

# A dedicated CREW



*Members of the University crew team brave the cold pre-dawn to prepare for upcoming spring competition*

By Jack Clifford  
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The night still controls the sky as 35 groggy yet focused University crew members and one purposeful reporter bound off the bus in search of the team's nirvana. The Dexter Reservoir is somewhere on the landscape, and the charcoal water awaits the athletes' presence. These sporting Ducks represent an exclusive squad, although they share a commonality with another.

Simply put, this UO club squad does more before 8 a.m. than some people do all day.

Six days a week, the team catches a 5:15 a.m. ride from campus to travel 20 or so miles to the reservoir for a strenuous two-hour workout. They meet during the spring between 10 and 12 times a week, with afternoon practices three out of seven days.

As the crew readies its gear for another drill, a subtle cadence has already begun. Carefully lifting the crafts from their boathouse cradles, the men and women are already working in sync. Once upon the murky lake, the symmetry of four oars on each side and the rhythmic sounds of the paddles caressing the water betrays the intensity of the experience.

One day of the exhausting rigor can be enough to scare off the less committed, so imagine pulling off such a strict regimen on a regular basis.

"It's the most dedicated sport in club sports, concerning practice time," says first-year coach Scott Jones, who oversees the novice, or first-year, rowers. "Their entire lives are focused around crew, everything is scheduled around it, and we're gone every weekend during spring."

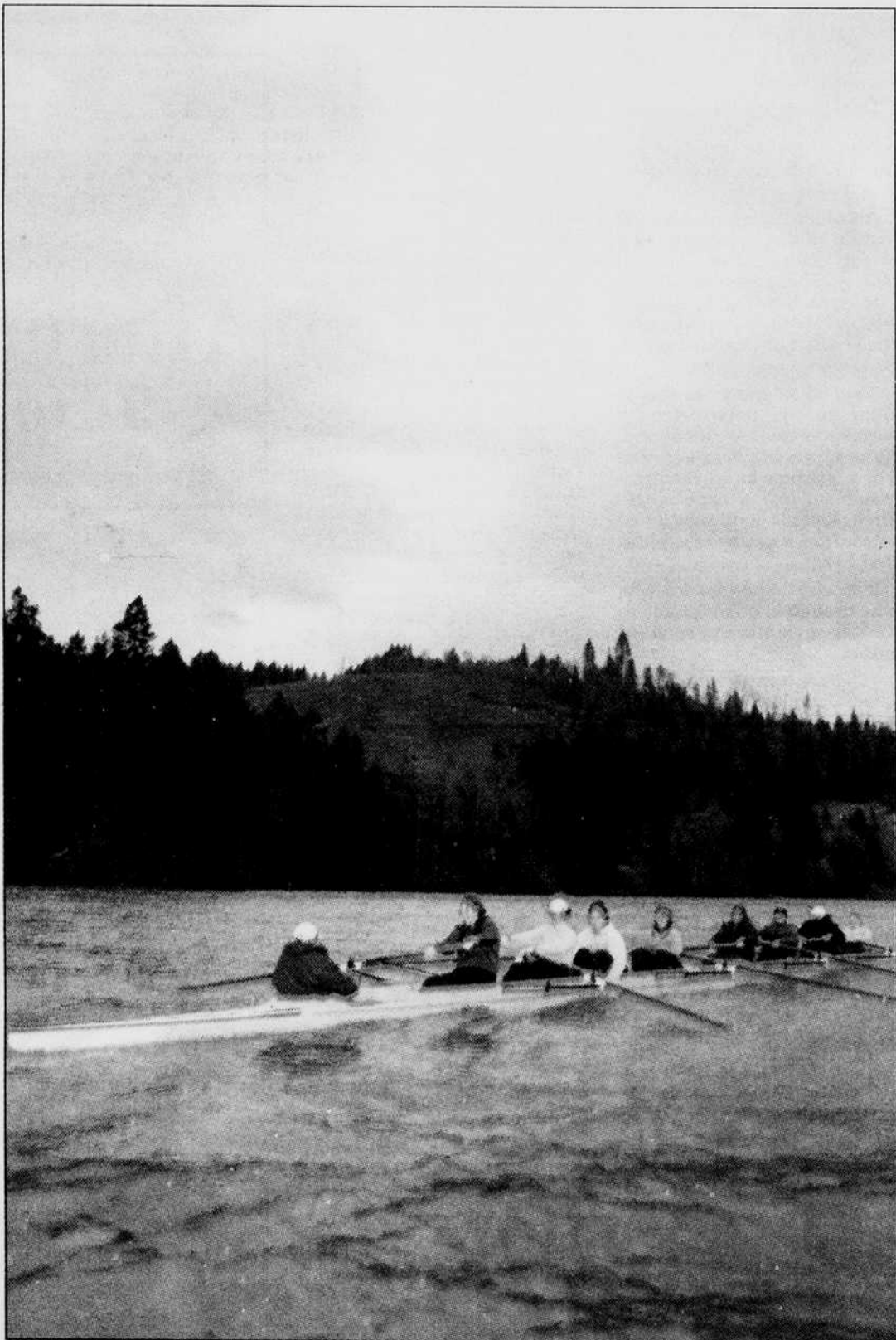
The crew team is the largest in number of any club sport, so a greater force than the chance to exercise must drive a person.

"The camaraderie," says Joe Neron, a second-year rower. "It's a great feeling when I get up at the butt-crack of dawn, show up at the bus stop and there are 50 other people there. I couldn't do it if it was just me or me and a couple of other people."

Additionally, chimes in Neron's teammate Jason Bodie, they do it for "the perfect row. It's when you have a row where everything's set, the power is there and you're just flying like you're on glass."

The rowing club was "swooshing" across the Willamette Valley waterways long before that other, more well-known image made a splash. Crew started at the University in 1967, says Sandy Vaughn, Club Sports director, and is subsidized partially through student fees. Participants pony up their own money to cover some costs and devote a lot of free time to fund raising.

Besides the financial obligation, the heinous practice times and the seemingly inherent lack of a social life, the squad members also must be enrolled as at least full-time students. The motivations for joining



Jessie Libfeld (top) struggles against heavy winds on Dexter Lake. Women's crew members (above) return to shore after practice.

are varied, and to an observer can seem obsessive.

"My initial reason for starting was partly curiosity, and the other half was I wanted to stay shape," says club coordinator Ruth Golar, a three-year veteran. "Plus, it's beautiful to watch the sunrise in the morning, and it's amazing when you're with seven other people in the boat and you're all as one person rowing. It takes a lot of skill, coordination and cooperation to be able to balance the boat and row as you're supposed to."

"For me, when school starts, crew starts, and it's not an option for me to not row."

On this particular morning, two other obstacles met the rowers face

first: The temperature was below freezing, probably about 25-30 degrees, and a blanket of fog hung over the reservoir. The heavy, frigid air didn't stop varsity coach Phil Holmes, however.

Holmes has been at the main helm for three years and touts 32 years of overall rowing experience. Dressed this day in an orange slicker suit, sporting a slightly graying mop of hair topped with a black cap, he looks more like a retro-icon for Old Spice cologne than a crew coach.

During the practice, Holmes maneuvers a motorboat around three rowing vessels, giving out orders and comments over his megaphone. He sometimes gently coax-

es — "Jessica, square the blade a whole lot earlier" — or his voice glides across the water: "Slow them down a bit, Andrea" he says to guide a coxswain, a person who acts as a coach on the water.

Other times, he's about as subtle as a train wreck. "If any of you knotheads miss any more practices, you will be skinned."

The gruff persona belies a highly-respected, inspirational individual.

"When you get a comment from Phil, it's so well-deserved and you work so hard for that one compliment," says second-year rower Wendy Martin. "It really makes you strive to do better."

Holmes returns the appreciation

for his rowers.

"I really respect this team no matter how they do [competitively]," he admits after practice. "Not only for the crew, but they're also serious students, most of them have part-time jobs, and they will be competing against other teams who are there on scholarship."

Ah yes, the payoff for these soggy, icy mornings is just around the corner.

During spring break, March 26-27, competition will begin. The University team will skim across San Diego's Mission Bay during a two-day meet against their Pacific-10 Conference brethren and the likes of Harvard and Yale. These races and the two-month spring season which follows consist of 2000-meter timed events.

Holmes can't yet say how his charges will stack up against an opponent that isn't weather-related.

"We're practicing in a vacuum right now, so we don't know how fast we are," he says. He adds that his team will be severely undermanned: Yale and Harvard each will have five lightweight eight-man squads in San Diego; the University has a total of nine guys in lightweight.

Whatever impending struggle the team may face in southern California aside, most members talk about the trip as if it were the Holy Grail.

"It's pushing us right now," says Janette Sherman, a varsity lightweight rower. "It's all we want, warm weather. It's the mortar in the brick wall, to get a little poetic for you."

Speaking of brick walls, when does a crew member hit one once he or she tackles the rest of their day?

"I'm pretty awake up until breakfast," says Andrea Butler, second-year coxswain. "But by about class time, noonish, I'm just worn out. I've become the master of 10-minute power naps."

Butler successfully led eight of the Ducks through those pea-soup environs in practice, not an easy task under even the best conditions.

"It's a really big responsibility, because the other coxmen and I have to communicate and if we're not paying attention, then the boats can converge on one another," she explains. "Everything seemed cold today. The weather was a little hampering because when it's foggy, you're kind of tense because you don't really know what's out there in the water."

At one point, Holmes booms out what seems like a fairly important question: "Does anyone have a compass?"

As the boat moves on, with the sun just starting to peek through the chilly haze, and the only other sound coming from a crew boat's eight oars slicing through the water as one, a better question comes to the reporter's mind: Does anyone have a portable heater and a nice cozy cot? The need for a 10-minute power nap is coming on.