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3 May 2019

United States Women's Rowing Team's Dominance

“Then, in the last two hundred yards, thinking itself fell away, and pain suddenly came shrieking back into the boat, descending on all of them at once, searing their legs, their arms, their shoulders, clawing at their backs, tearing at their hearts and lungs as they desperately gulped at the air. And in those last two hundred yards, in an extraordinary burst of speed, rowing at forty strokes per minute, pounding the water into a froth, Washington passed California”(Brown). This boat of rowers who came from Washington University to compete and win the national championships in Poughkeepsie, New York are destined to go on and win the 1936 Berlin Olympic games. Thanks to the popularity of rowing, fate brought these boys together to win nine gold medals and be declared the best in the world (see fig. 1).

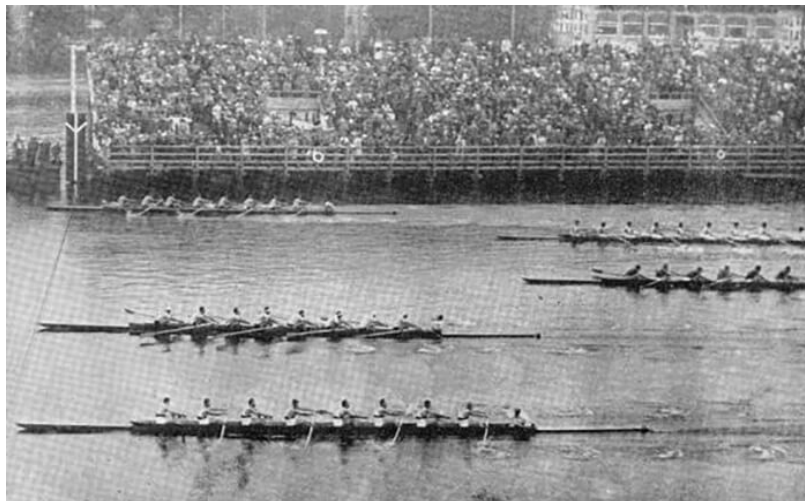


Fig. 1. This Picture displays *The Boys in the Boat* crossing the finish line first at the 1936 Berlin Olympics (Brown). The United States continued to dominate in the sport of rowing. Recently many collegiate rowers

have joined the Men's and Women's National Rowing Teams, and thus provide an abundance of strong and talented athletes to aid the United States and their path toward dominance. Due to the popularity of the sport rowing in the United States, combined with extreme mental and physical training for elite athletes, the U.S. Women's National Rowing Team is most consistently the best in the world.

Rowing is a sport originating in Egyptian times in which someone in a boat puts oars in the water and pulls with their legs, body, and arms propelling themselves through the water. This motion is called a stroke: "The stroke is divided into two complementary segments, the drive, and the recovery. The drive propels the boat through the water. The recovery allows an oarsman to move from the end of the stroke, the release, to the beginning of the stroke, the catch"(Lewis). The drive is an extreme effort pulling with all the strength you can muster, while the recovery is a rest to help the rower recovery from the recent stroke and reset for the next (Lewis). Most people row in a scull which is a type of boat used in most races to reduce friction on the water improving racing times. Most elite athletes practice with these boats when rowing on the water and working on technique rather than training in the gym and using rowing machines (O'Connor).

The United States rowing teams came from humble beginnings as seen in *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*, by Daniel James Brown. Boats of inexperienced rowers in the early nineteen hundreds from different colleges and universities competed against other colleges and universities. These competitions could qualify teams to compete in the national championships in Poughkeepsie. If they were to win they could then go on to compete at the Olympic Qualifiers in Princeton on Mercer Lake

(Brown). If this team could once more win this competition with the top national teams in the United States, they could then go and compete at the Olympic Games.

In recent years rowers have qualified for the U.S. national teams with impressive times on the rowing machine. These athletes once admitted to the U.S. Women's Rowing Team then go on to be coached by Tom Terhaar for the rest of their time on the national team. Juliet Macur, a *New York Times* journalist and winner of the Sidney Award, a monthly award for excellent socially conscious journalism, explains the coaching process. In her article *U.S. Women's Rowing Coach Says Secret Is the Deep Talent Pool*, Macur points out Tom Terhaar's unique perspective on finding the fastest boat by mixing the rowers around putting them in different boats until they are comfortable rowing with anyone. He then selects the top athletes and compiles boats to race in the national championships. Since 2001 when Terhaar was hired, the U.S. Women's Rowing Team has won four Olympic gold medals and thirteen world championships.

Other aspects that rowers must focus on include: catching your swing, trusting yourself, trusting the rowers in the boat, and trusting the coxswain. These ideas must be obtained to have a successful boat and stay in sync with the others on your team. The swing is a term used by rowers meaning the experience when the rowers in the skull drive and pull with their oars in the water achieving perfect synchronicity. This experience helps propel the boat and make the workload easier for everyone in the boat: "Emily Reagan could feel her end of the boat rise, as if the whole shell were taking flight"(Macur: "A Simple Yell"). This experience felt by Emily, an Olympic rower for the U.S. Women's National Team, is similar to a boat finding their swing.

A key element of racing is understanding the teammates in your boat and trusting them. If these powers build a great relationship with the people in their boat, they are more likely to connect in the stroke and be more efficient as a team. If a rower knows their limits and their ability to fight through the pain for everyone else in the boat, these thoughts can relieve mental stresses for all rowers when racing as seen in Anahad O'Connor's article from the *New York Times*, *The Workout: Rowing With Esther Lofgren, Olympian*.

Coxswains are rowers without oars that sit in the back of the boat calling out directions while steering the boat. These rowers are an essential part of rowing not only because they steer the boat, but because they can make or break someone's race. These usually short lightweight members carry out race plans from coaches and also encourage their teammates to row harder faster, and push themselves past their limit. They can be responsible for helping the boat find their swing and have the rowers share their burden of burning legs and hearts with the rest of the boat. Another job of the coxswain is to have the rowers push their hardest with phrases like "power ten" a keyword for ten gigantic elephant sized strokes with a hundred and fifty percent effort, helping propel the boat ahead of the competition (Brown).

Furthermore, trusting a coxswain is a crucial aspect of rowing. First, the athletes have to trust their coxswain to steer them down the course, carry out the race plan, and give the rowers the correct directions to follow the race plan. Many problems can occur ruining a race if you do not trust your teammates and coxswain to keep you safe when rowing your absolute hardest for more than five minutes. Having a great coxswain is a huge part of any rowing team's success. Standing at five foot four inches coxswain Kaitlin Guregian (formerly Kaitlin Snyder) is a crucial part of the United States Women's Rowing Team's dominance. She has been a talented

coxswain with the United States since 2008 medaling in sixteen international competitions, and winning gold in thirteen of those competitions (“Katelin Guregian”).

Similarly, verbal codes used by coxswains can be helpful during a race to not concede any information to your opponents while giving your crew specific information during the race. Bobby Moch, the coxswain for Washington University’s 1936 Olympic rowing, team used covert messages to communicate with his team: “Bobby Moch had worked out an elaborate set of verbal codes to which only he and his crew knew the real meanings ...Moch began to chant their newest rowing mantra in time with the stroke-’Save, Save, Save’-reminding them that this was all about conserving power”(Brown). The trust Moch’s teammates had to put in him to make the call to slow down was phenomenal. This also shows the relationship a world-class team has to have to win Olympic gold medals. This relationship is one of brothers and sisters not of teammates and coxswains (Sandstrom).

Furthermore, the U.S. Women’s Rowing Team is a great example of athletes trusting their teammates and fellow rowers in the boat. During the 2018 world championships, the U.S. Women’s Eight won the gold medal. Kaitlin Guregian the coxswain explained after the race, “We Believe in each other with our whole hearts, and we just followed that down the course”(U.S. Women's Eight Reclaims Gold). These rowers know each other like sisters and have experienced the highs and lows of a professional rowing career together. As this team comes together through hardships they become stronger, trusting each other to pull their hardest for as long as possible. These bonds are the markings of a great team and show why the U.S. Women’s Rowing Team is most consistently the best. In the same race Emily Regan, who rowed in the seventh seat of the race, explained how her fellow rowers continued to push through the

pain in order to win the gold: “I’m really proud of our boat because we stayed super internal, and we just kept fighting”(U.S. Women's Eight Reclaims Gold). Emily highlights her team's mental strength to keep from being distracted and ignore the burning sensation in every part of their bodies. All for the chance to wear a gold medal around their necks.

One more example of trust is seen when the boys in the boat come from Washington to compete in the national championships at Poughkeepsie. Al Ulbrickson the coach for the junior varsity and varsity teams, could be the first coach ever to win all three races: the freshmen race, junior varsity, and varsity. The freshmen had won earlier that day and now the junior varsity crew who had struggled to find their form and swing put their rowing careers on the chopping block. The junior varsity boat slashed uselessly against the water and became unhinged as a unit when raced against the varsity boat (Brown). If these boys did not win this race they would surely be cut from the team: “... the real question was whether they had the maturity and discipline to keep their minds in the boat, or whether rage and uncertainty would unhinge them... Somehow determination conquered despair. They began to pull in long, sweet, precisely synchronized strokes”(Brown). The junior varsity boat found their swing and put their trust in each other with their new- found determination to prove they were better than any varsity boat in the world. To trust your teammates is to risk everything both losing and winning, but if you do not trust your team you risk losing the hardships, the friends, the feeling of success, and the chance to win a gold medal being named the best in the world.

As a result of rowing and training for long hours, the U.S. Women’s Rowing Team has acquired lots of mental and physical strength. When working out three times a day rowing, weight lifting, and stretching, rowers learn to become both mentally and physically strong.

Esther Lofgren, an Olympic rower for the United States, explains her intense training regime to Anahad O'Connor, a bestselling author, graduate from Yale with a degree in psychology and nominated for the Livingston Award for Excellence in National reporting. Pushing yourself to the point of throwing up on a daily, takes dedication and the United States has lots of determined rowers. Physically the most used part of your body when rowing is your quads (O'Connor). Driving with the legs pushing the hips back requires lots of leg strength especially if you do this motion hundreds of times a day. When racing your skull with eight other teammates is dead still at the start. Lofgren says for the first part of the race rowers are powerlifting their weight and some of the coxswains weight, when your boat then comes to top speed you settle in for the rest of the six-minute race, "You're essentially powerlifting as fast as you can for forty-five seconds until you get up to speed"(O'Connor). Weight lifting and rowing on the water are really important but doing the repetitive motions takes a mental toll on all athletes. To get a break the U.S. rowing team uses cross-training: "We use cross training to get a mental and physical break from rowing"(O'Connor). These athletes burn thousands of calories to maintain a healthy weight. Rowers can sometimes fit in room for sugary snacks like Ice cream and cookies: "7,000 calories of spinach and almond milk is a lot of food, so sometimes ice cream works its way in there"(O'Connor). Having these treats can also help relieve mental stress.

Having lots of mental strength when rowing can help you push through the pain and come out winning the race. Coxswains can help your mental strength push through the pain and focus on the team and moving the boat as fast as possible: "Snyder said, 'This is the U.S. women's eight!...' The words were meant to make the rowers pull harder, to make the United States eight surge ahead. They were supposed to remind the rowers that they could push through

the searing pain in their legs and lungs, and push through it together”(Macur: “A Simple Yell”).

This yell accomplished its goal by pushing the team to finish the Rio Olympics with another gold medal adding to the collection of world championships and Olympic medals.

Another piece to the U.S. Women's Rowing Teams success is their deep talent pool and strength of their collegiate rowing system. Tom Terhaar does not take credit for his team's domination of rowing but gives the credit to the great talent pool in the United States: “Oh, no, its not me, it’s the talent pool... It’s just incredible how big it is now and how many great athletes we’re getting”(Macur: “Talent Pool”). During the Rio Olympics in 2016, the Americans had around twenty-eight women to choose for their boats. This ability to find the perfect combination of highly trained athletes makes the U.S. team so formidable explained Terhaar. One reason for this great talent pool is the American collegiate rowing system. Colleges find talented strong athletes and train them to compete in their regional regattas. These athletes go on to try out and make the U.S. team and add to the deep talent pool fueling the United States Women's Rowing Team’s success. After the Olympic Games in Rio, Juliet Macur in her article, “*A Simple Yell Helps a Dynasty Pull Together*”, tells of British rowers claiming that the United States rowing team had been so successful at the games because of the strength in the collegiate rowing system.

The U.S. Women's Rowing Team is most consistently the best in the world due to the popularity of the sport rowing in the United States, combined with extreme mental and physical training for elite athletes. Collegiate rowers supply an abundance of talented rowers for the United States national team to pick and choose to form the fastest boats, challenging other

countries for the gold medal. These athletes go through an intense training regime three times a day strengthening their mind body and trust in each other.

The popularity of rowing provides thousands of people with full body workouts and a strong sense of shared hardship. Women rowing for the U.S. Women's Rowing Team inspire hundreds of people to go outside and work their bodies, becoming fit on and off the water. Any person who can inspire another to join a crew team or club could save a life, create a lifelong passion, or contribute to the winning of a gold medal. Next time you are on the couch remember the possibility of amazing moments of beauty, exhaustion, and friendship. Get out there and enjoy some fresh air.

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