The Renovation of the Associated Students of the University of Washington Shell House

By Lorraine O’Donnell
The former home of the "Boys in the Boat" and three decades of University of Washington rowers has finally been targeted for a major renovation and restoration. Also known as the "Canoe House," it is one of only two buildings on the UW campus currently on the National Register of Historic Places. On March 7, 2018, the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board unanimously approved its nomination as a Seattle Landmark as well. A public meeting has been set for April 2018 for final consideration and approval of the designation.

The 10,000 square foot building was built in late 1918 as a seaplane hangar by the U.S. Navy, but the sudden end of World War I in November of that year abruptly voided the structure's utility to the Navy, so it was donated to the University of Washington in 1919.

Head UW Rowing Coach Ed Lender immediately requested that the building, ideally situated on the northeast corner of the freshly excavated Montlake Cut (opened in 1916), be used to house the shells that his crews rowed on Lake Union, Lake Washington, and the Ship Canal. The University agreed, and the building was lightly remodeled for its new purpose and dubbed the ASUW (Associated Students of the University of Washington) Shell House.

The new home of Washington Rowing was perfectly situated for its new role: it was right on campus, on the water, and large enough to accommodate a growing fleet of sixty-foot-long racing shells. Student volunteers dug a long trench down from upper campus to house underground steam pipes to heat the vast interior space.

Coach Lender also made room in the new facility for the workshop of George Pocock, who had built exemplary racing shells for the UW crews before the U.S. entered into World War I and shut down collegiate sports. Pocock was widely recognized for building the best racing shells in the world, and once he installed his small company, Pocock Racing Shells, in the back mezzanine of the ASUW Shell House, he built not only every UW racing shell for the next fifty years but also every collegiate shell used in the U.S. Every United States Olympic team rowed Pocock shells from 1928 until 1964, and George was the Olympic gold medalist at every Olympiad from 1936 to 1956. His workshop is now empty but still intact, and could be restored as part of the renovation.

Washington crews that rowed out of this shell house won eight varsity national championships, and sixteen junior varsity and freshman national championships in twenty years of competition between 1922 and 1948. In that span they also won two Olympic championships—the eight at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the coxed four at the 1948 London Games.

A new, modern shell house was constructed in 1949 and the ASUW Shell House shifted purposes and became the "Canoe House," to remain because it was used as a canoe rental facility by the university for several years until the waterfront Activities Center was built for that purpose in 1975. Since then it has fallen into disrepair and has been used to store canoes, kayaks, and rowing shells that are rarely used. The sturdy, open-beam construction has, however, allowed the fundamental structure to remain remarkably sound and suitable for restoration. The old hangar has good bones and could last another century or more.

The building is managed by the Recreation Department at the UW, and they are launching a capital campaign to restore the shell house and convert it to be used as a rentable event center that is envisioned to also contain exhibits related to "collective histories that have taken place there—tribal, military, seaplane, engineering, rowing, and recreation."

The building's most historically significant use has been as the birthplace of the golden years of University of Washington Rowing and, concurrently, the home of the most influential boat builder and advisor in rowing to the first half of the 20th century, George Pocock (profiled in this issue).

Other uses of the building and site have been negligible or utilitarian rather than historically notable. The ground the building sits on did not truly exist prior to 1916. The plot was marshland or partly under water until the opening of the Montlake Cut in 1916 lowered the level of Lake Washington by nine feet, exposing the outcropping on which the shell house was later constructed on. Even though it was initially intended as a seaplane hangar, it served purpose for, at most, two months. The building's use as a canoe rental house for twenty-five years is of no particular significance (other than fond memories of paddling through the Arboretum), nor is its later and present use as a dusty, barely functional warehouse for canoes, kayaks and shells.

The glory days of the building were the golden years of Washington Rowing, which began in 1916, when the varsity eight was the first Western crew to place (a close third) in the Intercollegiate Rowing Association national championships. Four years later, the UW crews moved in to the Shell House and from there came international success and renown with the exceptional Olympic championship in 1936 and the final U.W. Olympic champions in 1948. One can only hope that this remarkable legacy as the birthplace of modern American rowing is the most prominent feature of the renovation.

Largely because of the international bestselling The Boys in the Boat, the ASUW Shell House is the most famous boat house in the world. Thousands of tourists attempt to find it every year but most fail. Even if they do manage to locate the old "cathedral" of rowing, she is boarded, locked up and inaccessible. Soon, perhaps, the massive back door to the University of Washington will again be open, welcoming visitors from outside campus and bringing students, faculty and staff back to the water to celebrate the rich legacy of the most successful sports program in the history of the Pacific Northwest.
The Other Boys in the Boat: A Rowing Adventure Tale

By BH Knight, Retired Sports Editor for The Seattle Post-Intelligencer Special to The Seattle Times - reprinted with permission of the author. Article published in The Seattle Times, June 17, 2017.

Our story begins with the HUSKY CLIPPER, in which UW famously won the 1936 Olympic gold medal. This is the tale of an unlikely and heroic feat 50 years ago by a lesser-known program whose members showed similar fearlessness and perseverance. Collegiate rowing has a history of making big headlines in Seattle, but this story is not about racing; there were no medals.

The only thing the Pacific Lutheran University oarsmen had when they got back to their dorm rooms that December 1967 night were fatigued bodies numbed by the cold, soaked by waves and blistered from seemingly endless hours of pulling on oars.

The newspaper story described the event as "a conquest of epic proportions" and noted the oarsmen's dedication and perseverance, telling in detail how they rowed an eight-oared shell from Seattle's Lake Union to Tacoma.

They started before dawn, rowing through the Ballard Locks, battling wave-crested Elliott Bay—and as twilight was coming on—making it to Tacoma's Point Defiance, a distance of more than 40 miles. But why?

Some sort of stunt? Fraternity prank? A punishment exacted by a sadistic coach?

None of the above. It was a matter of absolute necessity. The PLU crew had to get the shell to American Lake, where they trained and raced. Unable to come up with the funds to move the boat on the road, they went by water.

They would row the boat to Tacoma. And they did.

This adventure of risk—and its rewards—will be remembered and celebrated June 20-22 when the Pacific Lutheran crew gathers for a 50th anniversary reunion of the Rowdown. The occasion will feature a return trip over the same route the PLU crew followed Dec. 16, 1967.

But instead of rowing, the oarsmen will make the voyage aboard a 75-foot powerboat.

Joining the PLU veterans, most of them pushing age 70, for the yacht ride will be Judy Rante Willmann. She is the daughter of Joe Rante, one of the featured UW rowers in The Boys in the Boat, the best-selling book about that celebrated the 1936 UW eight that won an Olympic gold medal in the 1936 Games.

The PLU rowers had something in common with that celebrated Washington crew. The HUSKY CLIPPER, the shell the Huskies rowed to a gold medal in 1936, had been loaned to the Lutes some three decades later; it was the shell in which PLU oarsmen had learned to row, used in practice and competed in.

But UW had decided to bring back the HUSKY CLIPPER so it could be put on display, a symbol of the Huskies' greatest rowing triumph, a truck arrived at the PLU boathouse to haul the shell back to the Seattle campus. The Lutes were promised a replacement shell, the LOYAL SHOUTY, assuming they could figure out how to get it back to Tacoma.

Jim Ojala, captain of that 1967 crew, and teammate Jim Wiltala went to see Jon Olson, the faculty adviser, to discuss the dilemma. As Ojala recalls, it was Olson who asked: "Why don't you row it down?" Ojala and Wiltala looked at each other and slapped hands. Ojala rushed back to his dorm room and started phoning teammates. "Within minutes a crowd had gathered and a plot was hatched."

Despite the threat of bad weather and what could be rough waters in a boat hardly designed for those conditions, the Pacific Lutheran oarsmen didn't seem to be the least bit intimidated.

"I really did not give it much thought other than it being another saga for PLU crew," said Curt Pearson, the stroke oar in the Knights varsity. "Since the school did little to support our crew we had to figure out how to get the shell to Tacoma on our own."

Added Roger Hansen, another PLU rower: "I certainly wasn't going to walk the shell to Tacoma."

Ojala felt his teammates were "too excited, innocent and naive to have any feelings of trepidation. I never had a doubt. None of us did. We thought we were invincible, that, if we banded together we could accomplish anything we set our minds to. Plus we had the support of our parents."

"Our biggest fear once we started making plans was that someone in the administration would find out and tell the president. Dr. (Robert) Mortvedt,...
who was adamantly against rowing and would have ordered us to stop if he'd learned of our plans in advance.

The rowers quietly went about planning the long-distance row. When I woke up from the Student Affairs Office asked for more details, Ojala recalled, "I said, somewhat truthfully, that we planned a long row that day to help prepare us for the coming spring season."

Then a story in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer announced what the crew was planning.

"The first person to call me was the dean of student affairs," Ojala recalled. "He was screaming at me, telling me he would cancel the event if he could, but he couldn't now that the P-I had made it front-page news. Before hanging up he asked me to make sure that nobody doubted me."

Another unhappy call came from the PLU sports-information director, Joe Schneider, saying how embarrassed it made him, Ojala said. "How can you do this to me?" he said loudly. "The biggest sports story in PLU's history and I had to read about it in the morning paper? Don't ever do this to me again!"

But the crew, according to Norm Purvis, who pulled the bow oar, was excited.

"We desperately needed another 8-man shell," Purvis said. "We had no coach. Everything was up to us from raising funds, repairing equipment, recruiting oarsmen, scheduling and hosting regattas. We loved rowing but we were always living on the edge."

"In some ways it was an act of defiance. We were not going down without a fight. We were mostly 19 and 19-year-olds, idealistic and with a can-do American spirit. If you would have told us we couldn't do it, we would have said, 'just watch.'"

There was a dusting of snow on the ground as the PLU oarsmen carried the LOYAL SHODY the two and a half miles from Green Lake to a public boat launch on the Lake Washington Ship Canal.

Supported by two small powerboats, carrying a handful of backup rowers plus a Post-Intelligencer sports writer and photographer, the shell coasted through the Hiram Chittenden Locks. Coming around West Point and heading south to Elliott Bay, the weather conditions changed.

Waves pushed by a strong rip tide slapped across the bow and the shell started taking on water. In danger of swamping, coxswain Jim Bartlett quickly handed emergency buckets to the four oarsmen in the stern of the boat. They started bailing while the other four continued rowing. Looking back, the PLU Rowers agreed this was their supreme test.

"That was the first time I realized we might not make it," said Rich Holmes, who was sitting in the No. 4 seat. "I was one of the four that continued rowing while the other four bailed. The boat fell very heavy and sluggish with all that water in it. It seemed like we weren't making any headway."

In the bow seat and taking the worst of the waves and wind, Purvis agreed that their situation was tenuous.

"We were all soaked with cold saltwater on a snowy December day, we were barely making progress," he said. "Waves were breaking over the gunwales and some waves were breaking over the bow and hitting me in the back. Even as idealistic as we were, I doubt if any of us believed we could make it unless the waves let up. This was hard physically, but really hard on our spirits."

"We were not prepared for this weather nor the rough seas. Most, if not all of us, only had cotton sweatshirts and sweatpants with layers of other cotton fabric. Soon we were soaked to the skin. Rowing is an amazing exercise and although we were cold our muscles were producing heat."

"I thought, let's pray the waves calm down; otherwise we won't last long this way."

Stroke Pearson said as they struggled in the rough water, "it really gave me second thoughts — what in the world was I doing out there?"

"From the stern of the boat I couldn't see the severity of our situation nor did I realize it until the bailing became necessary," Pearson added. "We had raced in rough water conditions but nothing like Puget Sound."

Ojala was pragmatic about the situation.

"There was no guarantee we'd make it across to Alki but we couldn't stop to think about it," he said. "All we could do was concentrate and do our jobs."

He also recalled a lighter moment.

"Someone on the boat started singing, 'Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream; Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, I wonder if I'll ever get to 102nd along for a stanza or two. That made me laugh and more determined than ever to make it to Tacoma safely."

In the midst of the heavy seas, Jim Wiatlala, the No. 2 rower sitting in front of Purvis, glanced at one of the nearby support boats. "I was trying to figure out how well all this was going to happen," he said. "I could see the four backup rowers and the photographer and reporter and thinking, 'Hey, there's no room for us if the shell goes down.'"

Looking back, Holmes thought the cold was the hardest part. "I knew it would be cold but I had no idea," he said. "When they pulled me out of the boat for a break I was shivering so badly I no longer had control of my body."

Wiatlala said he was glad he was a rower and not a builder.

"At least when you're rowing it keeps you warm," he said.

The waves subsided somewhat as the crew neared Alki Point and the decision was made to substitute replacements for four of the fatiguing eight rowers and the coxswain. Roger "Ask Bob Torget how tough it was—when he was starting to get hypothermia, when he couldn't control his body when crossing Elliott Bay," Hansen said. "Getting him out of the shell and into one of the kicker boats was solely an ordeal in itself. Ask Jim Bartlett, the coxswain who was in that first leg of the trip... He had to be lifted out of the shell as his legs were frozen in place."

Because the coxswain didn't row he didn't benefit from the physical activity of the oarsmen.

"I remember that I soon lost feeling in my legs and hands," Bartlett said. "We probably should have had a wet suit for the coxswains."

Crewmember Norm Purvis said, "in some ways it was an act of defiance. We were not going down without a fight."

With fresh bodies in the shell, the next destination on their route was Saltwater State Park in De Moles, where family and friends of the rowers had prepared hot food and a chance to dry out and warm up. There was a huge party in the park.

The Seattle Times in 1967 chronicles the LOYAL SHODY making its way into the Saltwater Lagoon.

Wiatlala remembers the scene vividly: "I had the soaked sweatpants and sweatshirt on, standing in front of the firepits when I realized I was standing in a big pool of water."

More lineup changes were made for the next leg of the trip, which ended at the Point Defiance boathouse. Relativized but behind schedule, the crew was soon back on the water, steadily making its way toward Commencement Bay. The seas had calmed and as dusk approached the sun appeared.

"I remember rowing on flat water..."
LONG JOURNEY AHEAD

Courtey of Pacific Lutheran University Archives and Special Collections.

Jim Wittala, Puuylap: “I had a lot of adventures being a schoolteacher and working in the summers. I spent time on a tug in Alaska; I delivered firewood; I worked on a helicopter delivering fuel. I was driving a fuel truck when the brakes went out and almost went over a cliff. I'd have to say this was an adventure and afterward you could think about all the possible things that could have gone wrong, but they didn’t. We bucked it out. It was a dark day but the sun was shining on us.”

Roger Hansen, Big Lake, Alaska: “I can think of no other experience so far in my lifetime which even comes close to that event. It takes the high point and anywhere I go and I mention it when the subject of rowing comes up the reaction is, ‘You did what?’ Nothing was ever done like this and probably nothing will ever be done again.”

George Wood, Port Orchard: “It made me more ready to take on a challenge. I have a better understanding of wild hair ideas.”

Bill Knight covered the 1967 Rowdown for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: BILL KNIGHT
Retired Sports Editor, Seattle P-I.
Knight was hired by the legendary Royal Brougham in 1961. His Post-Intelligencer career included stints as sports writer, executive sports editor, national sports correspondent, and sports editor. P-I assignments took him to Super Bowls, Rose Bowls, NBA, NFL, and MLB playoffs, World Cup soccer, America’s Cup sailing, NCAA championship basketball, the Henley Regatta rowing with UW crews, NFL and NBA all-star games and the Goodwill Games in St. Petersburg, Russia.

He was the Seahawks beat writer when the Seahawks made their first trip to the AFC title game in 1983; he covered what still stands as the Mariners’ most significant post-season accomplishment, beating the Yankees in the 1995 playoffs.

Knight’s 45 years in journalism started at the Vancouver Columbian, then four years as sports editor of the Daily Olympian before moving to the P-I. He is a graduate of the University of Washington journalism program and attended Queen Anne High School.

After retiring from the P-I, Knight wrote a book with ex-UW athletic director Mike Luna; taught a writing class at the University of Washington’s Football campus; he has done consulting work with the Seahawks and Emerald Downs.

Knight has received various national and regional journalistic achievement honors, including the Jim Murray Outstanding Sportswriter Award (1999).
Rowing Vignettes

Guest Editor's Note: Excerpt from a forthcoming book, The Varsity Eight, Underfooted and Unremembered, An Irrelevant Rowing Memoir by Les Eldridge, due out in 2019

“What’s that dwarf doing rowing bow?”
Les Eldridge claims to be the shortest oarsman ever to win a varsity letter at the University of Washington. He was 5'10” tall in his rowing days. He rowed bow one in the bow pair with #2 oar Dick Erickson in Al Ulbrickson’s last undefeated varsity in 1957. He always wondered why Coach Al put him in the boat with a bunch of 6'3” plus giants, and so did everyone who rowed with him. Here's the story of the week he made the varsity.

Eldridge remembers: “I should have suspected a surprise coming when Al Ulbrickson put me at bow one of the senior (class of 1957) eight in the class day race the weekend preceding the early April day he picked his varsity. But, it never dawned on me what he had in mind.”

The senior class had only five members still rowing in ’57, (including crew captain Floyd Barker) so Coach Al filled in with sophomores and juniors. But Les Eldridge? Better known as “Dwarf”, at 5’10”, four inches shorter than any other oarsman? Why him? I figured rowing in class day was the peak of my career. I’d only made the 3rd Fresh boat rowing port-side for Bill Learderson the year before. In the varsity, the year he rowed, the turnover was not, in desperation and with Ulbrickson’s blessing, I switched to the starboard side. I was far too small to row in the varsity, turn-out, my Fresh port-side position.

The Monday following Class Day was the day Coach Al unjumbled the mix of eight varsity boats into his boats that represented his best guess as to the hierarchy of boats according to quality, mostly measured by speed. He boated from 8th varsity to first boat. By the time he reached the Junior Varsity (JV), I still hadn’t been boated. My hopes that he’d pick up the wooden tongue depressor with my name on it and slide it into one of the last 16 rowing slots were slim indeed. “I’ll be cut from the squad,” I thought.

As Ulbrickson slid my name into the varsity bow slot, a hush fell over the turnout, jaws dropped. I looked around in bewilderment. We launched the varsity boat first. (I always had trouble when we carried the shell over our heads, as I couldn’t reach the guwhales. I took a lot of grief from that.)

The varsity boat left the dock and I’ll never forget Erickson turning around to me, a look of disbelief still on his face. “Goddamn, Eldridge,” he said, “hang in there!” And I did, for the whole undefeated season.

We were binned from national championship competition because of the UW football scandal over the booster club “bash fund” as were all Husky teams. So some argue that we “didn’t row anybody tough!” Yes and no. We beat the University of British Columbia, Canada’s perennial national eight. We beat Stanford by seven and one half lengths, and they then finished second in the National Championship to Cornell by three and one half lengths. We would have been right with the leaders at the nationals. Draw your own conclusions. Next year’s ’58 varsity with five from our boat, made the semi’s at Royal Henley and then beat five Russian boats in Moscow.

Decades later, I read Daniel James Brown’s excellent The Boys in the Boat, in which he mentions Coach Al keeping a turnout log. “Maybe the answer to why I made the varsity would be there,” I wondered, I was always afraid to ask Coach Al. Contacting the archivist at UW Rare Books, I learned that Al stopped keeping the log the year I was in the varsity. But the Archivist, John Bolcak, who rowed at Amherst, read the previous logs and said I might find the answer there. He read them, and learned that 1957 was the only year on record that Al wasn’t logging the line-ups all season right up until the last race, moving pairs in and out to improve performance. He boated us in April, and never changed the line-up once! I guess he didn’t want to tinker with a boat as fast as we apparently were.

Facing down the Rose Bowl champ
Eldridge: “No, Coach Owens, the Football team can’t move into the Shell House!”

In late 1958, Athletic Director George Briggs and soon-to-be 1960 Rose Bowl champion Head Football Coach Jim Owens told new head crew coach Fil Learderson that they were moving the footballers into Conibear Shell House for fall quarter 1959, to build the camaraderie the crew seemed to attain each year. After all, it was only Fall Quarter rowing, just workouts, no races, who could care? The crew could live elsewhere for one quarter.

Fil was in his first months as head coach, trying to do the impossible and fill the shoes of the great Al Ulbrickson, retired only months earlier. He wanted to please his new boss, Briggs, but was constrained to point out that he could agree only if the UW Rowing Stewards, the crew support group, gave permission, as they, not the University, owned the building. Fil hustled off to ask the Stewards, who replied that they would leave the decision to the Varsity Boat Club (VBC), the crew.

“I should have suspected a surprise coming when Al Ulbrickson put me at bow of the senior (class of 1957) eight in the class day race the weekend preceding the early April day he picked his varsity. But, it never dawned on me what he had in mind.”
pleased with my answer. As an intern, they moved portable dorms onto the lawn outside Conibear that fall. I remember cramming for a geography exam with my friend, football star George Fleming, in his dorm room.

I'll give Bill the benefit of the doubt as to whether it affected his judgment toward me. But, after rowing in an undefeated JV for an entire season, and beating Stanford by 22 lengths, that spring, three days before we left for the Intercollegiate Rowing Association (IRA) national championship, I'll moved the bow three (me, Bob Diehl, and Jim Bingman) to the 3rd varsity. The JV finished second at the IRA by open wires, a length and a quarter, and I missed my only chance at an IRA race. The next year, I had left the program. The pressure was too great for the VBC to resist, and the football team moved in. Later the NCLA ruled against athletic dorms for any teams, and the rooms were lost in a subsequent remodel.

We beat Cal, and finished ssidereversy! Our very first race in 1957 was the dual regatta against our arch rival, the University of California. It was at the 2 8/7 mile Seward Park course on Lake Washington, about 15 minutes of racing at roughly 22 strokes per minute. None of us, save our senior cox, Mickey McKeehan, had ever rowed in a varsity race. A powerful feeling of anxiety filled the boat.

As we approached the finish line, we lead by more than seven lengths. We were so giddy as one can be after 14 minutes of hard pulling. Our cox, Mickey McKeehan, stood up on his seat, dropped the tiller ropes, and held on to the gunwales as he urged us on through the last minute of racing. No one was steering. In theory, the boat should have maintained a steady straight course, both sides pulling evenly. We crossed the finish line, and no one in the boat noticed that we were parallel to the finish line. We had made a ninety-degree turn to port, or to the left and barely made it across. All had certainly noticed. The coaching lasted, also after Cal finished, came roaring up to our boat. Erickson turned to me. "Finally," he said, "all's going to say something good!" (Coach Al was sparring with his praise). But Dick was wrong. Al's big megaphone pointed at us. "Wait in the hell happened!" Ulbrich wanted to know. I hadn't a clue, but the whole boat got a royal chewing out for jeopardizing victory. Dick Erickson never forget for the rest of his life, and wouldn't let me forget, either.

Dick Erickson loved to "yank my chain." For years at public rowing celebrations where he, as Washington coach, was the main attraction, he'd walk in, see me standing in the crowd and mutter quite audibly, "Damn Dwarf! Can't believe he pulled me around!" and shuffle off, muttering some more. I've always contended it was #3 our John Nordstrom's strength that caused the turn to starboard. He was a great oarsman.

Dick was a great teacher. When I was coaching women's rowing at Green Lake in the 1960s held chide me with "a woman's place is in the home, not the boat," all the while

Joining me boats and oars for the program. Of course, he became one of the foremost women's rowing advocates, founding "Dicks Chicks" and starting the UW women's program.

1957 was a banner year for Washington rowing, from my point of view, despite being banished from post season racing. The six oar, Ross Holmstrom, was also my fraternity brother. I remember we sat on a wall outside Conibear the week before the Cal race. "Lee, if we can hang on to win our varsity letter, they'll never take it away from us," he declared. Ross was right, and the achievement changed my life forever. I knew thereafter that if I focused and applied discipline to my efforts, anything was possible. Al would take us around to Rotary Clubs and Chambers of Commerce for publicity. Held introduce me as "the tooth knocked out of the couch." It always got a laugh. The icing on the cake for me was living in the same building as George Pooch's boat shop. After dinner, a dozen or so of us would go next door and sit on the floor, watching George sand one of his beautiful Alaskan Red Cedar boats, and talk to us about rowing and life. "Harmony, rhythm and balance, boys, that's all there is to rowing and to live as well." George would say in that gentle voice of his. He liked to mention that as former rowers grew older, they'd say they learned more fundamentally important life lessons in the racing shell than in the classroom.

Green Lake's Seattle Junior Crew - rowing, coaching and the aftermath.

I became hooked on rowing at age 14 in the Sea Scouts, with a huge whaleboat and 12-foot sailboat oars. Rowing was the primary national sport in Seattle at the time. The UW football team was no powerhouse, and there were no major league sport franchises in Seattle. The Seattle Junior Crew Green Lake program was for boys from anywhere in King County ages 14-18. When I turned out, living only two miles away at 90th and Corliss, Frank Cunningham was the coach. My most pleasing first discovery? George Pooch's oars were hollow, and lightweight! No more solid ash sweeps!

Frank had been a Marine in WWII, and then attended Harvard on the GI Bill. Even though he was a lightweight oarsman, he stroked the heavy weight varsity in 1948. The Eastern Sprint Regatta was held in Seattle that year, and Frank's boat won the varsity eight race. He loved the Northwest, and soon moved to Edmonds where he taught history and Lit. He was a great coach, teaching us to feel the boat, stressing blade work and finesse, and teaching us to scull as well as sweep.
My junior year, Frank left Green Lake and started the rowing program at Lakeside School, under then headmaster Dan Ayrault. Dan and Conn Finlay had rowed in the ‘68 Olympic team for the USA in the ‘Ally’ coxswain, the so-called ‘bubhish’ that they had trained in Cockesbay. Conn was a giant at 6’8”. I was a lovable 4’6” Freshman, but they both treated me as though I were a world-class rower. What gracious guys they were! Conn later coached Stanford, and amassed a collection of used boats held rent to new and struggling clubs at absurdly low rates. When we started the program at The Evergreen State College in the 1970s, we rented from Conn. Frank gained national prominence as coach of one of his Lakeside rowers, John Biglow, an Olympian and Henley sprinter, who later appeared in David Halberstam’s book, “The Amateurs”. He later was instrumental in building Lake Washington Rowing Club’s glorious new shell house, under the Aurora Bridge on Lake Union. He was still sculling well into his 90s. A photo shows him kneeling beside the Green Lake ‘53 varsity, with 15-year-old Les Eldridge in the #4 seat, and Gene Phillips rowing #7. Gene later rowed in Ulbrich’s 1989 Henley eight.

I continued at Green Lake after Frank left, rowing for several coaches who were UW oarsmen, notably lightweight John Baker, who remained a lifelong friend. Competition was sparse, limited to Vancouver Rowing Club, HMSU Discovery, Kelowna Rowing Club, Penton RC, and occasionally, Seattle Tennis Club boats coached by Charley McIntyre, Jack “Kelly” Kelly’s good friend.

I argue with Henley champ Jack Kelly, and Jose! Where was Princess Grace when I needed her?

In 1968, with four long-suffering chaperones, I took 30 teen-age girls on the train, with our oars, from Seattle to Philadelphia’s Schuylkill River for the ‘68 women’s nationals. Jack Kelly was referee. My oars were four and many more coxswain (we didn’t call the girls’ boatings “heavyweights”) was in medal contention in mid-race. The National Women’s Rowing Association distance in those days was 1000 meters. We were in the easternmost lane. The boat to our starboard moved into our lane, and forced us out of the course. My Cox was under strict orders not to risk damage to our borrowed boat. We continued rowing but finished out of the running. I approached referee Jack Kelly. “The boat that finished should be disqualified,” I argued, “and we should get a medal.” Unfortunately, “Kelly” replied, “the rule is that you must make contact with the other boat or its oars. If not, no penalty.” A good lesson for our girls on the occasional unfairness of life while doing the right thing!

Jack Kelly was very kind and understanding in delivering the bad news. He was a two time Henley Diamond Sculls winner (1967, 1969), and won an Olympic bronze. Some contend that his success was partly revenge for his father, John B. Kelly, Sr. (“Kelly for Brick” Philadelphia construction empire), who was rejected by the Royal Henley for Diamond Sculls contention in 1920, but that same year won Olympic gold in the single scull event in Belgium. The Henley at the time had a rule that those who “worked with their hands” (artisans, laborers) could not compete at Henley-on-Thames. Besides, Kelly was Irish, and the English didn’t take kindly to rowing to the Irish. National guilt, I suppose. Jack, Jr. remained the most celebrated of the Kelly clan until his sister, actress Grace, became Princess of Monaco.

Coaching Young Women at Green Lake — What goes around, comes around.

In 1966, while I was working at Boeing, I was asked to coach the Girls rowing program (quite new) at Green Lake. The first Women’s nationals were to be held at Green Lake that summer. Women’s rowing was in its infancy, and there was no separate high school category, so my 14-18-year-olds competed against adults. The equipment was all hand-made down, built for 180-pound men. My lightweight girls (125-pound average, 130 pound maximum) had to row against the big men. But that a dedicated squad! Our first championship, they won gold in lightweight eights and fours. They won the same two events the next year, 1967, at Lake Merritt, CA, plus Pat DeNeu won a sculling gold. Pat also won a cox as the gold for the eight, and as bow oar in the next year’s eight. Marymai Tsutakawa rowed #5, and also rowed the four. The daughter of renowned artist and sculptor George Tsutakawa, she is today a nationally recognized artist and historian for Japanese Americans caught up in WW II internment, as well as the heroic Japanese American soldiers of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Battalion (the “one-puck-puka”) the most decorated unit in American Army history.

The circular nature of life found me coaching one of Frank Cunningham’s daughters, Laurie, in 1968. Further, Pat DeNeu settled in Olympia, rowed for Olympia Area Rowing (OAR) and coached my daughter, Tiffany, in volleyball at Capital High. In the photo of the Pocock carbon-fiber four LES ELDREDGE being carried to the OAR dock, you can see that Pat still wears her prized Green Lake rowing shirt, after 45 years.
Pocock’s boats live on!
The cedar boats George and his son Stan crafted are now collector’s items.

The largest collection of these boats still in active use is maintained at the Maritime Center in Port Townsend by my classmate and rowing buddy, John Collins, Seattle U. Professor Emeritus. Another Pocock four, the Carl Deetken, in which I rowed, and then coached two national champion crews, hangs from the ceiling of Tidby’s Pub in Coupeville, WA. Carl Deetken was a Seattle elected official and avid supporter of the Green Lake youth rowing program.

OAR (Olympia Area Rowing Association) When I came to Olympia at The Evergreen State College (TESC) in 1971, I dreamed of a college rowing program. I couldn’t make it happen, but Coaches Cath. Johnson, and later, Azam Stark, put together a club program for TESC still rowing out of the OAR Shell House. The shell house was largely the work of Gretchen Van Dusen, Richard Ramsey, and Don Low. In 1984, a group of us formed OAR. These included Law, a former amateur rowing association eights champion from Detroit Boat Club, Bill Cullen, who rowed bow in the US Naval Academy varsity, the late Bill Kalenius, the “Johnny Appleseed” of NW rowing, and Mike Bahn and Janet Waeschle, later both OAR presidents. We rowed out of warehouses, scrounged boats from the Pocock Rowing Center with the help of Bruce Beall and Al McKenzie, and finally built the Shell House. OAR has developed a juniors and masters program serving more than 100 rowers.

Our coaches and their results have been remarkable. Trips to many nationals for both juniors and masters. TESC at the Dad Vail Regatta. At least one junior Brody Buckland, has rowed in the Olympics (for Australia). We have more women than men rowing. Our stellar coaches have included British national team and Oxford rower Richard Hull, national champion and Olympic rowers Helen Cullen and Christie Nordius, and many more former collegiate oarsmen. When OAR members bought the Pocock four and christened her LES ELDREDGE, I was moved to tears. The photos show me at the christening, rowing in the four with Law, Waeschle and DeNeu, and carrying the boat to the dock. OAR is alive, and in very good hands.

Errors in these vignettes are mine, unintentional, and no doubt owing to these memories being 60 years old.
IGNORANCE IN ACTION

Four guys from Bainbridge Island take on the best rowers at Boston

By Russ McCombs
All images provided by the author

The Head of the Charles Regatta is the biggest rowing event anywhere, and is held annually in Boston.

ROWING IS NOT A NEW SPORT. It is generally considered to be the oldest competitive sport in the United States, older than baseball, basketball or football. The race between Harvard and Yale dates from 1852 and has been held annually since 1859 except during the years of the two world wars.

To compete in a rowing race the essentials are: a long, narrow boat called a shell, oars, and people.

Racing shells come in four established sizes. The largest and most recognizable is the 8+—58’6” long x 24” wide, they hold 8 rowers plus one cox’n. Each rower has one 12” long oar. 8 rowers, 8 oars.

The next size is the 4+. About 44’ long x 20’2” wide they hold 4 rowers plus one cox’n. 4 rowers, 4 oars. There is a variant of the 4+ called the Quad which uses the same hull as the 4 but is rigged such that the rowers have 2 oars each. 4 rowers, 8 oars. Quads are raced both with and without a cox’n.

Then come the Double and the Pair. The hull is about 32’ long x 12” wide. The Double has 2 rowers, each with 2 oars. 2 rowers, 4 oars. The Pair uses the same hull as the Double but each of the 2 rowers has only one oar. 2 rowers, 2 oars.

There is no cox’n in either the Double or the Pair.

Finally, there is the Single. The hull is about 26’ long x 9’ wide. If you wonder how a fully-grown person fits into a 9’ wide hull, the answer is that he, or she, doesn’t. The rower sits on top of the hull. And yes, it is quite tippy. That is why you always have the oar blades on the water when sitting still. Lift one oar blade off the water and you will be swimming before you know it. There is no cox’n. The Single has 1 rower with 2 oars.

A few words about the cox’n (coxswain) — There can be only one boss in an 8+ or 4+ racing shell, and that boss is the cox’n. The cox’n is the most important person in that boat. Yes, it takes a lot of muscle to make a boat go fast but it also takes brains; and the brains in the boat belong to the cox’n. Muscle is easy — the cox’n tells the rowers what to do, and they do it, no questions asked. (My daughter, Kelly, who was a cox’n in college, told me that when she found out she could yell at great big men, and they HAD TO OBEY her, she had found her place in the world. She is now a kindergarten teacher, marshalling 27 five-year-olds every day. She will, on occasion, use her “cox’n voice”.)

The cox’n is responsible for everything that happens from the time the crew picks up the boat to take it to the water until the boat goes back on the rack at the end of the day. The cox’n makes all the commands for the boat. He, or she, calls for rowers to enter the boat, calls the start of rowing, the number of strokes/minute, the charges in stroke rate, the finish and cool down rates, the commands necessary to bring the boat safely back to the dock or shore. The cox’n will often talk directly to the Stroke — they sit looking directly at each other — to agree on the stroke count and speed. Because the Stroke sits all the way aft in the boat, the Stroke’s oar can be seen by all the rowers in the boat. They take their speed and rhythm from the Stroke.

The cox’n calls the orders, sets the stroke count, steers the boat, knows how to call for a fast start, when to settle to a race rate that can be maintained over distance, when to pick up the stroke count for a finishing sprint. A good cox’n is worth his/her weight in gold.

There are two types of races for flat water racing shells: Sprints and Head Races. Sprints are traditionally held in the Spring. Head Races are held in the Fall. Sprints are straight line, now as hard and as fast as you can. 2000 meters for high school and college students, 1000 meters for masters (rowers past the age of college students). In a sprint race several racing shells (up to 8 at a time) are lined up at a starting line and sent down a straight line course by a starting referee. They start quickly and maintain their best speed for the duration of the race. The first boat crossing the finish line wins. Head Races are longer distances (usually 3-5 miles) and follow a course that wraps around a lake or follows the bends of a river. Because of the longer distance of a Head Race the speed of the shell is usually slower and the stamina of the rowers is most important. Head races have a separate starting time for each boat. The race is against the clock, not against any other boat. The boat with the lowest finish time wins.

The Head of the Charles Regatta (HOCR)

The Charles River flows through Boston, MA and is the site of the Head of the Charles Regatta. Looking upstream the city of Boston is to the left, and the city of Cambridge is to the right. The warm-up area is a basin formed by a dam and is adjacent to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's campus. The race starts at Boston University. It continues upstream past Harvard University and ends near Soldiers Field. Founded in 1965, the HOCR is the largest rowing regatta in the world, attracting approximately 11,000 athletes, over 2000 boats and 800 rowing clubs and colleges. It is held annually on the penultimate fall weekend in October. The course wraps around several bends in the river, turning both to the right and to the left, passes under seven bridges, and attracts tens of thousands of spectators. Racing starts early Saturday morning and lasts until dark, taking up again early on Sunday and lasting most of the day. Each boat is assigned a number and a starting time. Every boat is responsible for
arriving at the starting line, in order, at their appointed time. The start is flying with each boat crossing the starting line at full speed. A boat starts approximately every 8-10 seconds. We be onto you if you are out of numerical order or arrive late. The weather can be sunny, is often raining, and has been known to snow. There is almost always wind. The course is 3 miles long. There are other head races scattered around the country including one in Seattle called The Head of the Lake, but Boston is the big one. There is nothing quite like it anywhere. It is intimidating. It is awe inspiring. It is grand!

In the spring of 2003 my late friend Bill Richards started hinting that we—the men program at Bainbridge Island Rowing (BIR)—should consider sending a boat to Boston to compete at the Head of the Charles Regatta. The men’s program was small at that time, no more than 10-12 men who showed up consistently. Bill was the self-appointed coordinator for the men and the closest thing we had to a coach. He undoubtedly had the most experience in competitive rowing. He had rowed as a student at Fordham University in New York and had continued in several of the places he had lived during his long career as a newspaper writer. He had been one of the founding members of BIR. There were four of us who were rowing consistently together and were having a pretty good season in sprint racing. In chronological order Bill was the oldest at age 63. Then came John Foy at 59, myself at 58 and Dave Ward at 55. Bill and I were both starboard—our oars were on the starboard (right) side of the boat. Dave and John were ports—their oars were on the port (left) side of the boat. John rowed lightweight at Yale for one year but not much after that until he found the recently formed BIR. Dave had never rowed before but was learning fast and enjoying it. I, although having been raised with boats, had never rowed in a racing shell but I was learning fast too.

With the exception of Bill, we knew nothing about head racing or the Head of the Charles Regatta. When I found out it was a 3 mile race I had doubts. I was used to sprints of only 1000 meters—rowing as hard as I could for about 120 strokes. But, as I said, we were having a pretty good spring so when Bill asked if we would commit to going to Boston we all said yes. Little did we know...

Participating in the HORC is by invitation or is based on your previous racing record in at the HORC. How did we, a tiny new rowing club from Bainbridge Island in far-flung Washington State get accepted? Was it an effort toward geographical diversity? Special consideration for a small start-up club? Was it just dumb luck? We’ll never know.

Work schedules demanded that we take the minimum amount of time off to make the trip. But we did have one complication—it was cost prohibitive to ship our own shell across the country. We had the find a boat to race in. That problem was solved when Bill called his brother, Rob, who lived in West Simsbury, a suburb of Hartford, Conn, and was a member of a small rowing club there. Rob agreed to loan us a boat, but we had to come there to get it. Our race time was set for Wednesday afternoon. Upon arrival in Boston on Thursday afternoon Bill, Dave, John, myself, and my wife, Dee tumbled into a rental car and headed for Connecticut. We got to West Simsbury and Rob took us to the rowing club to show us the boat. It was late afternoon, but we just had time to take the boat for a trial run with Rob. Squeezed into the cox’s seat. There was one stipulation—the boat came with a cox, and it wasn’t going to be Rob. Our cox turned out to be a lovely 79-year-old lady named E.L. Swanson who simply went by the initials “B.L.” and she would meet us at the race course on Saturday. The next morning, we loaded the boat on top of a pickup truck's cargo rack with a temporary support rigged on the front bumper. Picture this: a 19-foot-long truck with a
As if driving on the Mass Pike at 65 mph with a 44-foot-long boat strapped on top was not bad enough, we encountered several toll booths.

The longer we stood there the more intimidating it looked. I had never seen so many racing shells in my life. That evening while walking in Cambridge we encountered one group after another of very fit men and women. And it seemed that all were very tall. The men looked to be about 6'-5" and the women averaged almost 6'-4". It suddenly dawned on us that we were going to be racing against teams that were not only tall and fit but, in many cases, had been rowing together for 35 years or more. Oh well, we had come to Boston and we would do our best.

Race day dawned, and we walked the mile or so from our hotel to Magazine Beach to rig our boat. B.L., our cox, found us there. We found out that four men were not the only ones who were unfamiliar with the course. B.L. had only been to Boston twice in her 79 years, had been coxing rowing shells for only one year, and she had never been on the Charles River, but she had studied as much as she could about the race. So all five of us were novices in the biggest regatta in the world. No pressure! We quickly found a course map and studied it. No problem, follow the boats in front of us and turn where they turned. Sounded easy enough.

We launched our boat, headed to the warm-up basin and found our place in line. We were all very nervous but when the starter called, "Bainbridge Island Rowing Club", we were off and away. We had decided to start at 30 strokes/minute and then settle to 26. Just a few strokes after the start we passed under two bridges, the Boston University Bridge and then a railroad bridge. A long turn to starboard (right) and we passed Magazine Beach. The River Street Bridge was next and before I knew it we passed the one-mile marker. I saw it and could not believe it. I felt great and the people on shore were cheering. We passed B.L. for us, but they were cheering. A couple of boats had passed us, but we stuck to our race plan. Our shell from bow to stern was: myself in the bow seat pulling a starboard oar, Dave in number 2 seat rowing a port oar, Bill in number 3 seat rowing starboard and finally John in the stroke seat rowing port. B.L., our cox, sat all the way aft looking at John and yelling to us, "Come on, you WIMPISH!" while trying to keep the boat on a straight course.

We found out later that there had been a free class for coxns who had never raced on the Charles. That class would have been a lot of help to B.L. We tended to row a lot farther than most of the other boats because there were ways to steer a straighter course through the corners than we did. We basically took the "scenic route".

The Western Avenue Bridge was next, followed by a long turn to port. In the middle of the turn we passed under the Weeks Footbridge. Then the first of two turns to starboard and we came to the Anderson Bridge. All the bridges had been jammed with spectators but as we swept beneath the Anderson Bridge two young girls could be heard yelling, "Go Grandma! Go Grandma!". They were B.L.'s grandchildren! Shortly after the Anderson Bridge I saw the two-mile marker go by. We picked up our pace and headed for a very long, sweeping turn to the port (left) that passes right in front of the Canbridge Bouchette. Bill and I had to pull extra hard on our oars to help us through the turn. Several boats passed us there. Then under the Eliot Bridge and another long turn to starboard with Dave and John pulling hard this time, followed by a straight run to the finish line. It had taken us a little over 23 minutes to complete the course. We had done it!

While rowing easily downstream back to Magazine Beach we congratulated each other and found out that our race plan had not exactly been followed to the letter. Instead of starting at 30 strokes/minute we had taken it up to 33, and our intended race rate of 26 strokes/minute had actually been 28.

Adrenalin will do that. So, fly 3000 miles to row a boat for 23 minutes. Make sense? Ask anyone who has ever participated in HOCR. The answer? Undoubtedly, YES. Would we do it again? Of course.

We did not win our division. We didn't even come close. 23 minutes is not a fast time for a 4+ with rowers averaging 58 years old. In fact, the winning time in the 2017 HOCR for that age division was 17 minutes, 5 seconds. But, there were also a couple of boats that finished near the same time that we did in 2003. Our division consisted of 10 boats. We finished 14th out of those 15. We beat 4 guys from London, England. They may have been partying a bit too hard on Friday night. But before we left home we had set three goals. 1. To show up. 2. Not to finish dead last. And 3. To have a good time. We achieved them all. And, regarding goal number 3, really, we didn't have a good time, we had a wonderful time!😊

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: RUSS MCCOMB

Russ grew up just north of the UW campus. From his home he could see the rowing shells on Union Bay and rounding Webster Point at the tip of Laureldale. Instead of attending the UW, Russ chose to study at Western Washington University in Bellingham. WWU was, and is, a great school, but it started its rowing program 2 years after Russ graduated. Therefore, he never rowed competitively until, having moved to Bainbridge Island in 1979 with his wife, Dee, and raising a family there, they found Bainbridge Island Rowing Club in 2001. They both enjoy the sport and Dee has become a US Rowing certified rowing referee. Russ retired from a career in naval architecture in 2016 and has been volunteering at Puget Sound Maritime ever since, working in the ships plans archives. Russ still draws boats and ships and is an accomplished ink and watercolor marine artist.
A word from THE PRESIDENT

Rachel Shermunsky, Puget Sound Maritime President

WITH A LONG FAMILY HISTORY IN THE PUGET SOUND, North Pacific and Alaska maritime industry, I am proud to be the new president of Puget Sound Maritime (PSM). Both my grandfather, Bob Shermunsky, Sr., and father Ric have been members of the former Puget Sound Maritime Historical Society, now PSM, for decades. Grandfather established Western Towboat Company in 1948, coincidentally the same year as PSM was founded. Together with his sons, my father Ric and his brother Bob Jr., he built the business to include today’s fleet of 22 tugs and barges, operating throughout the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Hawaii, U.S. West Coast, and to Mexico and Central America.

I have continued our family involvement in maritime activities, and have been active in the Seattle Propeller Club, a regional affiliate of the national maritime industry trade association, serving as president for two and a half years beginning in 2012. During this period I also chaired the popular, long-running feature Seattle Maritime Week tugboat races. So I have been involved in the maritime business, and with affiliated nonprofit organizations, for my entire working life.

I look forward to continuing my participation in maritime activities as I take the helm of PSM. We face some challenges as we move ahead, an aging and slowly declining membership, and as a result, less revenue to support our programs. Also, we need to reduce the considerable cost of publishing our now half century old, highly respected historical journal, The Sea Chest, without compromising its quality. And we must take new approaches to increasing our membership, especially among younger generations.

The board and I will be studying and taking action to meet and overcome these challenges in the months ahead. I hope that you will join us, and participate in our effort to sustain, grow and re-energize PSM. It’s an honor to be the new president of the region’s oldest maritime heritage organization. I look forward to working with you to continue our proud, now 70-year-old legacy, and making renewed progress in the months and years ahead.

Rachel

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