



THE HISTORY OF ROWING

From the development of the concept of an oar working against a fulcrum (some-time after 1000 B.C.) until the present, rowing has been an efficient means of transportation. In the past 500 years whale boats, captains' gigs, surf rescue boats, ferrymen, fishermen and many others have turned to oar-propelled boats. And from the beginning, anytime there were two or more boats, sooner or later there was a race, whether for business, for honor, or purely for the sport of it.

Rowing began to develop as a sport in the early 19th century. In England, boys at Eton were racing in eights by 1811, and the first Boat Race between Oxford and Cambridge was held in 1829. In the United States, the first boat club appeared in New York harbor in 1834, while a Yale student began intramural college rowing with the purchase of a second-hand Whitehall boat for \$29.50 in 1843. Soon rowing had spread across the country. The Detroit Boat Club (founded in 1839) has the honor of being the oldest club in the country still active in the sport. The Schuylkill Navy was organized in 1858 by the Philadelphia boat clubs, and is the oldest sporting organization still in existence.

As the country's population began to move to the cities following the Civil War, they soon seized upon sports and outdoor activities to fill their free time. Leading the way were horse racing and boat racing, the latter involving amateurs,

professionals and college students. Regattas increased in number from 10 or 12 before the Civil War to over 150 in 1872, and were held from Savannah to Sacramento and Maine to Milwaukee. By 1873, there were 289 rowing clubs, 74 in New York, 12 in Georgia, 14 in Michigan, 5 in Iowa and 14 in California.

Professional rowing was enormously popular in the second half of the 19th century, but by 1900 had virtually disappeared. Prizes varied from \$25 for beginners to \$6,000 or more for the famous Canadian, Ned Hanlan. The professional scullers became popular as colorful personalities, while the regattas themselves became exciting events with crowds, food, drink, entertainment and gambling. It was the gamblers who hastened the end of professional rowing, with rigged races and such dirty tricks as boats sawed in half.

Both the amateurs and colleges wanted to distance themselves from the professionals. The National Association of Amateur Oarsmen (renamed the United States Rowing Association in 1982) was established in 1872. It was the first national sports governing body in this country, and also the first to establish a definition of an amateur. This early schism between amateurs and professionals is unique to the sport of rowing, and has continued to this day.

The popularity of amateur rowing clubs waned somewhat in the early part of the

20th century, but the stronger clubs survived. One of the strengths of the clubs has been their emphasis on small boats, which demand greater skill yet also allow working adults more flexibility.

Early college racing was in sixes, with no coxswains. Due to the endless fouls and accidents, they gradually switched to eights with coxswains. The first intercollegiate race was in 1852 on Lake Winnepesaukee, New Hampshire, between Harvard and Yale. What soon became an annual race between the two schools changed location several times before settling in New London, CT, in 1878. Other colleges were soon rowing and, in 1875, 13 eastern schools (Cornell, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Dartmouth, Wesleyan, Amherst, Brown, Williams, Bowdoin, Hamilton, Union and Princeton) raced before 25,000 people at Saratoga, NY. Various match races and at least one collegiate association came and went, until the ancestor of the present-day Intercollegiate Rowing Association was established in 1895 at Poughkeepsie. Initially made up of eastern colleges, Wisconsin (1897), Stanford (1912), Washington (1913) and California (1921) soon joined. In 1929, the NAAO voted to accept college members, but the clubs and colleges remained separate, with few college oarsmen continuing to row in the clubs following graduation.

The distinction was clear in Olympic rowing. Beginning with Navy in 1920, American college eights won eight suc-



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cessive Olympic Gold medals. The small boats were filled by club oarsmen, who usually gained 3 or 4 medals in each Olympiad. American domination of the Olympic eight event ended in Rome in 1960. Changes in style, training methods, and rigging led to the emergence of first the West Germans and then other countries as major world rowing powers. The biggest changes have been in training: speed, endurance and strength can be improved much more effectively and efficiently today.

Two other changes have also affected American rowing in the past 25 years. The first is the appearance of women. Although women were rowing at Wellesley College in 1877, and soon after in a few other isolated clubs and schools around the country, the activity was strictly intramural, and intended to be primarily "healthful and recreational." A few women were rowing, but women were not a part of rowing.

That began to change in the early 1960s. The National Women's Rowing Association was founded in 1962. Four years later, the first NWRA Nationals was held in Seattle, with fewer than 100 competitors. Today, American women rowers are among the best in the world, they are a part of the USRA governing structure, they row at nearly every college and club at which men row.

The other major change has been the development of the "recreational" shells. Less expensive than a racing single, the recreational single has an even more important feature: a complete novice can get into one and start rowing immediately. A racing single is often only 12 inches wide, and learning to row usually involves a fair amount of swimming. The extra stability of the recreational singles and doubles allows the beginner to enjoy the sport from the start. It also lets the more experienced row in the rougher water of bays, ocean coasts, and large lakes and rivers, where a racing single would swamp. The recreational single has been a major factor in popularizing the sport.

Today the United States Rowing Association has over 19,000 individual members, and is growing at more than 20% per year. Almost 400 clubs, colleges and high schools from around the country are member organizations. The sport is quietly becoming a phenomenon. Olympic athletes, homemakers, business people, youth, senior citizens, disabled individuals, athletes from other sports and those discovering sport for the first time, those who wish to race and those who row for fitness are finding that rowing can meet almost any need and interest. If rowing is, indeed, the "sport of the '90s," it is certainly easy to see why. —

(This information was taken from A Short History of American Rowing by Thomas C. Mendenhall. The book is available from USRowing.)

What to Look For

One of the most obvious signs of a good crew is the bodies, moving in perfect unison. A good rower is powerful but never rough, with no jerks in the stroke cycle. Most of the power comes from the legs, and the transition between the drive of the legs and the follow-through of the back should be smooth. Any extraneous motions waste energy, and rowers strive for efficiency and relaxation.

Look at the oars, both as they enter the water (the catch) and as they come out (the release). The blades should drop quickly and precisely into the water at the catch, without first "skying" up into the air before the catch. They must hook into the water at maximum reach instead of pulling several inches of air before locking in. The release must be clean, with none of the blades getting caught in the water. As the oars move back for the next catch, all the blades should clear the water surface, which gets progressively more difficult as the wind and waves pick up.

The shell itself doesn't move at a constant speed, something easily observed when two boats are driving for the finish line in a dead heat. The lead will change with each stroke. A boat moves fastest at the release, slowest at the catch. Watch the bow of the boat as it surges with each stroke. A good crew will catch the boat just as it's starting to slow down and give it a smooth, hard drive to accelerate it again.

The "stroke rate" of a boat is the number of strokes it is taking per minute. Most boats sprint at the start of the race at 38 to 44 strokes per minute, "settle" during the body of the race to 32 to 36, and sprint again at the finish. A higher stroke rating usually results in a higher boat speed, but a cost is paid in efficiency. If two crews are rowing evenly, the one with the lower stroke rating usually is in the better position. There are special stop watches for determining ratings, but you can make an estimate with your wrist watch. Simply count the number of strokes in 15 seconds, starting with the catch of one stroke, and multiply by four. —