

BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL COLLEGIATE CLUB ROWING PROGRAM

A How-to Manual by Gregg Hartsuff

INTRODUCTION

In just its third year of existence the American Collegiate Rowing Association (ACRA) drew attendance from 50 college programs, had almost 200 crews entered, and had 1130 athletes compete at the 2010 national championship. It was another year of continued growth for our new organization, with those numbers topping the numbers from the 2009 regatta and now our new organization is breaking even financially. In the past three years we have had over 60 different organizations represented at the national championship, but I believe there can and should be more crews attending. We have the potential to have 158 teams represented at ACRA, meaning we had roughly 1/3 of the potential membership represented in 2010. I would like to see ACRA membership increase to 75 teams over the next two years. I would also like to see 2,000 participants at our 2012 National Championship regatta. This will take planning and recruiting teams who have not been competing at ACRA. The success of getting our organization off the ground has inspired me to write you. That is the essence of this manual really, to give advice on how to make this happen within your own teams, and form a new team culture that will have your team enthusiastic and focused on competing at the national championship, and doing as well as they can there.

I write with the assumption that the person reading it is very, very motivated to compete to the best of your ability. Quite often club rowing coaches have a few different personas: the first one is the supremely motivated coach who often is frustrated with low commitment from his athletes. The other one is the “baby-sitter coach” who coaches in a club where the student-athletes have all the power and make the decisions, and he or she simply shows up and coaches practices and has very little role in guiding the club’s culture. I write this more for the first type of coach, though the second type of coach may desire to become the first type. I encourage coaches to have team members read what I write because something that needs to happen to make changes is self-examination and reflection, and hearing how things are done at a successful collegiate rowing club, how we evolved, and the reasons for it, will help this process. Comprehending this is the first step for a group of student-athletes on their way to make behavioral changes that will lead to success.

I receive a lot of email from people every year asking for advice on running their club program. I speak to collegiate rowing club coaches new to the situation, as well as newly elected student-officers annually. I have seen the wheel reinvented in a few generations of officers at the same school a number of different times in my 20 years of coaching collegiate club rowing. So much can be written about this, that there is no way I can in this manual address every little detail and share everything I can, but I am going to provide you with the essential advice to building your program’s competitiveness.

The advice and coaching I am about to offer is based on 25 years of rowing as a college athlete (at Grand Valley State ’86-’90) and coaching (at GVSU ’88-’90 and at Michigan since 1992) club teams to success against varsity and club rowing teams alike. I have learned, the hard way at times, the things that work and things that do not. I have learned, intimately, the psychology of student-athletes who are members of collegiate club teams - rowing clubs and other club sports alike. I was one myself once. I have

coached over 2,000 athletes along the way, and have had the pleasure of influencing novice walk-on athletes to win medals at the IRA against varsity programs (when clubs were allowed there) and other major championships, and have placed former athletes on national teams, including a few Olympians. Some of the accomplishments I highlight here:

Team Finishes

- 6th Place Ten Eyck (IRA Men's Team Point trophy) in 2002, 7th place in 2003 (with Harvard and Yale)
- 10 times have finished in the top 20 at the IRA In the Ten Eyck.
- 4 Dad Vail Men's Team Points and 1 Overall with our women.
- 7 ECAC NIRC Men's Team Points and 2 Overall with just our men
- 3 Times ACRA Men's Team Point victories

Varsity Eight

- Has beaten every club and varsity program at a major championship except four: Harvard, Cal, Washington, and Northeastern.
- 5 times has made the petite final of the IRA, twice finishing 11th.
- 2 times has won the Dad Vail
- 3 times has won the ECAC NIRC
- 3 times has won the ACRA

Other Crews and Notes

- Freshman Eight won the silver medal at the IRA in 2002, losing only to Washington.
- Between the IRA, Dad Vail, ECAC NIRC, and ACRA we have won over 80 medals as a program since 1992, with most of them since 1999
- ten former athletes I have coached, including myself as a coach, have made their country's National Team; three of them have competed in the Olympics.

I do not highlight the above results to brag, as other club programs have had a lot of great results in championship races also. My point is that as a club you can have great success in this sport, and to show you that success does not come quickly or easily. I will point out also that the most *consistently* successful club teams in the past 10 years – Michigan, Purdue, Grand Valley State, UNH, Notre Dame, UC Davis, Washington State, Bucknell, and others – all have something in common: they all have a head coach, and usually one who has been there for quite a while. Additionally, that coach is generally paid a full-time salary, and has control over the program – usually the student-officers answers to him or her.

When I arrived at Michigan the program was what I call very “clubby”. It was a club, not a program. There was a spotty commitment to the program and competition. There was a heavy social focus, which is fine and I believe desirable at a certain level, but it often came at the expense of the competitive focus. I see a lot of these programs out there; they are essentially organized drinking clubs that practice occasionally, and compete every so often. The kids like to say they are rowers and to be part of a team. And they do like to compete, and many talk the talk, but few walk the walk. At Michigan in 1992 was a small core of kids who did genuinely want to do well, and even a handful that were prepared to make the sacrifices needed to compete to the best of their ability. The average athlete did not possess the physical potential to compete at the top. There were about 2 ½ eights of varsity men, and the typical 5-6 eights of freshman novices starting in the fall that dwindled to about 2 eights by the end of the year. The metamorphosis I have guided this team through over time was a very deliberate and gradual shifting of attitudes and more importantly behavior, through an imposing of my personal will and a constant test of what I call the five P's: persistence, patience, power, pressure and pride.

I took a few small boats to the 1996 Intercollegiate Rowing Association (IRA) national championship and became inspired by what I saw there. We finished in the middle of the pack in those events, but I realized for us to get better we needed to compete against the best teams – varsity teams. I was still frustrated a lot by the lack of commitment of the athletes. They said they wanted to win, but would often make excuses for missing practice, and sometimes races. Excuses like going to a sister's high school graduation, a nephew's baptism, a fraternity social, or simply to go home for a weekend, were all too common. Guys did not do workouts outside of practice as much. I wanted to compete with the best, and win championships, but they were not doing the things to allow us to do that. Instead of shaking my head and placing the blame on others, I realized that much of the problem was me. I was failing as a coach to demand what was required of the athletes, and tolerated their excuses. I was failing to enforce the behavior that needed to happen to do that was followed. I was part of the problem, and owned up to it.

The following fall of 1996 I told everyone at the beginning of the year we were going to go to the IRA with the Varsity 8 and a few small boats, and they should plan on it. This would mean staying after classes end an additional 3 weeks. This meant staying after school a total of FIVE WEEKS (sometimes this could be six depending on the calendar), instead of two. Our classes end in the third week of April, then a week of exams. There was some moaning by some, and enthusiasm by others. After the ECAC (then Champion) regatta one guy from the 1V told me he was going home and begin his summer job. "Sorry coach, can't go to the IRA." It pissed me and the rest of his crewmates off something fierce, but we substituted a guy who did want to race there and moved on. We went to the IRA with those crews, and the 1V finished dead last, not even close to the pack. This was not due to lacking one guy, so much as it was we just weren't that good.

After the racing at the IRA in Camden in 1997 I presented the guys there with a document in the parking lot of the hotel we stayed in. It was called simply "A Two Year Plan". It detailed a plan for having the Varsity 8 make the petite final of the IRA Varsity 8 in 1999. I went over erg scores they needed to commit to performing, how we were going to upgrade equipment, change the racing schedule to be tougher, and design the training plan to peak at the IRA instead of the ECAC or Dad Vail regattas, and how we needed lots of guys to make it happen.

To that point in 1997 I had invested five years of my life into the program, and while we had won a silver medal at the Dad Vail in the Varsity 8 in 1995, and a few other medals here and there, we were not performing where I wanted us to be. The frustration came not because of the results so much as how we went about our business – we were not maximizing our potential. Our behavior did not allow us to do what I wanted us to. Our commitment needed to be greater. I was now 29 years old and could go on and do something else that was more satisfying. So I simply laid out my demands to the team leadership – commit more, eliminate the cheesy excuses for missing practice, train more on your own, and commit to winning. Do that, or I was gone.

I also clearly stated to them to plan to attend the IRA from the beginning of the year. If you were on the team, you were going to go race at the IRA in some form or another. No excuses. If you could not do that, then do not bother to return to the team. Staying FIVE WEEKS after the end of classes was a REQUIREMENT of being on the team, not an option. They received this information in July, in a handbook I sent to them each summer detailing the upcoming year. They knew about it, and had no excuses – you are either going to the IRA, or don't bother starting. Plan all summer jobs and internships to be after the IRA, which at Michigan means delaying all these fantastic opportunities – opportunities

that seduce guys away from rowing – at least five weeks, sometimes six weeks, because our classes and exams are completed by April 28th (at the latest) every year.

So I am going to end this introduction with simple advice: tell your kids NOW what the date of the ACRA is. They are not to start any jobs until after that date – it is a sacrifice they will need to make to take your program to the national championship and compete to your highest place possible. They need to hear it NOW at the first meeting in the fall – not part way through the fall – NOW. Because I can tell you, the kids at Michigan, Grand Valley, Bucknell, and all the other best programs will be planning this too, and sacrificing money-making opportunities to compete. Because that is what athletes who are committed to winning will do. And it is a privilege for them to be able to do it. If staying until that date is viewed as a pain-in-the-ass then perhaps they should think about not rowing next year. That is the hard-line approach the very best club programs in the country take with their programs, and now you see them in the grand finals of ACRA.