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Rowing through the pandemic

By Jon Kingdon



Matty Shepherd, Head of the Oak Regatta, at San Pablo Reservoir on Oct. 17. Shirley DeFrancisci, DeF-Stop Photography

crannies of our boat house to be able to fit in the new boats, but it's definitely been worth it."

Rowing in an eight-person boat and then rowing as a single is a major change for the rowers. "It's a huge adjustment," said Hooper. "It's a little bit like trying to learn how to write with a different hand."

Steve Stewart, a native Australian who has coached all over the world, has been the Director of Men's Rowing at Oakland Strokes since 2019 and lives in Orinda. He saw firsthand the initial difficulty some of the rowers had in adjusting to a single boat. "The first six weeks, there were a number of kids that were falling out of the boats, though none in the last six weeks," Stewart said. "There also had to be a bit of a mind shift. In the eight-man boat, the pressure is on you to not let your teammates down. In the single, the pressure is to not let yourself down."

Danielle DeFrancisci, a junior at Campolindo, has been rowing with Oakland Strokes since the seventh grade, used her experience to adjust to the demands put on her in the single boat. "It was somewhat difficult," DeFrancisci said, "but I already had the foundation and rowing has taught me to tackle new challenges by being coachable and open to criticism so I was able to pick it up rather quickly."

Even with a grandfather, a father and two brothers who were rowers along with an uncle who rowed in the Barcelona Olympics, Matty Shepherd, a senior at Acalanes, did not join Oakland Strokes until his junior year only at the urging of a friend and describes it now as "one of the best experiences of my life."

In a sport that demands extreme effort and discipline, the camaraderie in the eight-man boat is what allows the rowers to fight through what Stewart concedes "is not an easy or really fun sport."

It's the group mentality that Shepherd found most satisfying, "You don't want to let down your coaches and teammates. If you don't like to work hard, it's not the right sport for you. You just fight through it and you figure that out on your own."

Shepherd is one of those who has yet to fall out of the single boat, and accepted the challenge of rowing in a single head-on. "I had to restart because sculling in the single boat (sweeping in the eight-man boat) is a new stroke, but the hardest part was learning to balance in the boat. Even though I am pushing myself in the single, we are all close enough to be able to hear each other and are able to work together that way."

The ability of the rowers to adjust to the new conditions has been a key to the success of the program through these difficulties. "I've been pleased at the resiliency of the kids," said Hooper. They're not in the same boat together but metaphorically they are, in that they are all trying to do the same thing."

Cooper Alford, a senior at Campolindo, has been rowing for nearly five years and is one of the most senior rowers at Oakland Strokes, so for him it was not quite as difficult to adjust to the single boats: "I had some experience with singles. However, even some of the seniors struggled initially with it. In a single boat, when you make a change, it's immediately apparent. You have to have the right posture with sharper, cleaner rowing strokes. I'm more than certain that this will translate well when we get back to eight-man boats."

Even though the rowers are putting in the same effort they did prior to the pandemic, the competitions and regattas were canceled, much to the dismay of everyone. "That's one of the big things I missed," Shepherd said. "From getting on the bus with the team and being together and enjoying each other's company. Now we get in trouble if we get within six feet of each other. It's totally different."

To compensate for the lack of regattas, Oakland Strokes put on their own competitions among themselves with the single boats. The last race for the fall season was on Dec. 12, though the weather did not cooperate. "The water was so rough that we were joking that it was the perfect metaphor for 2020," said Hooper. "We had to move the race to a different part of the estuary so that we could get into the wind shadow. We persevered and were able to hold the races."

Prior to the pandemic, Oakland Strokes would have over 200 kids out on the water in the afternoon

through the day with slightly staggered starting times. For Hooper, it's been a logistical nightmare planning for practices for eight people at a time as opposed to just having everyone show up at once. "It was a heavy lift but it's been very rewarding."

There is no halfway commitment to the sport with all of the demands it makes on the rowers. "Prior to the pandemic, we would go six days a week," said Shepherd. "Now we only go in four days a week but I use the ergometer (rowing machine) when I don't go to the boathouse."

Oakland Strokes has been very conscientious about doing what they can to avoid any exposure to the virus. "There have been no outbreaks at the facility," said Stewart. "We've been very strict. No one is allowed there without a mask and all hands are sanitized."

Time management is an essential for the rowers. "This is the first year that we have had morning practices," said Alford. "Waking up at five after doing homework late the night before can be brutal. It does keep you driven and motivated and to work hard and then get right on to the next thing to focus on."

So what is it that keeps them all coming back for more? For DeFrancisci, "It's learning how to manage the pain by convincing yourself that you are not at your maximum effort and to go places you never thought you could and to work harder than you ever thought you could."

For Alford, it's both the challenge and the serenity of rowing. "Being on the water in the morning with just you and the boat, it's very peaceful," Alford said. "There were days where I got in the boat and had a feeling that made me forget everything. Where I could look down the gunnel at my friends and realize that we had never rowed that good before and yell and laugh at our success. Where we would get to the end of the estuary, look out at the sun setting beautifully over the San Francisco skyline and just enjoy life, only to row all the way back to the boathouse moments later."



Danielle DeFrancisci rowing during the Tail of the Turkey Regatta, at the Oakland Estuary on Nov. 21. Shirley DeFrancisci, DeF-Stop Photography

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