I command my eyes to turn. I risk a quick glance to my left to look for the crowd. But all my addled brain registers is a blur. I’m not trying that again. Best to stick to what I know. Look down the lane and row row row!

Eventually I hear a horn. Heather has warned me: "When you hear the horn, don't stop rowing, because that horn could be for another competitor. You don't want to stop rowing and then realise that you've stopped short of the finish line." So I keep rowing. I hear a second horn. I keep rowing until I'm almost beached on the far bank.

Eventually I comprehend that the lane ropes have ended. I've gone past the finish line.

I've survived the race.

In fact, I think I enjoyed it. Can what I just endured truly be described as "fun"?

Post Race

It turns out I placed 2nd. With a time of 4:05. I'm all alone in 2nd place. 1st place finished 17 seconds ahead of me. And I finished 22 seconds ahead of 3rd place.

My "race plan" is in tatters. I rowed the entire race on muscle memory alone. 4:05 is not my personal best. But close enough to it. Given the lane ropes, the anxiety, and the adrenalin fog, I'm happy with a time close to my PB. All my practice has paid off. When I lost the plot and started rowing on instinct, my muscle memory saw me through.

The Bad

- I had no idea how much distance was left in the race, so I did not sprint at the end. I didn't "leave it all out on the field."
- I had secretly hoped to break the 4:00 minute barrier for the first time in this race. Oh well.

The Good

- I rowed the entire race within my limits and under control. That usually results in efficient rowing and fast times. That’s how it played out today.
- Given this was my first attempt at racing, and my first time rowing in a

lane, things might easily have gone much worse. Rowing close to my PB is an achievement.

Men's Masters Double Scull

I don't have any time to waste. My next race is in 40 minutes time. I row under the footbridge, back to the warm-up lake, around the island and back to the jetty. My teammates are waiting there to congratulate me and help me with my boat. They watched the race and cheered me on at the finish line, then walked back across the island to meet me here at the jetty.

I'm happy with my race. Heather is happy that I'm happy. I'm happy that Heather is happy. Everybody is happy.

My memory is blurred here. I'm still drugged by a massive overdose of adrenalin. I'm thinking in a fog. Someone takes my oars, I get out of the boat. People are talking. Faces that I recognise. I walk somewhere. I'm glad Heather is here to lead me around because I can't think.

My teammates carry our double scull down to the water. I sit in the double. James sits in the double. Someone hands me my oars. Do I need to pee? I think I need to pee. I should have used the bathroom. There’s no time for that now. We push off on to the water, and I'm rowing again towards the starting area.

Everything still feels distant and muted. That entire process of docking and switching boats reminded me of waking up in hospital after surgery. I don't understand what is going on. But I placidly accept everything that is happening, because nice people are talking in friendly voices. Heather is like an intensive-care nurse. Except instead of healing me, she straps me onto an unstable raft and pushes me into the deep. So less like a nurse and more like a Viking funeral priest.

The warm up row is good for me. The slow, rhythmic exercise brings my adrenalin back under control. My brain starts working again. Tony-brain, not hamster brain.

I'm sitting behind James. James and I started rowing together on Saturdays a couple of months ago. So I've spent hours on the water, staring at James's back. I'm more familiar with James's back than I am with his face.

James has the kind of torso that Lycra tank tops were designed for. He is a competitive swimmer. His back is impossibly wide. When he rolls his shoulders, muscles writhe and coil across his back. It’s a back that can blot out the sun. James is relaxed, sly humoured and charismatic. He is A Man in

all the ways I very much am not. It’s impossible not to like him.

But James is also a teacher and an engineer. That’s much more in my comfort zone. It’s a bridge by which I can connect to James. So when Heather matched us up as a potential racing pair, I had something to talk about. James also seems genuinely impressed with my improving 1,000m times in the single. This makes me very happy.

We pass under the foot bridge and line up for our race. This is a Masters (old people) event. There are 3 Men’s Masters Doubles races today. Our team mates, John and Howard, are lined up a couple of rows back, in the older age bracket race.

I am 44 years old, James is 33. That makes us one of the youngest crews in this race. So we have to give up a 7 second handicap (head start) to the oldest crews in our race. Theoretically, an “older rower” means a "weaker, slower rower.” I'm sure that’s true at the elite level. But at my level of (in)experience, "older rower" often means “tough, wiry, glass-chewing bastards with decades of experience and ruthlessly efficient technique.” It feels unfair to give those guys a head start.

The race official gets us lined up on starting line.

"Attention." Beeeeeep.

Two sculls (the oldest crews) take off. The race official starts counting.

1.
2.
3.
4.

On 4, two more sculls take off.

We are still sitting on the start line.

It’s so quiet. The silence feels strange and endless.

5.
6.
7.

We explode into action, along with the other team who is also starting on 7. We are the two youngest crews, and last to launch.

This race feels totally different from my singles race. James and I need to

move together, in sync. This race will be as much about how well we can coordinate our movements, as it is about individual skill or power. The mental work is also split between us. James is in the "stroke" seat, ahead of me. It is his job to set the rate and rhythm of our rowing. I'm in the "bow" seat behind James. My job is to steer the scull, and to try to match James's movements as he speeds up and slows down.

Our launch is bumpy. James, a veteran swimming competitor, anticipates the "7" and tries to time his launch as the race official says "7." I am caught flat-footed. Waiting to hear the "7" before I act. The result is that James takes off before I do. I try to catch up and the scull lurches. But we've been practicing together for 2 months. So we have also practiced plenty of dodgy starts. We collect ourselves well, and by the 3rd stroke we've stabilised, and we are moving (roughly) together. It's ugly, but we have staved off disaster and made the best of it.

The big challenge for me in this race is the steering. This scull has a rudder. A rudder I can (theoretically) control with my foot. The trouble is that I've only steered a scull this way twice before (the last two practices before the regatta). I am not comfortable with the steering. I don't know where to put my foot to keep us heading straight ahead, and I'm not familiar with the delay between my turning the rudder and the boat turning.

The end result is that our scull weaves a snaky path down the track. I manage to avoid hitting the buoys on the side of our lane. But we weave back and forth for the entire race as I overcorrect left and right.

James has the Strokecoach. He calls out the change of pace at 250 meters. Then when we reach 750 meters James shouts. "Come on. Puuush" as we sprint for the finish.

More background: When I first started rowing, I was worried about falling in the water and losing my expensive prescription sun glasses. So I wear contacts when I'm rowing, and a cheap pair of plastic sunglasses that I bought for $20 at a roadside petrol station 15 years ago.

As we start sprinting, the arm of my sunglasses detaches, and my sunnies fall down crooked on my nose. It's not a big deal. But I lose concentration for just a second, and next thing I know our oars are hitting the lane rope buoys. I steer us back toward the centre of the lane. James takes it in stride. Once again, I'm relieved to escape potential disaster so lightly.

James shouts "Dig deep." I'm pushing as hard as my tired legs will take me now. I am motivated by James's shouts, but I don't know how he still has the

breath to talk. James tells me later that his shouts are carefully timed to when he has the oxygen.

We cross the finish line, far behind most of the other teams. But it felt like a good effort.

So we rowed the 1000 meters in 3:52 (when you subtract our 7 second handicap). I don't have any experience with doubles rowing times, so I don't know how much faster we should be in a double. But neither James nor I can row under 4:00 in a single, so it feels like a win to me.

The Bad

- We finished a long way behind the pack. The other scull with the same combined age/handicap as us finished 20 seconds faster. Even without the handicaps, the older crews would have beaten us in a straight up race.
- I was very wobbly with the steering.

The Good

- That would have been the first race of the day for most of those men, whereas I was racing again for the second time in 40 minutes. Not a bad effort.
- For me and James, it’s our first race as a pair. We didn't have any disasters, and we recovered well from some minor mishaps through the race.
- I'm still alive, with dignity intact.

Rest Stop

After 2 races in 40 minutes, I now have 7 hours until I row again. The rest of the day falls into a steady routine.

Whoever is competing next, we carry their scull down to the water and send them off. We walk to the finish line to cheer them on, then return to the jetty to help them back out again.

My Mum and Dad have travelled from Blackheath to support me. So along with Denise (my wife) and Suzanne (my Mother in-law), I probably have the largest fan club of any athlete here today. The heat is stifling, and there is no breeze in the grandstand. I'm impressed and grateful that my family chose to hang around for the full day. Denise has heard so many stories about Heather and the rest of the team, I enjoy the opportunity to introduce Denise to them.

Sometime around 2pm, the heady cocktail of adrenalin and endorphins that I've been riding all day wears off. At first it is a blessed relief. I'm finally able

to think and talk normally, without a constant fog clouding my synapses. But very soon after, the exhaustion hits. My poor night's sleep, all the exercise, the emotions, it all catches up to me, and I hit a brick wall. One minute I'm chatting, the next I'm poleaxed. I need to find a place to lie down.

Earlier in the day I found a shady spot in the athletes' area with artificial grass. It's a nice spot to stretch my hamstrings after a race. I zombie-stumble over there now. I lie down on the ground, set my phone alarm, and go to sleep.

This begs the question: Why was I such a delicate sleeper last night? Now I can sleep like a dead man while lying on the hard ground, with crowds of teenagers stepping over my corpse and a loud speaker blaring constant rowing commentary into my ears. I've heard accounts of soldiers sleeping before combat. I thought that meant they were Stone Cold Badass. But maybe they were just Very Fucking Tired.

I wake up feeling much better.

Men's Masters Quad Scull

My third and final race is at 5:00pm. A Men's Quad Scull with James, John and Howard.

You've met John already, in my previous rowing Diary. He was a Taekwondo instructor before he started rowing. He is light, shorter than me, and has the kind of lean, flexible strength and coordination that I associate with life-long martial artists.

Howard is one of those tough old bastards I mentioned earlier. It feels good to have one on our team for a change. Howard has been rowing since he was young, it is in his bones.

John is some kind of manager/accountant at Wollongong University. He is smart and personable. I enjoy drawing John into long talks about body mechanics, rowing technique, and injury prevention. Howard works at the Steelworks. He has a blunt, straight-forward manner. Howards advice for injury prevention: "harden up." His opinion on training techniques: "less chatting, more rowing."

John and Howard are Tact and Straight-Talk. Finesse and Blunt-force. Scalpel and Hammer. They both represent something essential about rowing to me. They've been rowing together for years, and have an easy relaxed camaraderie, despite their opposing personalities.

As a crew, we have one small obstacle to overcome. We haven't trained

together. At all. We've never all four of us sat in the same boat together. It’s difficult to find time to train for 3 or 4 different racing combinations. We also had issues with injuries. John and Howard are both incredibly fit for their ages, but they've both been injured in the lead up to this regatta.

It’s a big deal. The first row with a new crew is often a complete write-off, even in training. You need to spend time on the water to get comfortable with each other. The good news is that John and Howard are experienced rowers and can adapt well on the fly. Also, John and Howard are doing the difficult jobs in the boat.

John is in the stroke seat. He sets the pace and rhythm. When rowing on his own, John is capable of rowing at a very high stroke-rate. But today he keeps the rating slower, so that James and I can keep up. As the tallest member of the crew, I would normally be in the stroke seat if we were an experienced crew. But John and Howard have decades of racing experience, so John sits in stroke, setting the pace, while Howard sits in bow, steering the shell.

James and I have the easy job. We are in the middle 2 seats. We don't have to set the pace, or steer. We are just muscle. That’s the first and only time you'll hear me described that way.

We try our best to "practice" on the way to the starting line. We stop once and try a race start. Our race training completed, we now head for the race area.

The masters doubles race I rowed with James had 3 races over 3 age divisions. This masters quad race has only a single race with crews of all ages. So even though the average age of our crew has gone up, we are conceding an even bigger head start to most of our competition.

We are giving up a 15 second handicap. No doubt to a crew of supernaturally strong, hundred-year-old vampires. (Please ignore the hypocrisy when my motley crew of injury-ridden old codgers gets beaten by a crew of invincible 25-year-old Olympians doped up on their own hormones).

Waiting at the start line for 15 seconds feels like an eternity. I wonder if those first crews might finish the race before we're even allowed to launch. On 15, they unleash the hounds, and we surge in chase of our prey.

I must be getting more comfortable with racing already. Because I now have enough excess brain capacity to look around. I see gigantic signs telling me how far we've rowed. Signs the size of a car, with huge, clear numerals. It

seems impossible that I didn't see them in my first race.

With hindsight, I understand the source of my problem. I went into that first race with a plan. And when something went wrong with my plan, my adrenalin-soaked brain could not adapt. Now that I've raced a couple of times I feel better able to roll with the punches.

I've never rowed at "race speed" in a quad before. We are really flying across the water. It’s thrilling stuff. The youngest team in the race, Glebe, gave up a 22 second handicap. And they come surging past us at an extraordinary pace.

We manage to catch and overtake 3 of the older teams before they reach the finish line. Putting us in 4th place. We are all very pleased with ourselves, given that we never practiced together. It’s a great way to finish off the day.

We ended up completing the race in 3:35, once you subtract our handicap. Given that I've never knowingly covered 1000 meters in less than 4:00 minutes, that seems blindingly fast. But the winning team did it in 3:07. So clearly quad racing is a whole new world that I can look forward to.

We catch our breath, and then row back to the jetty, where our team has started to disassemble and load the boats back onto the trailer for the trip home. I try taking a rigger off our quad. I give the rig a one-handed, open-palm jab. It comes away smoothly in my hand.

Oh yeah. I'm a rower now.

Alison Barr

Alison Barr now lives in Italy and like many of us, she experienced a lot during her first single sculls race.

First Race Fear

My first race in a single was raced on the River Irwell a tributary of the Mersey in Northwest England.

I got in my boat and immediately thought “What the hecky is going on?” as I was quickly swept into the bank trees.

It dawned on me that it was the river current, I had only ever rowed on a lake!

Then on the way to the start, I saw a screaming jogger on the bank being taken down to the ground and attacked by a big dog!

During the race I looked around behind me, and saw something quite big and white in the water. I tried to make an evasive maneuver but couldn't and ended up with my bow and boat contained in an entire fireplace surround!

As I was going back in towards the dock afterwards a gang of kids started throwing stones at me and my boat.

I won't forget that race in a hurry!

Tony Brook

Tony Brook was a personal friend and also coached by the late, great Harry Mahon. He knew Harry for 27 years from 1974 on and saw him develop from a confused shy character completely lacking in confidence right through to 2001 when he was at the peak of his powers.

Tony won a World Championship gold medal in the New Zealand eight in 1982. He now lives in London.

The Finest and Fastest Eight

The 1993 Cambridge University Boat Club eight was superb and broke the record to the mile post and Hammersmith with two guys who were effectively novices (Will Mason and Sinclair Gore) in stroke and 7. They rowed the “Harry style” - deceptively long in the water with such a beautiful pick up off the feet and an accelerated smooth drive. It was beautiful rowing and they won by lengths over Oxford who had Pinsent and Robertson (both Olympians) on board.

I remember (as I helped Harry coach this crew) that the Americans Jon Bernstein and Malcolm Baker were critical in 5 and 6. Harry built the crew around these two, it was remarkable to see this style and method of picking up one or two individuals in an eight and moulding them and then bringing in others around them. This approach was quite remarkable and became his hallmark as it was incredibly effective. I have never seen anyone do this as well as Harry, this truly set him apart, this was how he progressed his crews. I understood this and was privileged to watch as he really started to perfect the technique with Cambridge and the 1993 crew.

It was so good to see Harry lift a dispirited CUBC to Olympic level as they performed so well that year.

In 1994 CUBC had two German world champions in 8 and 7 and they were lightening quick.

I will tell you an amazing story about this crew, the stroke Streppelhoff

threw his blade aside one outing at Putney Bridge after a torrent of Harry's “No, no, no, no, no.” He said "I can't do what you want. I won't do what you ask because I row the German way and it made me a world champion.”

All went deathly quiet on the Thames that fateful morning...I was driving the launch with Harry coaching and the entire crew lowered their heads with only the defiant stroke man looking wildly in Harry's direction and we all waited for Harry to respond.

"Take me in closer to Thorsten, Tony." he said.

I manoeuvred the nose of the coaching launch with Harry sitting poised to within inches of a very disgruntled and pissed-off world champion oarsman. It was so dramatic I simply could not look Thorsten in the eye. No one, I mean no one in the world of rowing had ever spoken to Harry Mahon like that before as far as I knew.

We all expected a sharp retort but instead Harry very quietly and calmly said

"Thorsten, you do row the German way and so does Peter sitting behind you and yes you rowed this way and yes you won the world championships but for this eight to go truly fast I need you to row the Cambridge way. You see the other six cannot row the way you do, I want you to change and I believe you can change. And if you can change, I think you will be a better oarsman but more importantly you will make this crew go very fast. Can I take you into the London Rowing Club tank and show you what I want?"

"Yes." whispered the German, "Take it in." shouted Harry, "Outing cancelled, stroke and I are going into the tank.”

Harry, Thorsten and I walked round to London Rowing Club. I asked both Harry and Thorsten if I could come in, I didn't plan to miss this next chapter unfolding. They both said OK. So we three went into the tank room and Harry explained and manipulated and drilled and explained and manipulated some more for two solid hours.

After all this a calm relaxed Thorsten said “OK, Harry I'll give it a go. I now see clearly what you want.”

I just wish I'd taken in the video camera because it was the most incredible transformation I had ever witnessed in my life. A proud German world champion fundamentally changed how he rowed that day and Peter, his 7 man changed immediately as well during the next couple of outings.

The crew went immediately lengths faster and Harry always told me a few days before he died that this was the finest and fastest eight he had ever

coached.

Desmond Brown

Desmond Brown is a proud Ulsterman and rows at City of Derry Boating Club in Northern Ireland, UK.

We Were Big Lads

When I was a lad we didn't get beaten much when we were racing.

I think we were beaten only by a head-on collision with a double scull and getting flipped through the air into very cold water.

Sliding onto their stern to keep my torso out of the water, I thought my legs had stopped working. I couldn't feel anything.

Then our coach came up in the boat to rescue us. And while climbing into launch I found the foot stretcher and shoes still on my feet, locked together, ripped clean out of the boat!

That's why my legs weren't working.

We were big lads going at speed.

Joel Oestreich

Joel Oestreich learned to row in the UK as a graduate student. He rowed out of the Thompson Rowing Center in Washington, DC for some year and then joined Vesper when he moved to Philadelphia, PA, USA.

Are You Tired?

I teach Political Science at Drexel University, in Philadelphia.

One time I was just getting started in my 1x when another boat crossed the river in the wrong place, coming out of nowhere; it hit me and I flipped.

When I stuck my head out of the water I saw a womens pair, wearing Drexel unis.

All I could think to do was shout “Neither of you will ever pass a Political Science class again!”

One of the women came by my office a few days later, looking terrified; it turned out she was a PoliSci major. I promised her I was just kidding. (She turned out to be one of my favorite students.)

So many Rowing Tales relate to disasters which end up in a capsize. I've ended up in the water myself many times yet I now know that there are many, many ways to do this as this collection shows.

The contributors' names are beside their anecdote.

Flipping the Boat

Irene Allen

We flipped a 4+ while stationary. Came up to front stops with blades on water.

Cox called square & bury.

One rower stayed flat, said he felt like he was holding up the boat.

Cox said "It's ok, square & bury." Apparently he HAD been holding up the boat, as we slowly flipped.

Tom Copeland

I was steering a straight four when stroke's blade popped out of his gate. Two caught a crab in surprise. It was January in Shrewsbury, UK. We were about 10 kilometers from the boat house.

Andrew Blit

Having been (foolishly, hubristically) elected Captain of my local Club, Sudbury, I decided my first entrance in front of the 08.30 am hoards would be in a 2+ (name of Animal Farm, we had a 4+ called 1984, both Carbocraft designs of a certain vintage).

As we paddled back to the admiring crowds, we got too close to the abutment of the bridge close at hand and, lacking stability and skill, rolled in VERY slowly.

You can wade out from there if you don't mind knee deep mud.

That was in 1996 and I still blush.

The Argument

Kevin moves his single shell into the boathouse, and Ross, who considers himself emotionally in charge of who racks which boat where, takes exception.

He says he doesn't know whose boat it is, so he makes some enquiries and discovers that it is Kevin’s.

Ross rings the club secretary to lodge a complaint about the boat being moved in without his say-so.

But she doesn't have Kevin's phone number. She suggests he ask Charles, the coach, who rows with Kevin.

Charles, who knows that Kevin has moved his boat onto the rack and has approved the boat rack allocation, does not consider it any of Ross’s business interfering with rack allocations.

So, he decides to play a trick on Ross.

Charles pretends to play along with Ross and sends a text message to Ross with “Kevin's phone number” in the message.

Except, of course, it isn’t actually Kevin’s number.

Ross calls the number and asks for Kevin.

The person who answers the phone says he is the janitor and has a strong Chinese accent and does not speak much English. He does not know who Kevin is.

The number is for the local topless bar.

Ross is furious.

The author of this story requested that all names be removed to protect the “innocent.” I will leave it up to you to decide whether this was warranted.

When Oarlocks Were Bronze

Way back when I was rowing at Imperial College Rowing Club on the Tideway, I took out a single scull.

This was in the days when gates (oarlocks) were made of bronze and were secured by a conical nut that fitted into a forked end.

I got almost to Barnes Bridge (4 miles upriver) before I noticed that since closing the gate on my stroke-side (okay, PORT, then!), one side of the bronze forks had snapped off, due to metal fatigue!

So that gate was not locked and the scull could jump out at any moment.

I nursed the boat carefully back to Putney and as the tide was running out, I passed the club and had to turn around to get to the bank heading upriver.

As I started the turning manoeuvre, I completely forgot about the broken gate, put my bow-side scull squared in the water (incidentally rotating the spoon 180 degrees - as we were taught in those days) and backed down one stroke.

Needless to say, the stroke-side scull jumped out of the gate and the boat flipped over, right outside London Rowing Club, where a couple of dozen people watched in amusement.

The funny thing was that the boat seemed to take forever to turn over, and I had time to think, "What a bloody silly thing to do!" before I found myself submerged.

Fortunately, one of the kindly LRC people immediately jumped into a launch and came out, picked me up and pulled my boat to the bank, before heading off downstream to collect my oar, which was almost at Putney

Bridge, some 500 meters away.

I got ashore trying my best to explain the cause of my predicament, while the spectators awarded me points for execution and style: 5.7, 5.9, 5.8, 5.7...

Liz Wray

Liz Wray is a longstanding rowing innovator. She started the gossip website “The Tideway Slug” while rowing at Twickenham Rowing Club in London. The site ran for over ten years.

There is a lively rivalry between clubs in Putney and those further up the River Thames. Ressies is slang for the accommodation above London Rowing Club where the chief coach and resident athletes lived.

How The Tideway Slug Started

For the start of Tideway Slug, you have to go back to the late 1990s, when the Twickenham Underground website first came on-line.

I was bored at work and needed something to do, so I decided to teach myself HTML, as coding raw HTML in notepad looked passably like I was working (whereas doing my Italian homework wasn’t quite cutting it).

Having decided to set up a website I then needed something to write about, and rowing seemed a suitable topic as it was taking up so much of my free time. This was still the early days of the web and anything online about rowing was very dry - it was “here's how to find our clubhouse” and “this is a list of our committee members.”

I started writing about the humorous side of rowing because when you're training ten times a week, come Sunday you're all knackered and it all gets a bit silly.

After a few months of posting the occasional update about TwRC members falling in the river or trailering miles to regattas while leaving the riggers at home, we became aware that a number the people from the clubs at Putney were also reading the site. The content was tongue in cheek and just taking the piss out of ourselves, but the thing about rowing is that anyone who’s done it has seen exactly the same sort of incidents happening at their own club, so it’s all very relatable.

One evening I was out for a meal with a couple of friends – Mike Owen,

who was rowing at London Rowing Club (in Putney) and my Mary-Ann Millar who rowed with me at Twickenham. The conversation turned to how we could leverage the interest and support the for more lighthearted entertainment for the wider rowing community.

Mike suggested starting a page that would cover the going-ons at Putney (and there was lot of good gossip to pick from).

Back at my flat, and with the help of a couple of bottles of wine, we pondered a suitable name for the page. In those days the Tideway community would refer to those on the non-tidal Thames, as “up-river inbreds,” so it needed to be something equally offensive…. We settled on “Trawl the depths of the Lower Thames with the Tideway Slug.”

Next on the list was an image to illustrate the page with – a map of the Tideway would make a great slime trail, but we needed a slug… This was easier said than done, as there wasn’t much use of images in the early days of the internet – however we rose to the challenge and eventually found one on an S&M site (once the high heel standing on it had been cropped off, we were ready to go).

The first edition we included three articles, all of which were provided by Mike “Are you sure that these won't be easily tied back to you, that it's not going to be obvious who the source is??”

“No, no, it will be fine, it'll be fine.” he reassured me, so I hit upload.

The Underground website, was getting about maybe 20 hits a week at that time, which was not bad in those days before most people had a dial-in internet account. The next day, there was a sudden spike in traffic. Mike had been going round to everyone and saying, “Have you seen this? Have you seen this?”

And then I get a strangled phone call from him. “Take it down, take it down!” - his girlfriend (now his wife) was mortified that we’d included the story out about her climbing into the ressies London through the window.

But it worked and that was the start of the Tideway Slug.

Elliza McGrand

Elliza McGrand rows in Portland, Oregon, USA. She has rowed in many places and brings her experiences to this delightfully descriptive Rowing Tale. Rowers talk in code much of the time and so I've left her piece as she wrote it with the decoding instructions here, before the start line.

She references HOTC - Head of the Charles, the most famous North American long distance rowing race.

Bridge to Bridge

This morning I got in my first 'Bridge to Bridge' piece of the season. The 'B2B' is our club's home version of a head piece and, depending on your steering, is somewhere between 5000-5300 meters. You have to row the entire thing (plus around 500m) to get to the start and it functions as a kind of goal piece, the 'you've arrived' of workouts in a single coming in at around about 12,500m.

The B2B... it starts at a railroad bridge upriver with two arches, and finishes at the Sellwood Bridge, right before Oaks Park (home of our boathouse).

If we had Friday night drag race spots in rowing, this would be it. The distances, weird turns (including one that spills into a bay and can be done properly, cheated, or gone laughably wide; or another that does a 45 degree turn around Elk Rock Island, then another 45 around the corner - thus making basically a square), bridges, and of course famous disaster spots like docks that stick out and misplaced buoys with a rainbow of paint scrapes.

I often imagine that the HOTC course started like this — a meeting spot for local clubs (especially the scullers in their singles) to take each other on in a drag race of sorts.

The sense of place. Rowing has always (for me anyway) been so imbued with the setting. DC is the slightly seedy twists and sand flats of the lukewarm Anacostia and Capital RC's urban fence enclosure of a club.

Asheville RC is the lake bizarrely warmed by spill-off from a heating plant that's both surrounded by wildlife like herons and cranes, but contains fish in forms no one wants to examine too closely; it's also a long dock with a funky gap that I fell into my first day there, only to find a row of hotel toiletries arranged along the side my second day!

Or Spuyten Duyvil, in Manhattan, where Columbia and Barnard row. It's a gorgeous green space with trees, briskly moving water, stretches of open sky at the top; the most refreshing thing you can imagine after miles of concrete and tall, dirty brick buildings. Then there's the contrast of the archaic, red and brown gingerbread of the Boathouses for Harvard and Radcliffe, the hilariously badly planned old concrete modernist box boathouse at MIT, all three on the banks of the melancholy, only partly tamed, weed-ridden old man Charles... Or there's the elegant Vermont largesse of Hosmer Pond, where Craftsbury maintains the feel of old New England summer camps combined with Vermont crunch.

In Baltimore we rowed in a choppy bay, seemingly always in the mist and dark. Spurts and bobbles of high school rowers would suddenly pop out of the mist - usually prefaced by the calls of coxswains - and disappear as quickly as they entered. In Oakland, Lake Merritt was an odd dichotomy; the "lake" was an oversized pond made in the fashion of late 18th century estates. On one side was a stable of latrines, on the other a food stand. We rowed in the mornings when neither venue was busy, but during regattas or busy times one bounced between a cloud of fried food and the earthly result of fried food. But in the morning… the skyline of Oakland, the classic greenspace around the lake, the blue and silver water.

My current boathouse is in one of the most beautiful places on earth to me - a green swath full of huge, gnarled old oak trees (alone and in groves) holding a historic old amusement park and skating rink.

We exist in a different dimension in our Boathouses, lakes, club courses, stretches of river banks; our eagles, cranes, sea lions, otters, "whitefish," the odorous spill from sewage that is ugly, but our ugly.

There is a city, or town — and then the city or town the rowers live in.

Penny Johnstone

Military Maneuvers at the Worlds

At the 1987 World Rowing Championships, I was a spare for the US team. I was given a single scull to row that the team had rented locally to practice and race in (there is a spares race).

On day 2 I took the boat out and on my second trip down the course a security launch, filled with men in military uniforms, started following me.

I had finished my outing and was sculling off the course towards the boating area when they flagged me to stop and claimed I had stolen the boat!

They told me to go back to the dock but I refused, telling them I wouldn't touch land until a representative from Team USA was found to clear it all up (I had visions of being hauled off to jail or something).

I recall holding water 30 feet away from the dock for about 20-30 minutes in a face-off with that military/security boat.

Eventually it came out that the local club had 'rented' the boat to 2 different teams by mistake!

That year the Worlds was in Denmark outside of Copenhagen so it was probably the Danish version of the Coast Guard or some such outfit. I seem to recall guns being on board. It was definitely a military style pontoon boat.

Lynne Charge

Lynne Charge rows in Victoria, Australia. Olympians are a dime a dozen there!

She was drawn into the sport after her daughters and then her husband took up rowing. Starting as a boat race official at regattas, she progressed to Regatta Secretary all the while finessing her boat skills. She also assists with Rowing Australia and the FISA World Cup regattas with the production team. Her career highlight was winning a medal at the Torino World Masters Games.

Push Me; Pull You

Two Olympians got out of their double scull. Took out the oars and picked up the boat overhead.

They went to walk away. Couldn’t move.

They were standing with their backs to each other.

Realized the problem so they both turned. Now they were facing each other.

Still with the boat overhead. Collapsed into laughter.

Them and us bystanders.

Oliver Zeidler

Oliver Zeidler is the German single sculler. He first started sculling in 2016 and by 2019 was the world champion.

Phenomenal Switch

When I started rowing, I first started only with indoor rowing. I began to swim a few times a week alongside the erg training, and I first didn't tell anyone about my Dad coaching me either.

It was just for fun. Just my thing next to my job and my studies. And when I won the German Championships that day my friends realised what I was doing.

And when I told them that I will start with rowing they asked “So really on the water in the boat?” and I replied, “Yeah, first of all, I want to learn it.”

This is crazy.

And then I decided I want to go to the Olympics one day just because I didn't make it to the Olympics in swimming.

And first they thought that I'm crazy because this is something you normally don't do within a few years, especially against people who are many, many years into the sport.

Of course, they were really, really surprised then when they saw my progress during that first rowing season. That was the beginning of 2016 when I just realised that I haven't got time to train enough for swimming to qualify for the Olympics. I’d just started a traineeship that year, so I couldn't just quit it.

So, I just trained with my swim team less. I did a bit of sparring for my swimming team mates and 3 of them actually made it to the Rio Olympics and were quite happy with their results there. But it was not my achievement. But I helped them of course.

Now I am a rower.

Rob Gibson

Rob Gibson rowed for Canada in the 2012 London Olympic Games. He medaled there and at the Pan-American Games and three World Rowing Championships. He didn't get selected for the 2008 Olympic Games.

He shared a letter received from Joe Rantz - the Boys in the Boat 1936 US Olympic eight - sent to his University coach. The letter congratulates the undefeated Varsity Crew from the University of Washington in 2007. He has given us permission to reproduce it here.

We have been fortunate (2019 Rowing Tales) to have published stories about Joe from his daughter Judy Rantz Williams. It's nice to be able to continue with more from the great man.

The Truest Form of Amateur Athletics

Coach Bob Ernst
University of Washington Rowing
Conibear Shellhouse, Seattle, WA
June 6, 2007

Dear Bob and members of the 2007 National Championship Crew (Max Lang, Jesse Johnson, Seve Full, David Worley, Rob Gibson, Aljosa Corovic, Heath Allen, Will Crothers, Katelin Snyder),

Congratulations! You have accomplished something exceptional. I certainly understand the dedication, sacrifice and pain that it takes to get to where you are right now. I also understand the soul deep satisfaction and companionship that is built in an eight oar crew who find that they can overcome all odds.

It's hard not to compare our crews, so I thought you might be interested in some of the differences between your journey and ours. No one on our crew had rowed before coming to the University. We were all from Washington and west of the Cascades. Our average height was only about 6' 4" and that was pushed up by Jim McMilllan's 6' 7." Our average weight was only around 180. There were fewer opportunities to row against other colleges.

We only had three major races during an average season; consequently, much of our racing experience was competition between squads on Lake Washington. The distance for the varsity national championship at that time was four miles (three miles for JV and two miles for frosh), so all the races we rowed required a different racing strategy than is used for today's 2,000 meter events. In fact, it wasn't until after the IRA Championships of 1936 that we began to actually work on strategies for rowing a 2,000 meter race at the Olympic trials in New Jersey. That gave us only two weeks to figure it out!

There were, of course, other differences. Our shell was cedar and our oars were spruce. Our coxswain was a guy. But all these things aside, a crew is a crew and is no better than the dynamics which merge eight oarsmen into one rowing unit. We had, as you have, a magnificent unit. It would have been interesting to see your crew and our crew race. I think that would have been quite a match.

I understand that you have passed up an invitation to the Henley Regatta so that many of you can train on national teams with a hope of rowing in the 2008 Olympics. I think it is sad that the way things work today, you - as a crew - do not have the opportunity to challenge for the right to be an Olympic team. I have always felt that the unity and team spirit of a champion college crew represents the truest form of amateur athletics. However, your victories over this last year mark each of you as a contender for an Olympic team spot. I hope that happens for you, and if you get to go, I would say to you "God Speed."

Sincerely,
Joe Rantz
UW Crew 1934-1937
Berlin Olympics 1936

John Nunn

John Nunn is a former US Rowing team member who relates this tale from the Montreal Olympics. The Mounties are the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the national police service.

Nadia Comăneci was the star gymnast of the 1976 games and the first ever to get a perfect score.

My Small Role Undermining Communism

The most cool thing that I've ever done related to the Olympics in 1976. I was a coach for US rowing and they had a bus that would go from the Olympic village down to the rowing course which was on an island in the middle of the Saint Lawrence River. We would all ride the bus down there.

One day I sit down, and next to me is this Romanian guy. I said, "Hi."

He spoke perfect English, and I introduced myself. He said, "Well, I'm Walter Lambertus, and I'm the Romanian singles sculler." I said, "Okay. I'm a US coach, and I was a bronze medalist at the double in Mexico." Anyway, we talked for maybe two minutes. Who knows? Not too long.

We get down to the course. He goes to practice, and I go coach.

This was a few days before the competition started. A couple of days later, I'm down in the main hall of the Olympic village which is the prime place to trade kit.

I knew that opportunities existed to trade gear with athletes from the Eastern Bloc communist countries because, in Mexico when I rowed in the 1968 Olympics we were up at the dorms and these two Soviet guys came to the door and said, "Hey! Change!" We said, "What do you want?"

They started to strip!

They stripped off their shirts, their pants, their shoes, their watches – anything they had. The only thing that they walked out of there with that they came in with was their underwear. I mean, they took off and traded everything they had.

The Cuban guys would come in and say, “Jeans! We’ll trade anything with you – sweat suit, whatever. Do you have a pair of jeans?” Because the jeans they had in Cuba, you’d put one leg in, and the leg would rip off. So, they were just crazed for jeans.

We learned this, and there’s one word in English that everybody in the Olympic Village understands, and that’s “change.” If you say change, you mean, “What do you want? Pants? Ties? Sweat suits?”

Anyway, I came prepared. I had this whole bag full of stuff from all my years of rowing. I thought, “Hey, maybe I can trade this, maybe I can trade that.” I’m down there in the main hall trying to trade stuff.

Walter comes in, and he says, “Hey Jack! Can I talk to you?” I said, “Sure!”

He says, “Well, I’m thinking about defecting and I need help.” I said, “What do you need?”

He said, “Well, here’s the plan. The only thing I’ve got, I’m wearing a sweat suit, but all my other clothes and everything is in my suitcase and I have to get my suitcase out of my room so I have something to wear besides a sweat suit when I get out of here.”

He had already contacted the Mounties; he’d already known how to do that. I said, “Sure!” and he said, “Do you want to do it now?” I said, “Sure, let’s do it.”

We went right from the hall up to his dorm which was in a different building than where the US people stayed. Along with the athletes and coaches, they have guards – guys that are just spies, basically. You know, they’re guards. They’re trying to prevent people from defecting. They’re just disciplinarians.

Walter says, “We’re going to go up with your stuff. We’re going to pretend we’re trading, and we’ll go in and then we’ll pretend we’re going to go somewhere else to trade and you can take my suitcase and I’ll take your bag and we’ll walk out.” They won’t know we switched suitcases.

As we get to the Romanian room – his room – Nadia Comăneci is on the balance beam doing her perfect ten. There were 15 guys in there and who knows how many coaches or how many athletes and they were glued to this big screen TV. Nobody even knew we were in the apartment.

I said, “Hey Walter, let’s not screw around. Let’s just get the stuff and get out of here.” I just grabbed his bag, and he grabbed my bag, and we left. We took all his stuff to my room. On the day of his defection, when he had gotten

the Mounties, he came by my room, took his stuff, and took off. That's how he escaped.

At the time, I really didn't think too much of it. I just thought, "Hey, this is great!" but it was really heavy stuff because Ceaușescu was kind of a nasty guy. He got sentenced to 20 years of hard labour for defecting in (0:56:29 unclear).

They never caught Walter, but the Romanian regime had secret agents in Canada, and when he wanted to send a letter to his parents. He had a friend in Austria, so he'd send a letter to Austria. The friend would take the letter out of the envelope, put it in an Austrian envelope and stamp, and then send it on to Walter's parents. He couldn't call them either. In other words, he was trying to be untraceable.

His first apartment was in Niagara Falls which I visited. He had three bolt locks on the front door. He had a rope ladder going out to the window. He was on the second story. He was all ready to escape if the secret police showed up.

When Walter came to the Montreal Olympics, he'd brought with him a bottle of Romanian brandy. I don't know if he was going to use it to bribe somebody to do something for him or whatever. Before he took off, he gave me this bottle of Romanian brandy, and I told him, "I'm saving this for when you come to California and then we're going to crack it open and we're going to have a party."

But Walter never came to California.

In the meantime, he had moved to Vancouver and worked in a restaurant at Whistler. And so, when we decided that we were going to go skiing at Whistler, I contacted him.

And I took this bottle with us. At this point, it was 40 years old brandy.

We met Walter and his family. We all had some Romanian brandy together. I still remember the shot. It was like taking a shot of kerosene and gasoline.

Rich Whelan

Rich Whelan started rowing in 1989 at the University of Lowell in the Men's Novice 8 but stopped soon after to focus on his studies. In 2005 on vacation in Portugal, he watched rowing on the Duoro River in Porto. Watching how intently I watched, my wife said, "You really miss that...maybe when we get home you should start rowing again." So in 2006, I joined Gentle Giant Rowing Club in Somerville. A few years later he started coaching for the Malden High Rowing team and the GGRC Juniors. He then joined the GGRC Board of Directors and became the Program Director for GGRC. Fast forward to today and he is on the Race Committee for HOCR, the Board of Directors for the CRASH-Bs and is also a licensed US Rowing Assistant Referee.

Simmons is a University that boats out of Riverside Boat Club on the Charles in Boston, MA, USA.

To “bow” the course is local slang for steering in a coxless boat.

No Language Barrier in Rowing

I have a Head of the Charles (HOCR) story for you. In 2015 (I think) a rower from the Ukraine was in need of a partner for his 2x. The person that was supposed to row with him couldn't make the trip.

This was Thursday before HOCR. The catch also was the person had to bow the course.

The folks at Simmons connected him with a sculler and Gentle Giant Rowing Club rower, Frank Soldo.

Frank had never rowed HOCR but always wanted to.

I met Frank through GGRC. Frank learned to row with us and I got to know him that way. Frank was such a team player...always willing to do whatever needed to be done. There was one GGRC Community Challenge where Frank rowed 500m races with novice crews. I think he raced about 8 times that day by jumping in whatever boat he was needed in.

There was one other issue...a language barrier that they worked out somehow.

There was no practice row, HOCR would be their row together.

The coaches at Simmons went over the boat bow to stern to make sure

there were no issues. About 100 meters from Riverside, the foot stretcher in the bow seat broke and Frank had to be creative about repairing it. He managed and off they went to the start.

Word of Frank rowing spread and friends of his were all along the course to cheer him on.

As they went down the course, cheers for Frank dominated. When they reached Reunion Village, the cheers of the crowd got ever louder and the Ukrainian rower thought they had reached the finish line and stopped rowing. Frank quickly got him rowing again and off they went to the Finish.

When they were done, the Ukrainian rower thought he had rowed with a local celebrity...there were so many supporters for Frank, he must have been a celebrity! After the race, they exchanged unis and formed a friendship. Frank went to the post-HOCR party at Cambridge Boat Club and told everyone he met how he bowed a 2x down the HOCR course.

Tragically, Frank was diagnosed with cancer the next year and passed away a year after that.

I'm sure he's in Heaven telling anyone that will listen about that time he bowed a 2x at HOCR.

Anne Buckingham

Anne Buckingham lives and rows in Henley-on-Thames, Great Britain.

Stupidity Is the Strongest Force

Flipping a 1x on the dock.

Because when I sat down, I missed the seat.

And instead of suspending myself up or even getting out and getting back in, yours truly decided to shove both oars to the land and put two hands on the rear wing rigger to lift myself up.

(Don’t ask what I was going to move the seat with. This was a multifaceted, stupid action.)

Over I went.

Oh, I forgot to mention that before I got in, I had called to a past 1x World Champion who was standing nearby, “Just promise me whatever you see, you won’t laugh.”

True to his word, he did not laugh even though it must have been pretty funny.

In my discussions afterwards with the club safety advisor, she asked me if I had learned any lessons from this.

Of course, I replied “Stupidity remains the strongest force in the universe.”

Pete Jacobs

Pete Jacobs is a Henley on Thames local who hosts overseas competitors for the Royal Regatta. Here he describes the pre-regatta selection races where crews do a timed race the Friday before the regatta starts. after which the top finishers are given starting positions for the regatta.

The Silver Goblets & Nickalls Challenge Cup is a race for international quality mens' pairs.

A Moral for Masters

So, me and my pairs partner, Dan Sadler had a successful period in our pair. We won at Henley Masters last year and at the worlds in both the E, which is over 55 and the D at over 50. And we've been winning lots of stuff this year too.

And on the way back from the British Masters Championships in the middle of June I managed to arm-twist Dan. I said "We're not getting much competition here. How about we have a go against the young guys, and enter the Silver Goblets?"

Dan said "No" about 10 times.

I phoned him the next day and said "So the entries close at six o'clock today. I've been into the Regatta office, and Sir Steve Redgrave raised an eyebrow. But he didn't say no. So, I have entered us."

We had a great, a great paddle however we were significantly below the pace for the Silver Goblets.

We nearly beat one other crew and another one, but still came last by 0.3 seconds and we were about 30 seconds off qualifying.

So, the moral of the story is, no matter how good you are as a master you're still a little bit below even the averagely good senior crew.

Andy Trotman

Andy Trotman edited the Leander bicentenary book, Leander Club - the first 200 years. He claims that the book contains many worthy anecdotes suitable for Rowing Tales, but chose to submit this story from his own rowing past at London Rowing Club.

The Thames is the event at Henley Royal Regatta for club eights. The Grand, is for international eights and is the premier eights event at the regatta. Peter Coni was the Chairman of the Regatta's Committee of Management and is credited as the visionary who achieved the greatest growth in the regatta's history.

Are You Ready

While I am presently a director of Leander, back in the 1960s I was a member of London Rowing Club. We had a ridiculous tradition of always entering the Grand Challenge Cup at Henley, even though we had a mediocre VIII which probably would not have won the Thames.

In this particular year we were drawn against probably the mightiest crew in the World - the Russian Navy - in the semi-final of the Grand. London clearly had absolutely no chance of winning. Peter Coni was at 6 and a most amusing gentleman called Marks was at 5.

London duly lined up alongside the Russians at the start, the umpire went through the usual preliminaries and when he said 'Are you ready', flag raised, Marks shouted out "Are we doing this in one piece?"

The result was that the London crew collapsed in laughter to a man, making what would have been a hopeless start even more shambolic.

The result was inevitable...

Mat Stallard

Mat is a former Cambridge and University of London rower and the Father of Tom Stallard, British Olympian.

May Balls are parties hosted after the end of examinations at Cambridge University. They are white tie or black tie dress affairs; they last all night and traditionally end with a “survivors” photograph.

The Northern Irish province, Ulster, has a flag with a red hand at the centre of a red cross.

The White Hand of Ulster

It was the year we won in the eight at Henley, 1964.

And so, the whole crew went to the May Ball. And the next day was hot. My crew mate, Miles from the five seat, went to sleep on the beach at Aldeburgh with his hand across his chest.

He appeared the next day suitably pink with a ‘white hand of Ulster’ on his front.

As the days of the Henley Regatta went on it remained hot. It was a good summer.

And the hand remained on his chest through the regatta.

So, he then went slightly brown with a pink hand and then dark brown with a slight hand, etcetera. Until finally he lost it on the day we accepted the prize!

Colin Greenaway

Colin Greenaway represented Great Britain from 1986 through to 1999. He managed to combine rowing with family life in a unique way during the Henley Royal Regatta. Colin drove a mini car at the time which amused many people because he is six foot nine and a half inches tall, and the car lives up to its name.

A Regatta Baby

Back in 1989 my wife was pregnant. I was selected in a quad for Kingston Rowing Club and our first baby was due around Henley time. So, I spoke to my partner to see if she was okay for me to race at Henley.

She said that was fine.

So, I then spoke to the guys in the quad.

I explained that I'll do Henley Royal Regatta. But if the baby arrived, I'd have to go back home, obviously and be there for the delivery. And they also said that was fine.

So, we did the first day of the regatta. We managed to beat an American quad from their international team, which was amazing.

And while we were asleep that night at two o'clock in the morning, the landlady of the house we were staying at came rushing into my bed room, slightly irate, and told me that a phone call had just come through and I needed to go back down to London as my wife was in labour.

I woke the boys and told them.

They said, “Go, go, go.”

So, I got back in my little mini car and by 4 o'clock in the morning I’d arrived back in London. I got there and my partner was still in labour. I spoke to the doctor and said “Look, I've got a race in about six hours. Is it likely the baby's going to come in that time?”

“Very unlikely Mr. Greenaway.” he replied “I think you've probably got a

little bit more than that.”

So, I asked him how long I might have to wait.

“We reckon it might not come until tonight” he answered. And so I jumped back in the mini, rushed back up to Henley to the regatta.

During the afternoon, we raced again. Unfortunately, we hit the booms. That was the end of the regatta for our crew anyway.

So, after the race I leap back into the mini. Rush back to London, and dive through the hospital doors just as my son Patrick was being born.

They handed the baby straight to me upsetting my partner completely which she was pretty irate about.

But I managed to both do the race at Henley and be there for my son's birth.

Tony Martin

Tony Martin lives and rows in Australia. This is his second tale in this volume.

Calm Water, Calm Brain. Messy Water...

When the lake is still it's all so easy. I climb into my single scull and push off from the jetty. I take a few strokes. I can feel the boat glide across the water. That feeling makes me greedy for more. More grace, more speed, more satisfaction.

So, I sit up tall and activate my core muscles. Relax the hands. Pivot at the hips. Control the slide. Time the catch. Whooosh. My effort is instantly rewarded. I hear water trickle off the bow. I feel connected to the water at the catch, and powerful acceleration early in the stroke. The boat is really singing now. God, I love this feeling.

The scull feels like a horse that wants to run. My only concern is holding it back enough so that I don't wear myself out in the first ten minutes. Before I know it, I've reached the halfway mark of my time on the water. Time to stop and turn around.

Physically I'm tired. But mentally, I'm still bright and clear. Getting here hasn't required discipline or willpower, because I'm having fun. Trying to improve my technique is a satisfying challenge. On the way home I try a race piece. That is both physically and mentally exhausting, but it's the good kind of tired. I pull up to the jetty feeling content.

That feeling of tired contentment carries me through the work day. At lunch break I need to walk off my tight hamstrings and lactic acid-filled quads. But even that feels like a reminder of my righteous exercise. Those sore muscles are getting stronger for my next row. By 9pm I'm ready to fall into a deep restorative sleep.

But then there are days like today.

The wind is up. The lake is rough. Not rough enough to banish me to the erg, but rough enough to ruin my Zen.

I try to concentrate, but it is sooo difficult. The choppy water makes me uncomfortably aware of how skinny and unstable this single scull is. The boat won't run. Every movement feels awkward and mechanical. It's impossible to focus my mind for more than a few seconds.

I try to snap myself out of it. Come on Tony! Focus! Wake up. Grow up. Get in the zone.

Self-flagellation doesn't work. So, I try the opposite approach.

This is a great learning opportunity! Feel the water. Control my posture. *Bump* *wobble* *sploosh*. My oars splash water onto my own back. The boat loses speed and I lose my rhythm. Start again. Feel the water...

The best I can manage, on a good day, is 6 or 7 strokes where I feel like the boat is running and my mind is focused. Then the back of my oar hits a wave on the recovery and the spell is broken.

Start over again.

On a bad day, I stubbornly try to overpower my problems with brute strength. Grip the handles, bury the oars deep, tense the shoulders, pull hard. After 3 strokes I crab an oar and almost fall in.

I battle my way across the lake. Sometimes I try to concentrate, but mostly I'm daydreaming. My mind wanders easily at the best of times, and in these difficult conditions my brain takes refuge in fantasy.

By the time I reach the halfway point in my row, I'm mentally exhausted. When I'm unfocused I become painfully aware of just how much hard work rowing is. I hate hard work. That's why I play sport instead of going to the gym. Sport tricks me into enjoying exercise. But now I'm stuck, far from home, with more tedious effort required to limp back to shore.

Maybe the weather will be better tomorrow.

I'm happy to report that the good rows greatly outnumber the bad. But this contrast between good weather and bad reveals the true reason I row. It's not righteous exercise that drives me to the lake each morning. It's not competitiveness, or discipline, or strength of will.

I'm addicted to serenity.

Karen Stryker

Karen Stryker grew up in Canada playing ice hockey and found rowing at the ripe age of 45 in the mountains of North Carolina. She rows with the Asheville Rowing Club and doesn't miss ice hockey at all.

Say What You Mean

Rowing in a mixed 8 and remarking to my crew mate Lindee Nittler Long that "Rowing with men makes me wet."

She's still laughing 3 years later.

Now I'm sure to say "Men sure are splashy rowers!"

Mary O’Callaghan

Mary O’Callaghan rows in Queensland, Australia.

Scotch on the Rocks

I was racing in W1x at state champs in a borrowed boat called 'Glenlivet'.

The crosswind blew me from Lane 2 to a vacant Lane 1 and then to Lane 0 (not an official lane) which was edged by a retaining wall of huge rocks.

In the last 50 meters, I used my right leg to fend off the rocks and save the boat while still trying to reach the finish line.

Right in front of all the tents, of course.

Grant Craies and Carole Mills

Grant Craies and Carole Mills both sent in stories about towing boats with a similar theme, as you will see. Grant was the boatman for Kings College School Wimbledon, UK at the time of his tale. Carole rows with Champion of the Thames Rowing Club in Cambridge UK.

Lake Banyoles was the venue for the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Rowing in northern Spain.

British Rowing RowSafe drivers' handbook v3 says "Where the projection exceeds 1.00m, it MUST BE MARKED i.e. visible from the side and rear in case of rear projection and side or front in the case of front projection."

Trailer Trouble

We knew that in order to have a training camp on Lake Banyoles one of the local safety rules is that we had to carry a life ring in the coach boat. And so, we took one out of one of the school coach boats on the Tideway to bring with us.

While driving towards northern Spain all of these cars on the motorway were flashing us and waving and drivers were waving and we were waving back and smiling and they were flashing.

Eventually we looked in our rear-view mirror and couldn't see anything obviously wrong with the boats.

My co-pilot looked out of the side window and said "Yeah, the boats all look like they are tied on fine."

I said "I don't know why they're flashing at us. Maybe we'd better pull over."

So we pulled to the side of the motorway and the life ring, which had a long piece of rope attached to it, had bounced out of the back of the trailer and was towing 30 metres of rope behind us down the motorway.

Another second trailer story came from Carole Mills.

We were on our way back from Masters Nationals in Nottingham, UK.

Our club has a wonderful woman called Trish, who is our trailer driver.

In the UK you have to mark the rear of the boats with a flag and so we had a flag on the most prominent boat. But for all the rest of the boats we'd used this hazard tape, which was black and yellow, which we had a large roll of.

When loading the trailer, we looped hazard tape around the bow balls tying it on and then had dropped the end of the roll into the back of the trailer.

As Jackie was driving down the motorway, the tape had started to unroll billowing yards and yards of black and yellow tape out around onto the surrounding vehicles. I remember a car next to us where the driver could barely see because of the tape that was across his windscreen.

Anyway, we pulled over to the side of the motorway, very embarrassed.

And I got out and started picking up yards and yards of tape, which I pulled into the cabin of the truck with half a thought to rewind it back onto the roll.

There was no chance of that happening. I was sitting on the front seat and hazard tape filled the available space up to the dashboard between me and Trish, the driver!

John Cook

John Cook used to row in Wellington, New Zealand for Petone Rowing Club. Here he tells us about his part in changing the club racing colours to a fluorescent yellow one piece row suit.

The Blue Lakes regatta is held in high summer on a lake near Rotorua. It is known for its crystal clear water where you can see the bottom of the lake at the start and the finish. Boat access is only allowed three times a year. It’s a very special place where the start is next to a beach beside native New Zealand bush where you hear loud birdsong.

Petone Yellow

In the old days, Petone rowed in old gold. And when I was at the club, it was very hard to distinguish us from a number of other clubs. And there was a new fabric coming out, nylon polyester.

I tried to look at a way of making one piece row suits. And the fabric came in a limited range of colours, the only yellow they had was a fluoro yellow.

We got one of the ladies who I knew to sew us up four one piece rowing suits for my crew and we turned up at the Blue Lakes regatta for Petone wearing these new fluoro yellow as opposed to old gold one pieces.

We were entered in the Premier four against Waikato and to our amazement the commentators started calling us as being 200- 300 metres out in front because of the brightness of our suits. They could see us clearly while they were commentating from a distance.

However, after two regattas that was fairly short lived.

Because protests then went in that we weren't in official club colours of old gold.

So it took another two or three years before it was approved through the club. And thus it was around 1993 when Petone changed over to having a fluorescent yellow vest, which is now especially distinctive amongst all clubs and is one of the most recognised colours out on the water.

Roger Giese

Roger Giese is a life member of Auckland Rowing Club. I was introduced to him by Chris Madell, author of several Rowing Tales.

Lake Karapiro is a hydroelectric dammed lake near Hamilton in the North Island of New Zealand, The 1978 and 2010 World Rowing Championships were hosted there.

Ready All? Row!

I was coaching a mens novice 8 which was to put it mildly was a hopeless crew, but I persevered with the crew to the New Zealand Club Championships.

NZ Champs comes along, and on the day of the heats the weather is a bit blustery.

I suppose I'd better let you into the capabilities of some of the crew. One of the worst was bow, an Irish fellow, a medical doctor, skinny, scrawny, couldn't pull the skin off a rice pudding. Away with the fairies 90% of the time, couldn't / wouldn't get the basics of rowing right.

The other was an Indian chappie, IT person, likeable fellow, big and fairly fit. Simple instructions such as "Pull the oar handle towards your chest" would be interpreted as “Push the handle away from your chest.”

Anyway, I struggled with them for a whole season.

The day of the heats it was blustery at Karapiro. Our boat was on the pontoon and the crew are about to get into the boat, so I'm there on hand to ensure that Raj (yep you guessed - the Indian Chap) got into the boat facing the right direction and that he didn't put his foot through the hull etc.

The coxswain’s a bit nervous about the weather so she gets the crew off the pontoon in quick fashion.

I'm relieved, Raj is in the boat, oar in hand, facing the right way.

Phew.

I then look at the end of the pontoon and there's Leslie our Bowman, the mad Irish Doctor, standing on the pontoon, with the seven-man 8 whipped out into the middle of the lake by the wind.

Oh, glorious days.