

The Eight

A SEASON IN THE
TRADITION OF HARVARD CREW




SUSAN SAINT SING

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A Season in the Tradition of Harvard Crew

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To Murray, for putting up with me

THE EIGHT

CONTENTS

Introduction

Part One: Rower Speak

- 13 A Hundred Years of Sweat
- 22 Rower Speak
- 29 In the Morning Mist
- 42 1852—The Start of It All
- 53 Charles Eliot, Harvard President and Bowman
- 65 Small, Distant Wars
- 72 The Coach, the Bar
- 84 Winning a Seat
- 98 On Becoming a Believer

Part Two: Racing

- 107 Dual Cup Racing
- 115 Reflections: The Morning After
- 123 Synergy
- 128 Hold-Your-Breath Harvard
- 133 The Historic Eastern Sprints
- 148 Monkey Time
- 166 The Inertia of Tradition

Part Three: The Harvard-Yale Race

- 175 Rowers' Time: The Historic Harvard-Yale Race
- 189 Red Top
- 194 Press Day
- 207 The 143rd Harvard-Yale Race

Part Four: International Racing and the Olympic Games

- 227 Reaching the Heights: Of Mountains and Water
- 238 The Henley Royal Regatta, 2008
- 242 U.S. National Team Selection Camps
- 250 On the World Circuit
- 257 Harvard's Olympic Tradition
- 260 Beijing
- 267 Seeking Harvard's First Olympic Rowing Gold
- 273 A Bridge to the Summit

279 Afterword

287 Acknowledgments

289 Notes

INTRODUCTION

Harvard rowing is a window into intercollegiate competition in America. The first collegiate competition was a rowing race between Harvard and Yale. The year was 1852. The Civil War had not yet happened, the game of basketball hadn't been invented, and football was still played mostly like rugby. American sporting traditions were still tethered to the British sporting traditions. Boxing, horse racing, and rowing captured the imaginations of most sports-minded individuals. And rowing in particular captured the hearts and souls of women and men alike. An afternoon at the boat races could include a lovely float in a punt with one's betrothed as sleek racing crafts oared by in the sun.

Such moments tug at our collective notions of fun and relaxation. Sport, stemming from games, stemming from play, structure our leisure and tie our present to the past in memories and ritual. These links are important because they define where we are on the continuum of our developing culture. They tie us to our past and pinpoint where we are in our present endeavor of making a better way, a more informed, illuminated way, toward the future.

An analogy from boating comes to mind. Once, two young friends new to boating mentioned that they were going out to the Gulf Stream to fish. I, with ten thousand miles of blue-water sailing under my belt, suggested that they take a chart, just in case.

They replied, "Oh, we don't need a chart; we have a GPS and that will give us our latitude and longitude so we'll know where we are." I looked at them a moment and said, "Well, you may know where you are, but you won't know where that is without a chart."

Navigational charts are products of collective information—depth of water, prevailing currents, land, navigational aids, light-houses, day markers, and so on. They are a log produced in graphic form gathered from years of data on which a single lat/long point is graphed. Charts indicate so much more than one point.

In a similar fashion, historical events are not just points in time but are related to other points in time. Harvard rowing is more a chart than a point. It is not a singular event that happens on specific Saturdays. It is part of the continuum of living American history, encompassing many Saturdays over weeks, months, years, decades, and centuries—so much so that it has gained the momentum of tradition. Few sports give us so complete a look into ourselves and our developing nation.

The year 2008 would have seemed a nearly unimaginable date to the first Harvard crews that raced Yale in 1852. It was an Olympic year—all part of the great wheel of sport tradition that rolls forward through much spirit and work, as seen in the way China readied Beijing for the Twenty-ninth Olympiad. The Games, and Harvard's participation in them, is part of a sequence, starting in 1896 with the revival of the modern Olympics. A Harvard man, James Connolly, won the first medal of the 1896 modern Olympics in the triple jump. His medal was silver and he also was awarded an olive branch and a diploma. Gold medals for victors were not introduced until 1904. Now, one hundred years later, Harvard rowers Patrick Todd, Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss,

INTRODUCTION

and Malcolm Howard also set their sights on bringing home the first prize in Beijing.

On a continuum of sports and culture sometimes laced with blood doping, steroids, and all manner of performance-enhancing drug usage, the Beijing Games set out to rise as a symbol of hope and change, a cleanup heightened to grandeur and spectacle previously unseen in the Communist Chinese State. If we were to look at the Beijing Olympics as a single point of latitude and longitude, it might appear that China always has relatively low pollution and that the world joyously traveled there to enjoy a festival of human enlightenment and achievement. It is only in the ongoing long look, like studying a chart of the collective input, that truth arises in all things human; that sport, for example, symbolizes a need within to excel and perform and compete at the highest level and, for a short time, to put aside political ramifications and prejudices, and try—at least try—to climb the lofty heights and touch the gods.

Harvard crew does not exist in a bubble. It is one of many great traditions of excellence at Harvard. And though this book focuses on the 2008 men's heavyweight varsity eight so as to have a point of reference in time and imagery, from this vantage point the text will also look at the layers on the continuum of time that this current team is steered in. That means the story will include many past Harvard rowers, some of whom are still active in the elite ranks (namely, those seeking Olympic and world-class recognition in Beijing and Europe), as well as the lightweight rowers, the women rowers seeking an Olympic berth, and the other Harvard athletes trying for Beijing.

Harvard is one of the premier intellectual capitals of the world,

the oldest college in America, *and* it is an athletic hotbed as well. A brief time line of Harvard athletics might read like this:

1852: All intercollegiate competition in America starts with a Harvard and Yale rowing race.

1896: A Harvard student wins the first silver medal in the modern Olympic Games.

2008: Harvard has more varsity sports than any college in the nation, and though it gives no athletic scholarships, it claims four of the top male rowers in Beijing.

What these student athletes go through physically to earn a seat in the Harvard first eight is just one side of the coin. The real test of their mettle is the inner athlete called upon to measure up in this very tense and dramatic world. In his book *The Amateurs*, which follows four single scullers in their quests to be number one for the 1984 Olympic berth, David Halberstam defined this world as “a small, bitter, and distant war”: crew practice. There is the drama of elite college racing, coaching, personal and team struggle, all with on eye to the collegiate national championship and possibly for the few, or the one, the 2008 Olympic Games.

My first encounter with Harvard rowing came in the mid-1980s when, for nearly inexplicable reasons, the collegiate national rowing championships were raced for six years not in the hotbeds of rowing on the East and West Coasts, but on a remote lake amid the grasses of a state park in the Midwest. Brainchild of Brown University rower Bill Engeman, the “Cincinnati Regatta” was billed as neutral ground, a sanctuary for East and West crews to come

INTRODUCTION

and race with no home court advantage—just good water, top billing, and lots of enthusiasm.

For me, it was an opportunity as a young journalist to cover a great sports story. Struggling to work as a free lancer covering the race for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, I was a small, injured female athlete listening in a crowd gathered around a rowing tank in Cincinnati, Ohio. I had been a Hall of Fame high school athlete. But my athletic career all but ended in college when a serious neck and back injury landed me in a pain control center for nearly a decade of therapy.

There, I learned a lot about my inner self and something I came to understand as the Other. The Other being a place inside you need to go to at times to find the strength needed. As an athlete, I had gone to that place many times during marathon runs and brutal workouts. The discipline and striving to push to a limit, reach it, and then go beyond it, began a pathway that I would follow in my recovery. An avid hiker and climber before the accident—with pictures of Everest on my college dorm walls and climbing books like *Tenzing of Everest* on my shelf—I used visualization techniques from sports when I had to endure yet another surgery or procedure at the pain control center; these techniques enabled me to put myself in the experience of a different, better place, usually up there on the South Col of Everest or out crossing the bridge at Mud Swamp on my cross-country training route. The search for a way out of my pain and depression, my fettered dreams, drove me daily to keep trying to reach out, not “sit down” and freeze to death in the ever-present call to self-destruct and just get out of pain, permanently.

When I heard that renowned Harvard rowing coach Harry Parker was in town for the regatta and was holding a coaching

clinic at the Cincinnati Rowing Center, I was there. I listened. Harry, I guessed, was used to having people take notice when he spoke. He was comfortable with himself and had an ease about him. The small crowd was entranced. He had no idea that he had made an impression that day that would alter a life for someone who wasn't a 6'5" rower-type guy, until I interviewed him for this book thirty years later.

After listening to Harry speak, I knew I could be an athlete again—a coxswain, where I didn't need a strong body, just my brains and my desire to be well and to participate *somehow* again in sports that had previously been so life-giving to me. After I heard him talk, I started to cox, then to compete, then to coach. Then within a few years I made the U.S. World Rowing Team as a manager, and finally—going full circle—I got to return the favor and write about that day and the impact of one of my heroes, someone who helped save my life.

The morning after his talk, the races for the collegiate national championships began out at Harsha Lake near Batavia, Ohio. The lake was shimmering, the wind was calm, and all the fishermen had been chased away for a few days as the festival-like atmosphere took shape. The warmth of the June sun felt good on my shoulders as I wandered through the unfamiliar accoutrements of crew shells, riggers, oars strewn across the grass and beach, sizing up the scene, when these long, lean, men with crimson tank tops and a white "H" on their backs caught my eye. You didn't dare approach them. These guys were *Harvard* oarsmen. I suspected every liting stance they took was somehow purposeful, not by chance, and that it was part of the prerace strategy needed in their "sacred" space.

INTRODUCTION

Harry was equally enigmatic. I watched him, as a journalist does, just watching without knowing or judging, just watching for something that stirs a thread in your mind and becomes a story. I watched him standing in the sand at Harsha Lake, surrounded by a throng of wannabes; and it wasn't until the race started that I got an insight into what I think was the greatest confidence in coaching I have ever witnessed. He didn't watch the race. And it wasn't as I might not have watched—a young coach too afraid of the uncertainty of the result—but it was because he knew, *he knew exactly* what his crew was going to deliver.

And what they were doing out there, two thousand meters away across open water charging down buoyed lanes was incredible. They were rowing the exact race that they had practiced, and they were delivering it. This is more sophisticated than it seems; we aren't talking the usual coaching banter of “practice as you play, play as you practice.” We are talking about a coach who, if he were a basketball coach, would have orchestrated the entire game as if the offensive shots were to be played without thought of—or more important, without concern about—the defense. Every shot choreographed, every move rehearsed and if it were executed perfectly, the defense was nullified simply by the perfect execution of the offense. The inner game. The same game I had been trying to play to heal myself.

Harry Parker acted as if he was confident that his crew was going to hit each stroke (roughly 220 of them in two thousand meters) from the first catch, through the body of the race, to the finish—and here is the pinnacle of my admiration—with the crew of eight men nosing the bow ball of the sixty-foot shell over the finish line *just* as all eight men were at *the finish of their last stroke*. Brown University, who had been ahead by inches in the last few

yards, with the bows seesawing back and forth right to the finish, at the line finished their last stroke *approaching* the catch, which is the slowest part of the stroke cycle and consequently the place in the stroke where the boat is waiting for the thrust and the speed to continue on—meaning the boat is lagging behind. Brown lost that two-thousand-meter race in the last stroke because they had not timed, not carried *the discipline of timing*, down the course to hit the last stroke crossing the line at precisely the top of the work-curve, nosing the bow ball ahead, at the only point of the race where it was needed to be nosed ahead—the finish line.

I watched Harry and I knew that he knew what we both saw. He smiled, as if to congratulate me on recognizing perfection.

I was hooked.

Long after the story of that race was written and published, I continued going to the boathouse. A seed had been planted and a lightbulb had gone on. I knew I could be an athlete again through rowing. I was small enough and had enough watermanship skills from years of sailing and boating on Lake Erie before the accident to my neck that I knew I could be a coxswain (the small person who sits in the back of a shell and calls the race strategy and steers). Rowing probably saved my life. I was reborn out there on the sand and water of East Fork State Park. Rowing engaged all my senses. Rowing gave me a reason to get up every morning. I was an athlete again. I was alive again. Slowly, I coxed myself right out of the pain control center and into the National Training Center for Rowing and finally to the U.S. National Rowing Team. And I've thought about that race for almost thirty years, carried it through twenty-five years of collegiate coaching and tried to instill into my own crews a morsel of what I witnessed that day of Harvard's mystique, character, and discipline.

INTRODUCTION

Harvard rowing. We see the magic of their results. There is no door to enter for the ordinary. We watch from our seats in the bleachers as the elusive unfolds. We recognize it. We applaud it. Theirs is a tradition rare and unique, bigger than any one individual, era, coach, or race; an ethos unlike any other, ethereal brickwork layered one season at a time, year after year, century after century, with talent, privilege, equipment, and a touch of grace as mortar—until a veritable temple of rowing is built: the eight.

