



Crew: emerging from the dark

Crew coach Mike Holcomb in the early morning hours at Dexter Lake. The crew team works out at 5:15 every morning.

At 5 a.m., most people are asleep. Nobody studies at 5 a.m.; nobody parties at 5 a.m.; you can't even get an Egg McMuffin at 5 a.m. But if you want to be on the crew team at Oregon, you better be up at that insane hour.

"We're working out by 5:15 a.m., and we're on the water by 6:15," says Mike Holcomb, one of two coaches of Oregon crew, "and then we have our second workout in the afternoon."

Crew at Oregon is only a club sport, but it is a demanding sport. The rowers compete in the Pac-10 Conference, facing such powers as Washington and California. Thus, the reason for two-a-day workouts.

Sounds crazy, huh? Well, it is, at least according to one team member. "Oh yeah, crew is crazy," admits Brenda Thornton, a coxswain for the team who also serves as the club president.

"I remember my freshman year, I had a neighbor who rowed. I told her she was crazy, that crew was a horrible and masochistic sport, and how could she get up at 5 a.m.," says Thornton, "but after I started, I fell in love with crew. I can't adequately describe what it feels like to be on the water and watch the sun come up."

Another thing that can't be adequately described is how far Oregon's crew team has come under club supervision. Crew started at Oregon in the mid 1960's as a club sport, and it has stayed that way ever since. The team, operating under a meager budget of \$7,900 a year, must lease most of its equipment from Conn Findlay, an ex-rower who owns a fleet of boats, or shells as they are more commonly called, in San Francisco.

"The program has never been really big," says

Holcomb. But last year, the Ducks took on the Goliaths of the Pac-10 — and won.

The men's heavyweight four (a four-man boat of rowers over 160 lbs.) defeated Washington in regional competition, and then bested the Huskies, Cal and UCLA to win the Pac-10 championships. They also finished fourth at the prestigious National Sports Festival. In addition, the women's heavyweight four placed second in the Pac-10.

Thornton, who was the coxswain for the men's boat, says, "We were ecstatic. We were all crying in the boat — it was amazing."

Still, Oregon is not ready to topple Washington's Northwest dominance in crew. "They're a set program," says Holcomb. "They've been around for a long time — 70, 80 years maybe." Adds Thornton, "Washington actually has a list of donors waiting to give money to the team. Here, we work our tails off."

In heavyweight eight competition (the glamour part of crew), as well as lightweight, freshman and novice competition, the Ducks must take a back seat to the Washingtons, the Cals and the UCLAs. As Matty Elliot, who coaches the women's crew events, says, "We're probably not taken seriously yet. We're starting to get a toehold, but we have a long way to go."

But Thornton, the walking advertisement for Oregon crew, disagrees. "We're not a screw-around crew team anymore. Washington was wild-eyed with surprise at what we did. And now their coach (Dick Erickson) has been really supportive. He's called a couple of times to ask us if there's anything he can do."

What the team needs most of all, of course, is

money. Last year the team staged a rowathon at Dexter Lake, the crew training site, in which they rowed 100 miles and received \$3,000 from donors. The reward was a new four-man boat and some carbon-fibered oars, which helped the rowers tremendously at regionals and the Pac-10 championships.

"When you lease equipment, you're not allowed to bring it to regionals or Pac-10's," says Holcomb, "so you have to borrow a boat, and it's harder to compete."

For this year's rowathon, which will be held Sunday at Dexter Lake, the crew team plans to row 150 miles around the lake, with each team member taking two-hour shifts. The team's goal is to raise \$7,000-9,000, which will be enough to buy an eight-man boat and more oars. "We need to start building a program, and that means new boats and oars," says Thornton.

The team must cope with several disadvantages, though. The small budget, the half-hour rides to Dexter and the inability of the program to offer scholarships make it difficult to build a sustained program.

But energy and spirit can overcome a lot of obstacles. This year the crew team has 67 members, more than ever before, and the team's attitude is to be the best they can. "I'm so proud of what we've accomplished," says Thornton. "Crew has such incredible demands — time demands, energy demands, and money demands. The motivation has to come from inside yourself. You have to really want it."

And this team does — enough to be up at 5 a.m.

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