



Photo courtesy of Fox Chapel High School

ROWING TEAMS MAKING A SPLASH IN HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

By Joan Greene

While football, basketball, baseball, and other WPIAL sports have scored recognition for hundreds of North Hills athletes, one sport that has been floating along for years is now beginning to make a major splash among high-school sports teams. Crew or more accurately—rowing—is emerging as a popular club sport at several high-schools in the North Hills area.

Although it is not a varsity sport sanctioned by the WPIAL (Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League), members of rowing teams are as dedicated and work as hard, if not harder, than athletes in other sports.

During the Winter season, when they can't be out on the water, many high-school teams keep in shape by working out for 2-1/2 hours, five to six days a week, lifting weights and practicing on an erg, an indoor rowing machine.

Krista Gregan, a senior at North Allegheny High School, has participated in volleyball, swimming and other sports, but “fell in love” with rowing the first time she tried it when she was in the eighth grade. “It’s a very different sport,” said Gregan, 17. “Being out on the water, seeing the sun rise, is very relaxing.”

As a captain of North Allegheny’s team, Gregan has experience in various positions in the shell (boat). The shells are designed for one, two, four or eight rowers. A coxswain plays a pivotal role in the four and eight rowers shells. This person steers the boat, watches the crew for errors and actuates the coach’s game plan for the race.

Gregan prefers the position of Stroke, the individual who sets the rhythm and the rating (the number of strokes per minute) that the crew rows at. “I like having everyone following you and being in command,” she said.

One of the major aspects of rowing that attracted Gregan to the sport is “it’s a real team sport.” “You have to work together. You’re only as strong as the weakest person in your boat,” she said. “Some of the strongest friendships I’ve



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made came from this sport.”

North Allegheny girls’ coach Don Heckenstaller agrees that crew is a sport where “everyone works together as one.” Synchronization and being physically fit are keys to the success of a crew, he said.

Spring is the “big racing season,” and Heckenstaller foresees his crew of 27 girls doing “very good” this year. Rowing teams in the North Hills compete in the Mid-West Division. In May more than 50 high-schools from the division compete in the Midwest Scholastic Championships in Detroit. The winners of this event are invited to compete in the National Championships in Cincinnati in June. Last year North Allegheny’s team finished fifth and in 2002, they came in second at the National Championships.

Most of the teams in the North Hills row in four or eight person shells and compete in several different types of races. A sprint race consists of six boats lined up next to each other and is usually just under a mile long. The crew that reaches the finish line first, wins. Head races are longer and usually held in the fall. They serve as a warm-up for the more competitive spring season, Heckenstaller said. Competitors start one after the other, about every 10 seconds, and each boat is timed individually. The course usually runs about 2-1/2 miles.

Parent booster clubs are instrumental in keeping rowing teams afloat and many teams would be sunk without their support. “Parent volunteers are amazing,” said Dallas Smith, whose daughter, Kaitlyn, 17, is a captain of the North Allegheny team. “They help with fund-raising, scheduling trips, chaperoning—they’re part

of the team!” “The joke (among parents) is you drive five hours to see your child come down the river and finish first the last 30 seconds of the race,” he laughed. But, it’s all worth it, Smith said. “Crew is an excellent program. You must be disciplined, dedicated to practice and committed to the team. It teaches values that can be carried on into adulthood.”

Joe Wilson, assistant coach at North Catholic High School in Troy Hill, describes rowing as the “ultimate team sport.” “You really get a sense of what teamwork is all about,” Wilson said. “You

Marietta, Ohio and the Pennsylvania Scholastic Sprints, a 1,500 meter race for high-schools, April 24 on the Allegheny River.

Although rowing isn’t a WPIAL sport, Mark Bellinger, Fox Chapel High School rowing coach, said Crew is “gaining in popularity” among high-school athletes. “More and more kids are discovering it and liking it, partly because it’s a co-ed sport and they can practice together,” Bellinger said. “Something just clicks and I think you get turned on to it. Most of the kids after they try it either love it or they don’t. It (rowing) does take a lot and you can’t be afraid of the water, and the boat tipping,”

he said. One of the biggest problems rowing teams face is Pittsburgh’s spring weather. “With the rain and floods, it can be a problem here getting in the water and rowing.”

Bellinger believes his team of 60 rowers will be “very competitive” this season and hopes the team will make it to the finals at the Midwest Scholastic Rowing Championships in May.

When Jessica Kocent joined Fox Chapel’s rowing team as a freshman, she knew nothing about the sport. Now a senior and captain of the team, Kocent says the sport is “physically demanding, but really rewarding when your boat crosses the finish line.” “It’s a cool, out of the ordinary sport,” she said. “You never know what will happen on the river.”

The Shaler Area High School rowing team is only in its second year, but Richard Laux, president of the Shaler Crew Booster Club, believes the team will do “excellent” this season. At a race in January in Virginia, two of the team of 19 girls finished 14th and 19th out of 75 competitors.



Photo courtesy of North Allegheny High School

can’t win a race if the entire team isn’t pulling its weight.”

North Catholic’s crew of 10 girls and 15 boys keep in shape during the winter by training at the school’s new fitness center. Wilson said the team is “pretty competitive” in the smaller programs and this year plans to compete in the lightweight division, comprised of women, who weigh in less than 130 pounds and men, 155 pounds. The crew looks forward to competing in two upcoming regattas—April 16–17 in

"I think Crew is beginning to take-off because North Hills high-school sports programs, as well as Western Pennsylvania sports in general, are a powerhouse," Laux said. "Rowing is good developmentally both physically and mentally. You're testing yourself constantly and pushing for the well-being of the team," he said.

The rapid growth of the Hampton High School rowing team attest to the fact that the club sport is becoming more popular among high-school athletes. "It attracts students who aren't necessarily ball sports kids," said Hampton's coach, Cliff Stevenson. Now in its fifth year, Hampton's rowing team started out with eight members. "This year, we have 45 kids, 25 of them freshmen, up a total of 32 from last year," Stevenson said. He predicts his team will perform well this year. "We don't have a lot of stars, but we have depth." At last year's Western Pennsylvania Scholastic Sprint at Moraine State Park, three of Hampton's crews received medals.

Rowers aren't out to receive recognition as "super-stars," instead they work together as a team, said Glenn Harcsar, who coaches both the Oakland Catholic High School team and the Ellis School team.

Although Ellis has had a rowing team since 1990, it's been "very slow," for the last couple of years, Harcsar said. Harcsar,

who took over the program this year, plans to change that. "We have some great kids, a lot of freshmen and sophomores. We've put together a decent light-weight team and our goal for this year is to be competitive and go forward from there," he said.

Harcsar hopes to make a ripple in the Ellis program by utilizing his experience as coach of the Oakland Catholic crew, which he believes is one of the best teams in Pittsburgh. Consisting of up to 55 girls, the team took fourth place at the Head of the Ohio race, coming in ahead of all the other Pittsburgh crews. At the Pittsburgh Indoor Rowing Championships in February, Oakland Catholic's Amanda Polk won the girl's Varsity Scholastic race with the fastest winning time for a girl in the Pittsburgh area.

Only in their second season, the Pine-Richland High School crew of boys and girls has grown to 25 members. Competing in the light-weight division, a boat of four girls came in third place in a novice race. "I'm very proud of the kids," said coach Jeanette Burgess. "Being a brand new team, they're doing fantastic," she said. "We really have a pretty city and I don't know of any other sport where you can be out on the water and enjoy the view of the city."

Dori Martin and Ladislau Tompa agree with Burgess that rowing is a great sport for athletes who enjoy being outdoors and on the water. Coaches for Winchester Thurston in Shadyside, Martin and Tompa's rowing team won a national championship last year at the U.S. Rowing Youth Invitational in Cincinnati. "Rowing demands a great deal of self-discipline," Martin said. "You focus on the same motion, with the wind and water consistently changing."

The dedication and hard-work the sport demands has paid off for Winchester Thurston junior Cara Dermody, who competed in the Junior World Championships last August in Athens, Greece, where she came in 11th place.

One of the major benefits rowers can reap from the sport are college scholarships, especially for girls. Oakland Catholic's Amanda Polk has rowed her way to a full-ride at Notre Dame, North Catholic's Jennifer McDonald received a scholarship to Duquesne University, and North Allegheny's Krista Gregan will continue rowing down the river, heading south with a scholarship to Clemson University in South Carolina. "Rowing has helped pay for my college education," Gregan said. "I look forward to another four wonderful years on the water." ▲



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