

My Rowing Epiphany
By Ethan Kim

Sweat dripped intensely from my brow under the hot beaming sun. All of my muscles were burning like a rapid forest fire, and I wanted to give up. But I knew that my teammates were counting on me to endure the excruciating pain with them for just two hundred more meters. This was how I felt during the first 2k race of my Varsity year at Norcal Crew.

During my middle school years, I tried many sports like basketball, soccer, swimming, and tennis, but I wasn't great at any of them, or more likely I wasn't willing to commit the time to be the best. Unlike many of my friends, I never felt intimately connected to these popular sports. I didn't get excited about wins and I wasn't upset about losing either. To me, these sports were something that my parents wanted me to do for reasons that didn't make sense. My dad played competitive soccer for many years. He believed that much of his professional success was based on what he learned on the field. He relished the moments when he was the last defender against the top striker of the opposing team and the game's outcome was dependent on his ability to prevent the striker from scoring. He was an aggressive tiger who only wanted to win and beat his opponents for his team. Conversely, I would find myself trying to hide on the field or court so that I didn't make a mistake. I was a ghost during the game and was useless to the team's success. I was often afraid of the ball and would flinch like a terrified animal. Additionally, I didn't want to be the reason why we lost and didn't want my teammates to criticize my performance after the game. It was a no-win situation.

While in sixth grade, I met my best friend Manav through Boy Scouts of America. We were on the same patrol in Troop 57 and we immediately became friends although our backgrounds and upbringings were quite different. At the time, I was a friendly and cheerful person, who wanted to try many different activities but was mediocre in every single one of them. Also, I was not naturally athletic and instead was one of those chubby kids who were very shy. In contrast, Manav was relatively short with a razor-thin physique, but he was naturally athletic, adventurous and once he had his mind set on something, he would do it incessantly until he mastered it. He was an avid and competitive skier, swimmer, and skateboarder. I always admired him for his many talents and his can-do attitude although he was quite mischievous at the same time. During the Spring of 2019 when I was an eighth-grader, Manav informed me that he recently started rowing for Norcal Crew in Redwood City. He stimulated my curiosity because I was unfamiliar with the sport besides unintentionally watching an Olympic rowing regatta a few years earlier. He talked about the program and his experience with such great detail and excitement.

“Ethan, you should try it out, I think you'd be amazing,” said Manav.

“I don't know man, not much of a water sports guy.” I shook my head, thinking back to the terrifying moments with swimming.

“The sport doesn't involve getting into the water unless you capsize... I mean, you would be just fine. Don't worry about it. Just do it.” Manav grinned as he patted me on the back.

I felt uncertain but was intrigued enough that I wanted to try. I never backed down from a unique opportunity. “Okay, I’ll give it a shot,” I said with a puffed-out chest.

Later that evening, I found out through text message that another good friend of mine, Theo, also rowed at Norcal, which made me want to do rowing even more. Theo was a little taller and bigger than me, he had spiky black hair, and was very considerate. Immediately after this news, I told my dad that I wanted to be a rower and to sign me up for the program. I couldn’t wait to begin.

My first time out on the water was terrifying and I thought the boat was going to sink tragically like the Titanic. It was around 5 pm when the sun and sky formed an orange-red atmosphere at the Bair Island Aquatic Center (BIAC). Coach Chris, a family friend of ours, assigned me to a quad with Korel, Manav, and Theo. When we launched off the dock and started to row towards Stanford’s boathouse, I was a statue, unwilling to take the first few strokes due to the possibility of catching a “crab” (blade gets stuck in the water that may eject a rower out of the boat). Despite my intense fear and having minor crabs here and there, I still kept ongoing. When we were rowing all four, I fell in love with the sport; our blades entered the water at the same time and as we were moving towards the bow, the boat moved swiftly on the water. Two days afterward, Coach Chris had everyone row twenty minutes on the erg as hard as they could, which was an indicator of our fitness level. Once everyone was done, I saw that my time was one of the slowest, which led to one of my many epiphanies. I realized that to become one of the best rowers, I needed to put in tremendous time and effort. Nothing is going to be easy and that is just how life is. I needed to be aggressive and not passive. Be Kobe Bryant, the most competitive athlete known in the NBA.

I only started to take rowing seriously in ninth grade when it was my Novice year. This was the introduction to competitive racing. We got to row eights, rowed longer distances and more sprints, and occasionally got to work out with the older guys, the Varsity Men. Overall, I had a fascinating time and learned more about the sport. However, the main challenge that was holding me back was my endurance. Ironically, rowing is the one sport that targets every single muscle group and by far hurts the most. It pushes the athletes out of their comfort zone and limitations. One saying that Coach Jarrod would always yell at us when we were dying on the erg is, “Get comfortable with being uncomfortable!” This stood out to me and is a phrase that I took personally, as I always wanted to do things the easiest possible way so that I wouldn’t have to challenge myself or go to the extreme. I soon learned that you won’t achieve as much and won’t nearly be as successful as someone willing to take risks and go for it, even if it means being uncomfortable. This later helped me with my mentality and I became one of the most competitive rowers on the team. I began to love the burning sensation that I would feel throughout my entire body. I drastically improved my fitness and strength. I was now Rocky Balboa, training for his boxing match against Ivan Drago in Russia. I felt triumphant and amazed, as I believed that I never could get in shape, not even from my days in Taekwondo. I remembered running six miles within an hour, doing core and speed exercises, and sparring for long durations. I might have lost some weight and gained some muscle, but I was still nowhere from being as strong as the Rock.

By the time I entered my Varsity year, expectations intensified and it was a rude awakening. My technique was ineffective and thus I could not move a boat all that well. For example, typically the blade gradually enters the water and gets locked on. In my case, my blades would be high up like a bird soaring to catch a fish. Therefore, as some of my friends were placed in the first group (with the older Varsity), I was stuck at the bottom and rowed a single to perfect my technique. My coach saw potential in me and thought I could row collegiately based on my physique but all of that would go to waste if I couldn't translate my strength onto the water. It took months of frustration and dedication to improve. I would always be upset whenever I viewed the lineups and saw that I was placed in a single when all of my teammates were rowing in the quads. It was only after the Covid-19 cases in the Bay Area dropped into the orange tier that things started to change.

In early February 2021, the Norcal Varsity Men's Coach Jarrod decided to place me in the top Under-17 men's 4+ boat to make the podium (top three) at the USRowing Youth National Championship in Sarasota, Florida. Coach Jarrod assigned coaching duties to Coach Jen who is an experienced coach and former collegiate rower at UC Santa Barbara. My three teammates were Korel, Theo, and Tim, and our coxswain was Akshay. Korel is white, has brown hair and eyes, short but compensates his height with his flawless technique, a good leader that wants to help his teammates, and very kind. Tim is caucasian, intelligent, very light but ironically is one of the strongest rowers. Lastly, Akshay is Indian and looks like an elementary school student, funny, and likes to have a good time with his rowing buddies. Overall, we were all ambitious and wanted to be the fastest four out there. As a result, Coach Jen increased our practices from five times per week to seven times per week and shifted our practice start times to 5:30 am. That meant waking up at 4 am every single day. I was already struggling to find sufficient time and energy for my academics. My dad was supportive given the opportunity, but my mom opposed. This situation caused a tense cloud of uncertainty and silence in our home for a few weeks and we had a huge argument.

“Mom, why won't you let me attend practice?” I asked.

“Your grades are going to suffer, and I'll not tolerate that,” she explained as she folded her arms. “Academics is the top priority, and you can't jeopardize it for a sport.”

“I love rowing, and you can't take it away from me as you did with my guitar lessons.” I threw my arms up.

“You better watch your tone and attitude!” she barked.

I took a deep breath and recognized that my aggression wasn't helpful, so I decided to pacify my angry mother. “Yes, I understand that school is more important than anything else I do, but can I please continue with rowing? It's the one thing that calms me down and relieves my stress. Rowing has taught me so much about being an athlete and I've become a more ambitious person who's improving every single day.” My mom looked at me, perplexed.

“Okay, if that's the case, then I will allow you to attend your morning practices under one condition,” she said.

I responded, “Which is?”

“If your grades drop and you don't have enough energy for your studies, then I will have to take it away from you. Understood?”

“Yes, thank you so much, Mom,” I said while dancing. My mom smiled.

Rowing has become a meaningful part of my identity, as it highlighted my perseverance and diligence. My teammates became my best friends and my family. The water became my sanctuary and omitted the daily stresses of being a student at Gunn High, which has an ongoing struggle to provide an environment of well-being and stability. I wasn't going to stop now.

In a few weeks, the sanctuary ended up turning into a full-time job that required me to be at my best at all times. The words of encouragement by coaches turned into solid anchors for all aspects of my strength, size, and rowing technique. However, I wasn't alone. I had four other teammates with the same experience. We would text each other constantly about our struggles and support each other through encouraging responses.

"Sorry about today guys, I don't know what happened. I was digging a lot and it's hard to get those nice catches when rowing all four," I wrote.

"Don't worry about it. Just get your hands quickly out of the bow, so that by the time you reach the catch, your blade is fully locked," Theo replied.

"Yeah, you want the blade to gradually fall into the water, so lift your handles as you approach the catch too," Korel suggested.

We were a team and for our boat to succeed, we needed everyone to play their role and put in the time and effort.

Due to the restrictions created by the pandemic, the USRowing Western Regional Youth Championships was unfortunately canceled. This regatta represented our opportunity to qualify for Nationals. The entire team was filled with disappointment. We had worked so hard to only lose this special opportunity. After a few weeks passed, Coach Jarrod informed us that we were going to participate in the Central Regional Youth Championships in Oklahoma City on the first weekend of May. The unexpected news created supernatural energy and excitement that I could feel throughout my entire body, but at the same time, I felt the pressure of meeting our coaches' high expectations.

Every week, we would burn ourselves out more and more like a car running out of fuel. Not only were the coaches pushing us harder, but we were pushing each other to get better individually and as a team. In particular, the afternoon practices were a death wish. Every time, I wondered why on earth would I come to practice to feel the pain that is close to crucifixion. Nevertheless, I kept going to practices and fought through the torture right next to my teammates. We were in this together.

With a few days left before our trip to Oklahoma City, the coaches canceled practices to give us time to rest and reflect on our upcoming regatta. I started to think about how far I have pushed myself and improved over the past two years. All of the sacrifices that I had to make, but unlike my prior sporting experiences, I didn't feel alone. I had four other teammates that believed in me and I believed in them. Little did I know, this trust would be essential in a few weeks.

In Oklahoma City, our first race was an initial qualifier for the finals and our lane placements. Only the top six boats advance from two separate heats. While we were rigging the boats, I could feel the pressure building as we were nearing race time. We were too apprehensive to make eye contact. Our heads were down ensuring that we didn't have any equipment issues. I

was afraid that a screw may come undone or my foot stretchers would fall off its tracks. As we held the boat over our heads and were walking down to the dock, I could hear the cheer from my other teammates and parents. "Go get 'em, boys!" shouted Finn Callaghan. Another rower yelled, "Give it all you got. Don't leave anything in the tank!" I looked up from time to time to see our competitors walking their boats in front of us. Most of them had the build of a giant. Their fully developed muscles flexed as they were easily carrying their boat with confidence. I asked myself, "Are we good enough to beat them? Will today be our day?" As we got in our boat, Coach Jen said, "You're prepared to be fast. Trust your training and preparation. Medals are won in the Fall and collected in the Spring and Summer." We then launched and proceeded to the starting line with our typical warm-up. Our jovial coxswain Akshay yelled his first order, "Pick drill starting with arms only, bow pair." I changed my focus from the other teams and the audience lining the river banks to executing the instruction as we had practiced thousands of times.

As we slowly approached the starting line, my heart was pounding like a large drum with anticipation and my teammates were deadly silent awaiting the sound of the horn. I could feel the sun warming up my body creating a tear of sweat slowly migrating from my forehead to my nose to my chin. I slowly rolled myself up to the catch and put my hand on Theo's right shoulder to let him know that I got his back and am right behind him. Immediately after, Theo placed his hand on Tim's shoulder, then Tim did the same to Korel. We all closed our eyes and took a deep breath, believing that we could win first place. Our oars carefully dipped into the brown nasty water with our knees fully compressed and our arms straightened and flexed. The referee announced, "All crews, we have alignment. OKC Riversport, White Rock, Newport, Norcal... Attention, go!" Instinctively I followed the movement of the rower in front of me and instantly went in sync with the stroke seat. Akshay barked into his mic, "Three quarters, three quarters, half, three quarters, full. High twelve, no layback." I felt the adrenaline kick in that provided a boost of energy. "Now, five strokes, add layback, twist for ratio," announced Akshay.

The adrenaline was flowing throughout my body as we did our start to get an early lead by a half boat length. As we passed the 1750-meter mark, our stroke rate, which is the average stroke per minute, went from thirty-one to twenty-nine. We formed a nice rhythm and cadence. It was relatively slow, but as long as we were connected and gave enough press, we would be fine. We were a boat length ahead of our closest competitor. By the 1500-meter mark, we had a comfortable three-boat length lead, but I knew that our coach instructed Akshay that no matter what, we were going to push the stroke rate from thirty-one to thirty-four.

All of sudden, I heard a loud pop and scraping noise under the boat. It sounded like a bomb went off. Within the next five strokes, Akshay screamed, "I can't steer. The rudder doesn't work." I couldn't help but think that my worst nightmare just happened and we were going to lose the race and a chance for gold in tomorrow's finals race. Our boat veered to the right and my oars were hitting the line of buoys, causing the boat to slow down.

Akshay screamed, "Starboard side keep it together, we're almost there!"

Korel and I adjusted our strokes. We were tight and tense.

"Come on!" I shouted.

"Aaaaaahhh!" Theo winced.

There were only 250-meters left. We were barely surviving. “Big ten!” shouted Akshay. Every push of the legs and pull of the arms caused a lion-like grunt from each of us. We had worked too hard to give up. Each stroke was a stroke that I had no energy for.

“Let’s go Norcal!” yelled the crowd. My legs were cramping with lactic acid and my lungs were burning for oxygen. I tasted the bitter vomit that crept up my throat. I thought I was going to pass out. All of a sudden, I heard a horn. We collapsed backward like dominos. As I looked up the sewer-smelling river, I captured a bit more oxygen with each breath, I heard another horn.

We had just beat the second-place team by sixteen seconds (five boat lengths). I smelled victory and pride. As we slowly rowed back to the dock, we could see Coach Jen fifty feet away staring at us, arms folded. Within seconds, she was jumping up and down. We parked parallel to the dock and in unison trudged out of the boat. Finn told us that we qualified for tomorrow’s race. I sighed in relief and smiled, but realized that we had to do it all over again!

What Jen knew, which we did not, was that we would come back the next day and win gold.

Back at home and during our next early morning practice at Westport Harbor, something was different. As we took our first few speed strokes, I found it beautiful when our rowing blades were catching together with one impulse while the boat was moving with the speed of the water. We felt a great surge. We felt like we were flying together. I began to realize that rowing is all about unity and coming together so that we can compete for something bigger than any one of us. It requires sacrifice so that you can be the best teammate possible and the best team possible. Look out competitors of the National Youth Championships. We’re coming to beat every single one of you!