

'Mystical dedication' rouses rowers at the crack of dawn

Before dawn in Hyde Park, a small group of men and women move about in the darkness. An occasional murmur of conversation and the muffled closing of car doors are heard. Engines catch, and the group is off. Its destination: Lincoln Park.

What a few years ago might have seemed suspicious activity—at this hour, after all, the only others around are unfortunates waking up on park benches—has become a daily routine for some members of the University community. Similar scenes are being enacted with increasing frequency across the country.

By 5:45 am, with the morning's first joggers yet to appear, members of the Chicago Co-ed Crew Club are gliding across the Lincoln Park Lagoon.

Rowing, a sport once associated almost exclusively with British and eastern schools, has quickly and quietly grown in popularity in recent years. The University's Co-ed Crew Club is

one of five in the Chicago area, and clubs can be found just about anywhere there is an open stretch of water.

"The excitement is hard to explain to someone who hasn't done it," said Gordy Williams, the current president of the club, "and rowers don't have to put it into words for each other. But the excitement can be scary."

Aside from the almost mystical dedication common to rowers, other advantages of the sport seem readily evident. It is a relatively safe form of exercise—rowers are more likely to injure themselves carrying boats than rowing them. ("Blisters on the hands of newcomers are the most common injuries," Williams said.) And it's egalitarian. ("Technique and coordination are just as important as strength.")

"When I first joined the club, I was sensitive about my age, but it turned out to be no problem," said Geoffrey Plampin, Editor of Official Publications and Dissertation Secretary, who

was a World War II Air Force captain and is the oldest member of the club's competitive crew.

Plampin typifies a large segment of rowers who have taken up the sport after being injured in another. He cracked a bone in his neck in a bicycle accident last summer and was advised not to participate in bumping and jolting activities such as biking or running. Rowing turned out to be the answer, and Plampin now prefers it over other sports.

"In terms of conditioning muscles, rowing is a more complete exercise, with its upper body motion," he said.

The disadvantage of rowing is that it's expensive. Boats—they're called shells—cost from \$500 to \$9,000, and there are added costs for storage and transportation. So most rowers belong to clubs.

The club here reflects the sport's democratic nature: it's open to anyone at the University, regardless of sex or

age. Ability, say participants, is directly proportional to experience.

Two types of boats are used in competitive rowing. Sculls are made for one, two, or four rowers with double oars. Sweeps are designed for two or four rowers on single oars with or without a coxswain or eight with a coxswain. The coxswain sits in the bow of the boat, coordinating the rhythm of the stroke with oral commands and ad-libbed encouragement.

Shells range in length from 25 feet for a single to 60 feet for an eight-person craft. They are made from cedar, mahogany, or fiberglass so thin that rowers must be careful stepping into the boat not to put a foot through the bottom. The boats are designed to minimize the surface area in contact with the water.

The rowers fasten their feet to inclined foot rests. Their seats slide back and forth along a track so that their legs perform most of the work in stroking.

"People who fear they don't have the upper body strength for rowing shouldn't worry," said Plampin.

Each element of the stroke must be performed in precise unison for maximum efficiency, Williams said. There is the "catch," when the blade of the oar is placed in the water; the stroke, when the blade is pushing through the water; and the finish, during which the blade is twisted so that it's parallel with the water as it's brought back for the next catch.

"When the movements are well-executed, the boat is literally lifted higher in the water. That's very exhilarating," said Williams. "When the crew is inexperienced or just not performing well, it's—well—tiresome."

The Chicago Crew Club, which has grown to a core of about 40 members from its original six in 1978, participates in a number of competitions. A four-man Chicago team placed fourth in its division at the national championship in Indianapolis. Last month the men's team placed fifth and the women's twenty-third, each out of more than 100 teams, at what is perhaps the nation's best-known competition, the Head of the Charles River, in Boston.

Plampin and Williams both started through the club's Learn-to-Row program, in which newcomers are invited to join in the pre-dawn excursions to Lincoln Park. While no Learn-to-Row sessions are currently scheduled, both men stressed that interested persons are welcome at any time.

Rowing's unique blend of cooperation and competition is another attractive element of the sport. "As a student at North Texas State in Denton, I participated in track and field," Williams said. "I joined the track club when I transferred to Chicago, but the moment I saw the Crew Club signs, I quit track and started rowing."

It's that kind of devotion that keeps dedicated rowers going through the pre-dawn rowing sessions, the winter workouts when the team runs up and down stairs in Bartlett Gym, and the four or five hours of travel to get to a race that lasts perhaps three minutes.

"You get out there in the early morning," said Plampin. "The water is calm, the crew is working well. It's the pull, the ride, your movements subordinate to the whole but an essential part of it. Everyone is just 'there,' as in a perfectly choreographed dance."



Members of the Co-ed Crew Club at a morning practice in Lincoln Park.