PART I

The Philosophy of Rowing

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I learned how to row in a dungeon. Well, it was really just the basement of the theater department, but it did have a bar, a bowling alley, and an unpleasant feel. You had to walk though a heavy steel door that said Do Not Enter.

I almost missed the first scheduled recruitment meeting for the rowing team. I was sitting around my dorm room watching *The Price Is Right* when a roommate walked in and asked if I still wanted to go to the crew meeting. I reluctantly got up and thought to myself, *Oh yeah, that's tonight,* got my coat and headed down to the boathouse. The Ohio State University rowing team launched their boats out of the bottom floor of the Drake Union, an unpopular, solitary place for students to hang out. It looked more like a futuristic electric power station from a low-budget movie or a building that would house servers for a cell phone company than it did a theater or a cozy student union.

The boathouse was a large room in the center of the basement. The entrance was down a musty hallway, a heavy steel door with a small window was at the other end. Walking through that door, however, led to another world. It was all solid concrete walls supporting 30 ft (9 m) ceilings that were covered with disco balls, spinning colored lights, and dusty old singles. The locker room was a sectioned-off corner at the north end of the room, segregated by red curtains and a few benches. The ground was also concrete and sloped down to the west so water could drain, which meant that all ergometer training was done downhill. Strange sounds of zipping chains and howling wind echoed down the hallway. Commands were being shouted, but only by a few voices that seemed to be in another language. I stopped to listen to the commotion before I went in. Then one voice bellowed above all the noise: "Everyone listen up!" It wasn't an oppressive voice, but when it spoke, everything stopped. I walked down the steps toward the other end of the boathouse into my first rowing practice and never looked back.

Ohio State University is a gigantic institution, both in landscape and population. With 60,000 students and classrooms that could be an hour away, it is easy to get lost in the mix. As a result, people look for organizations to join to make it seem smaller or help them to develop a more intimate sense of community. The Drake Union housed several organizations that helped encourage smaller communities, and they all seemed to be fringe groups that needed a secluded place to go about their business.

The theater department owned the building. They ruled the top two floors with offices, workshops, rehearsals, shows, and all-night study sessions, while the basement was filled every evening, like the galleys of a ship, with an army of rowers toiling away in the muted florescent lights; heavy, confined air; and cold concrete. The janitors, maintenance workers, and facility department also had offices and break rooms there. The fringe life of a major American campus seemed to gather there to work, study, relax, and do the things for which they had found no other place. The building was an outcast, tucked away on a dirty, winding river on the wrong edge of campus, meant to be used by students looking for a place of their own. This is where I learned to row.

There was something about the place that inspired philosophical perspective. Where you come from, the environment you are surrounded by, and the people you are involved with all have a deep influence on your perspective and the things you are trying to do with your life. The boathouse and the people who used it for this quirky, unknown sport inspired me.

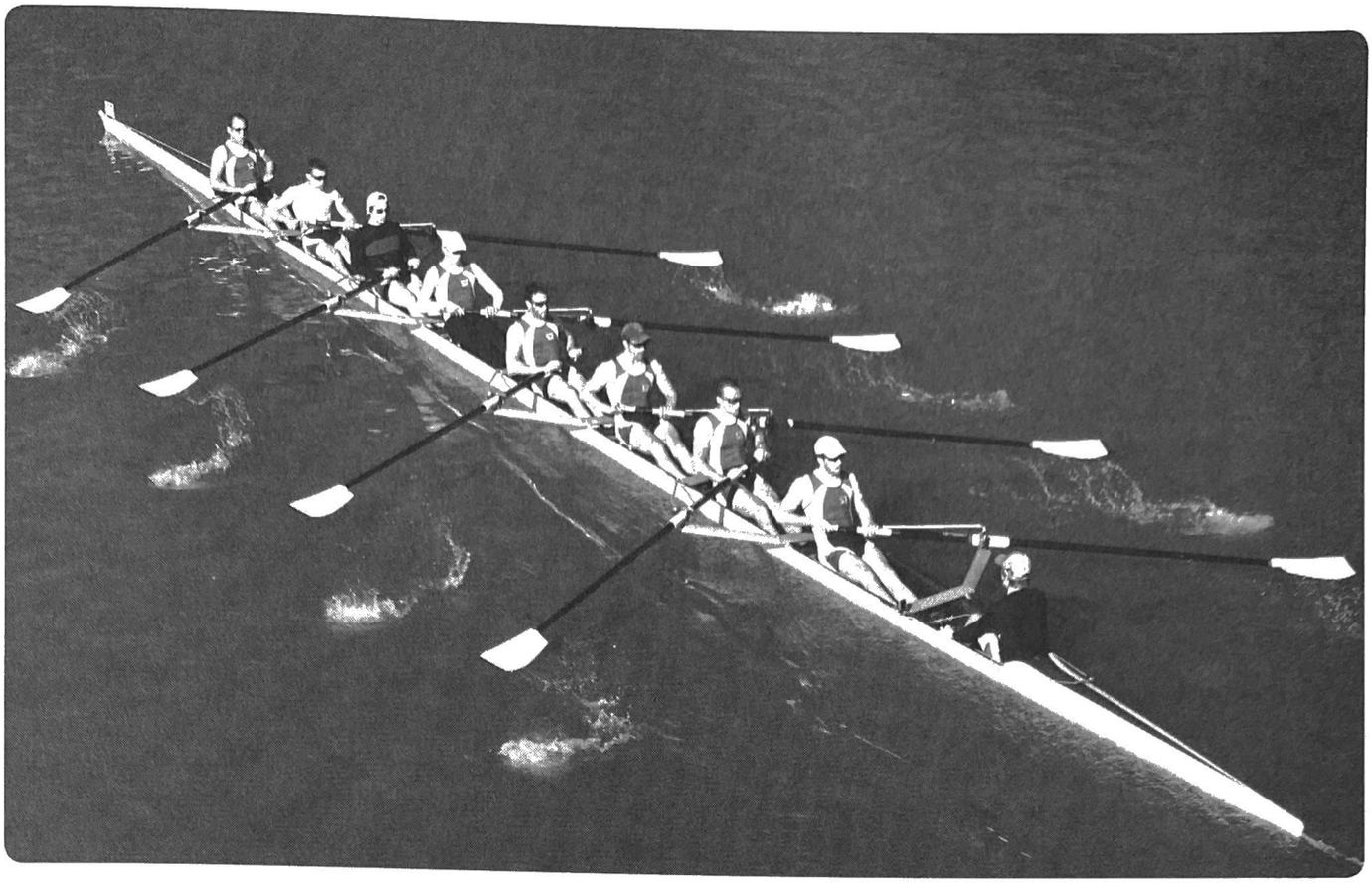
Boathouses have a spirit that I have found in few other places. They are cathedrals of effort, and this one especially had a strong meritocratic presence. There were no games being played here. There were no politics. Individual effort would be rewarded by the group, and then the group would go on to do great things by combining those individual efforts. Though it goes against the philosophy that rowing is the ultimate team sport, I've found that the more an individual rower worries solely about himself, the better he will be, the better he will cooperate with others in a boat, and the more respect he will get from teammates.

This was, of course, only the beginning of my career, but it would be the basis of my attitude and philosophy going forward. As I got better and started to get some results (and a bigger ego) and experience, my attitude changed and my philosophy developed.

My first team was operated by the athletes. We elected officers, hired and fired coaches, recruited new athletes, and bought new equipment. This gave me a great sense of ownership in the sport. It allowed me to develop the belief that what I did and the choices I made had a huge impact on the team. We were an upstart team in the grand scheme of the sport. We weren't supposed to be good. We weren't even supposed to try to be good. However, that was not what we were taught or what we believed, and it wasn't even the nature of the building in which we trained. We simply wanted to beat the best, and so our philosophy was simple: In order to beat the best, we had to be like the best, which at that time meant we had to be like the Ivy League schools.

How were we going to do that? We didn't have the money, couldn't get the same equipment, couldn't hire the same coaches, and couldn't recruit the same athletes. We only had two things: ourselves and the will to work. So, that is what we did. We worked. We put our noses down and did what we thought we had to do. We erged, we biked, we rowed, and we lifted weights, all in our dungeon of a boathouse, filled with our fringe cohorts urging us on in shared obscurity. Our somewhat absurd goal inspired me to believe that I could do anything in this sport if I just put in the work.

To illustrate this point, I'll share a story about the power of that perspective. We used the honor system to record ergometer tests. There was a 6 × 5 ft (183 × 152 cm)



chalkboard leaning against the wall near the ergometers. On test day, you would show up when you had a break in your schedule, do the test, and then write your score on the board. One day my sophomore year when I showed up to do my test, I saw that one of my teammates, who happened to be a lightweight, had gone before me and posted 5:55 as his score. I had limited knowledge about what was good and what people around the world were doing; I only knew that if I had 40 lb (18 kg) on this guy, I should be able to beat him on the erg, so that is what I set out to do. My personal best at the time was 6:15, but within the year I was down to 6:03. Later that summer I learned that my teammate's time was fabricated, but the damage was done; I was convinced that I could beat his score, and by the next year I had. As a result I received an invitation to a U23 national team camp and was on my way to the next phase of my rowing career.

To this day I have conflicting feelings about that experience. I did nothing other than simply pull harder because I believed I was supposed to be able to, but I know now that it's more complicated. Physiology, timing, and a little luck all factor into it, but I hope that this sport doesn't stray from the idea that if you do the work, you will go far and put yourself in a position to perform well. The power of the mind should never be underestimated. It is this philosophy that was developed by a group of committed athletes in a boathouse not built for rowing that will stay with me throughout my rowing career. I believe philosophy is more about the question than the answer, and I keep coming back to one question throughout my life that originates from the time I spent learning how to row at an obscure program in a makeshift boathouse: *Why not?*

The next years of my life would take me places I never thought I would see, in a way I never thought would happen, and would teach me lessons I never expected to learn. The ergometer was the gateway to the Olympics for me. It got me in the door and got me the benefit of the doubt, probably more times than I knew. As I moved forward with rowing, everything became more intense. No longer was I isolated and safe in obscurity;

every practice was a threat. I was surrounded by bigger, better, more experienced athletes and coaches whose only interest was making fast boats. Things had to change. I had to develop. I was now officially in the American system.

The first thing I realized was how much each practice matters in a camp environment. I don't want to say that it was ruthless and everyone was out for themselves; for the most part, we became friends. But there was an unspoken understanding that most of us were out for the same seats, and although we would eventually be on the same team, there would be no letting up during the selection process. Every practice, every stroke, every seat race, every technical change counted. Each day could be your last shot. This awareness can put a large group of competitive people on edge, to say the least, but it can also make the group rise to a new level. In an environment like this, winning is the only thing that counts. Is your boat ahead? Did you win that switch? Did you win by enough? Do you have to win again, or will the pressure let up? These are the questions you ask yourself every day, and usually the answer is *no*. Even if the answer is *yes*, the tactic I employed was to assume the answer is *no*.

I took the approach that whatever I was doing was never enough. I didn't win enough, my boat was not ahead by enough, they hadn't switched me enough to be convinced to pick me—the more I thought like this, the more I found myself in boats that were winning. In the beginning, this way of thinking produced good results both on the micro level of day-to-day successes during practice and the macro level of winning world championships and trying to defend those titles.

However, the more races I won over the next couple of years, the more pressure I felt. It became more difficult to get mentally ready for practice. Anxiety about being at the top became stronger than the desire to be there. As soon as that anxiety was there, focusing on performance became more difficult. The world shrank and instead of taking risks and developing as an athlete, things got tight, and I started holding onto the results of the past. The more I believed winning was everything, the harder it was to even think about a result other than first place. All of a sudden I had something to lose, and it was unthinkable to lose it. I became mentally trapped. Gripped by the anxiety and fear of losing along with the pressure to perform to a certain level, you become unable to see through your daily battles and set real expectations based on where you are and where you need to be. You are afraid to lose and to make mistakes. You are afraid to make changes and adapt to whatever the current situation presents. Stuck in the mind-set of how things *should* be, you become too afraid to race to find out how things *will* be.

Winning at all costs is an expensive philosophy. There is a sense of urgency that never relents in an environment that thrives on winning. Losing is unacceptable, and, if you start to lose, you are dropped off the back of the wagon. That urgency can lift a group like nothing else and create extraordinary results, but at the same time it caters to the few at the top and doesn't do much to develop the middle of the group who may have other issues such as injuries, fixable technical problems, rigging, overtraining, poor nutrition, and so on. It becomes unsustainable. It is unbalanced and fragile, and sometimes the only way to break out of it is to lose an important race.

The Sydney Olympic Games is a perfect example of how this happened to me. We were three-time defending world champions and expected to win the eight for the first time in 40 years. But, as the selection went on, things began to go wrong; we became wrapped up in our own little world, holding on tight to what we thought we had. We were trapped by circumstance without the ability to adapt and find a new approach.

After Sydney, I knew something had to change, but I wasn't sure exactly what. I took the next 4 years leading up to Athens to prepare my attitude and mind as much as my

body and physiology. I went back to the beginning and tried to think about what got me to where I was. I realized that my main advantage coming from Ohio State was that I had nothing to lose. I was never supposed to be an elite rower. I was already doing better than I should have been, so what did results matter? I began to look at the process as more important than the result.

I carried this attitude throughout the next phases of my rowing. I began to look at the preparation from two points of view: (1) I looked at the day-to-day training, racing, rowing, and selection as means to the end, and (2) that end was the larger goal of Olympic gold. If I didn't feel something was making me better, or if I thought it was hindering my chances at winning the Olympics, the next time I fought it and didn't do it again if I had the choice (sometimes in a group you don't have any option but complaining, and I did that a lot). I treated each year separately but also as part of a bigger plan, so winning every time I pushed off a dock wasn't necessary—racing itself was merely part of a bigger goal.

This perspective gave me the mental freedom to take risks, try new things, argue with coaches and teammates, experiment with technique, and take the time to learn at my pace, but most important, it gave me the confidence to lose. By the time I got to the Olympics, winning wasn't on my mind. I wanted to win, but I didn't need to win. I knew that I had gotten to the point where, if I simply did my best, it could be good enough to win, and it was going to take somebody else's best to beat me. I was no longer afraid to fail, and that gave me the freedom to perform.

Now I'm moving into another chapter in my rowing: coaching. As a coach I've gained even more perspective that I wish I would have had earlier in my career. I've only been coaching for a year now, so I have no real authority on the subject, but I will say that there are several themes that I've taken from my experiences as a rower. First, rowing should be fun. Training is difficult enough without a coach creating an environment that people don't want to be in. I'm also trying to be adaptable, not only in the variety of situations that present themselves but also with my coaching methods. Each athlete is different. They learn differently, understand differently, and express themselves differently. I try to coach to the athlete, not to a method. And finally, I don't yell . . . yet.