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From Novice to Champion Hard work pays off for Rower of the Year

By Rebecca Eckland



Alia Shafi Photo provided

Imagine pursuing a sport six days a week, at least 2.5 hours a day in order to be the best athlete you can. Acalanes senior Alia Shafi did just that and her hard work was rewarded. She was named Junior Rower of the Year by USRowing and row2k Media-- the sponsoring bodies of pre-collegiate rowing.

Shafi's rowing career began two years ago. Already athletic-- track and soccer were her other pursuits-- a friend persuaded Shafi to do something "different." So, Shafi traded land for water, joining Oakland Strokes Crew, a club team with members from Lamorinda, Oakland and Piedmont.

At first, Shafi says she wasn't very good. Yet, that is what kept her attending practice after practice. "I don't like quitting because I'm not good," she explained. "I just wanted to stick with crew to see where it would take me."

She knew that if she continued to practice, she would improve. "It's like running-- it's physically demanding. And if you work hard, you'll get better at it," she said.

Her determination paid off. Shafi was second at the junior lightweight 8+ at the youth national championships as a sophomore.

Last year, as a junior, she was voted the "most inspirational" by her team and coaches.

Though she'd be the last to admit it, Shafi's no longer a mere inspiration--she's become a star.

This year, Shafi led Oakland Strokes to 17 victories in 19 races, including gold medals at the San Diego Crew Classic, the 2012 USRowing Youth National Championships, the USRowing Southwest Junior Regional Championships and at the Royal Canadian Henley Regatta.

For Shafi part of the appeal of crew is that it is both an individual and team sport. "Practices are like competitions," she said. "You have to compete with your teammates to win your spot in the Varsity boat." But when

competition days arrive, the atmosphere changes: "it's very 'teamy'-- when we're in a race, we move like we're one rower."

In fact, it was the team coach who would nominate Alia Shafi for the national distinction of "Junior Rower of the Year." Shafi was pitted against many others, and 33,000 votes in total were cast to determine a winner. Among thousands of candidates, Shafi was the clear winner, a distinction hard-won from her work ethic of "you get what you give."

Shafi has signed with Brown University and will continue her rowing career as a collegiate athlete in the fall.

When asked where rowing might take her in the future, Shafi was modest. "I hope it takes me somewhere awesome," she speculated. "I'm pretty small for a rower, but..."

If Shafi's record says anything, size is nothing compared to hard work.

