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Pair of Orinda Residents Compete in World Rowing Championship

By Karl Buscheck



Cole Ortiz, 4th from left and Nikita Lilichenko, 5th from left Photo provided

"It's the pinnacle of junior rowing in the United States," said de Regt, "As a program, we won the national championship which is obviously a pretty big achievement, but to make the World team is just the next step."

It's no secret how Ortiz, who will row at Cornell in the fall, has risen to the top of the sport.

"I don't know if you met him - he's enormous," de Regt said. "He's 6-foot-eight, 215 pounds. So, that certainly helps because that gives him a lot of leverage and that's a big part of the sport."

Like Ortiz, Lilichenko creates plenty of leverage.

"Nikita's also a pretty big guy," de Regt said. "He's like six-foot-five and 210 pounds. So, that's a big part of it."

Their imposing statures help, but that's just the start. As de Regt detailed, there are other reasons why Ortiz and Lilichenko are among the select group of rowers taking part in the World Championships, which run Aug. 21 to 28 in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

"They're physically talented. So, they have the core tools that you need in order to compete at this level," de Regt explained. "But there are a lot of guys who are 6'5" who didn't make the team. They worked very hard. They row well."

Ortiz and Lilichenko's home club - the Oakland Strokes - is one of the premier rowing setups in the nation.

"We run hopefully the best program in the country," said de Regt after Strokes' boats claimed three medals - including a pair of golds - at the US Championships. "That level is the highest junior 8's rowing in the world - just the times we're putting up. So, in order to win that championship you have to be pretty good as an individual athlete."

After a summer spent training in Portland, Ore., and rowing on nearby Vancouver Lake, a pair of Orinda residents are taking part in the 2016 World Rowing Junior Championships.

"It's all the best guys from all the best programs come to one place," said Brian de Regt, the coach of the U19 men's eight boat. "And then the best of those make the national team. So, it's the biggest accomplishment that you can have in terms of making a squad."

Cole Ortiz, a 2016 graduate of Campolindo, and Nikita Lilichenko, who will be a senior at Miramonte, both made the cut. In June, Ortiz and Lilichenko were members of de Regt's Oakland Strokes varsity eight boat that won a gold medal at the U.S. Rowing Youth National Championships.

The World Championships - hosted every year at the junior level and every non-Olympic year at the senior level - provide athletes like Ortiz and Lilichenko with a glimpse of just how wide the world of rowing is.

"It just opens their eyes to what's possible," de Regt said. "It's a very cool event. It's very cool to be out there and listening to other people talking different languages and understanding how different rowing is in different countries and to kind of come together and hopefully put yourself in a place where you can be the best in the world."

While an educational experience, the competition is ultimately a business for de Regt and his rowers.

"I hope they're pretty clear on it that it's not a vacation to Rotterdam," de Regt said. "Like, we're not going to enjoy Europe. I'm sure there will be an element of that, but I think the coolest part is that you're going to the most competitive regatta that you could ever go to as a junior athlete. It's the absolute pinnacle."

As de Regt sees it, the goal in Rotterdam is simple.

"I think the guys are pretty clear that we're going over to Europe to try and come back with some hardware."

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