

# Cinderella Rows a Boat

How a group of determined North Park students overcame the odds—and their own limitations—to become champions

Hidden somewhere among the more than 15,000 people crammed into the grandstands along the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia for the finals of this year's Dad Vail Regatta on May 8, was Tim Grant, coach of the North Park University women's rowing team. Since the decision to compete at the regatta was a last minute one, Grant was a one person cheering section.

The largest college rowing event in the U.S., the Dad Vail attracts rowers and fans from more than 100 colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada. North Park had surprised their competition and qualified for the finals. Grant believed they might just win their event—the Women's Novice 4+ race—if the team could find a way to catch Purdue University, which finished two and a half seconds ahead of North Park in the semifinals.

Then he overheard some rowers from Georgia Tech, seated nearby, say, "Who should we cheer for in this race?"

Figuring that every little bit helps, Grant leaned over and asked them to cheer for North Park. After hearing his "sob story," says Grant, they became instant North Park fans.

"Everybody loves the David and Goliath story," Grant says. "And we were truly David this year."

As the boats approached the finish line, the Purdue fans started cheering. Grant and his new friends countered

with "Let's go Park!"

"Once Purdue got started," he says, "the Georgia Tech team decided to be even louder."

The cheers continued as North Park crossed the finish line four seconds ahead of Purdue. They continued as the North Park team pulled up to the dock, and Grant accepted the gold medals from the race steward. One by one, Grant placed the medals over the heads of team members Cori Bowman,

priceless," Grant says. "I'll never forget it, never."

Winning a gold medal at Dad Vail was a perfect ending to an extraordinary first season of varsity crew competition for North Park. The women's team won medals at every regatta they entered during the fall and spring rowing seasons, and really began to shine during a one-on-one meet with Drake University, a Division I school, winning four out of five races.

The strongest boat on the team was the women's novice 4+ event, which won a bronze medal at the Midwest Championships and gold at MACRA. Unlike other sports, rowing has a novice level, where athletes in their first year of college rowing compete against teams with the same experience.

Only one of the women in that boat—Saftstrom—had ever rowed before. The rest

were true novices. Rebecca Bowman, from Cowiche, Washington, says that the closest she ever got to rowing was being "in a rowboat on Puget Sound."

That was "nothing like crew," she says, adding that when she started last fall, her biggest worry was "trying to not tip the boat over."

Out of the eighteen women on the North Park team, only two had college rowing experience. That came last year, when the women's team was still a club sport. (North Park also has a men's team, which remains a club sport.)

The idea for starting a rowing pro-



North Park administrators and fans met the victorious team at the airport. (from left) Alli Koubsky, President David Horner, Rebecca Bowman, coach Tim Grant, Erika Treatch, Annika Saftstrom, Cori Bowman, and Jack Surridge, athletic director.

Rebecca Bowman, Annika Saftstrom, Alli Koubsky, and their coxswain, Erika Treatch.

Over the next few hours, Grant watched as fans and other competitors came up to his team and congratulated them. The Georgia Tech team and several others gave the North Parkers t-shirts from their programs, asked about the school, and acknowledged their accomplishment. In winning a gold medal, North Park beat forty-four other boats, including five Division I schools in the finals.

"The look on our team's faces were



**"EVERYBODY LOVES THE DAVID AND GOLIATH STORY," GRANT SAYS.  
"AND WE WERE TRULY DAVID THIS YEAR."**

gram at North Park came in the spring of 2001. Biology professor Jeff Nelson was watching a track meet and saw the crew team from Loyola University rowing up the Chicago River next to North Park's track.

"Why aren't we doing that?" Nelson asked himself. Crew seemed a perfect sport for North Park, as the Chicago River runs through the campus. Nelson, who knew nothing about rowing, decided to buy a boat and try to start a team.

"I thought, 'We'll just get a boat and learn to row,'" he says.

Nelson ended up at the Dammrich Rowing Center in nearby Skokie, Illinois, where he met Grant, who offered to teach a class for North Park students.

Before long, some of the students in the class began to ask about competing. Grant agreed to coach a rowing club, and Nelson helped raise money to buy two boats. After a successful club season, the women's team became a varsity sport, in part to satisfy Title IX requirements of equal oppor-

tunity for women athletes.

Some of the strongest supporters of the team are North Park's science faculty. Nelson often traveled with the team as unofficial photographer, while chemistry professor Lee Horton was team cook. Cal Katter, professor of biblical and theological studies, and his wife, Fern, also came to the events, bringing bagels and support to the team.

"Having the faculty there has been so great," says Koubsky, a transfer student from Covenant Bible College—Ecuador. "If you don't have your friends and your family nearby—there is always some one to cheer you on or to lift you up."

The team got a boost this fall when Saftstrom, a first year student from First Covenant Church in Seattle, decided to come to North Park. She rowed in high school for the Sammamish Rowing Association, where her team won the San Diego Crew Classic and placed fifth at the nationals in Cincinnati. She brought her experience and her enthusiasm to the team, and talked Cori and

Rebecca Bowman into trying out.

"She made it sound fun and exciting," says Cori Bowman, a first year student. "I had no idea what it would be like."

Because of the intense demands of the sport—rowing a 2,000 meter race is the equivalent of playing two full court basketball games—crew members undergo an intensive physical training program. After a two week "boot camp" in the fall, the team settled into a routine of practice on the water five days a week—from 5:30 to 7:30 a.m.—weight training, running stairs, and working out on the Ergometer 2, a hi-tech rowing machine.

Cori Bowman had one word to describe the rowing workouts, known as "Ergs."

"Pain," she says. "They hurt and they are hard and you hate them, and yet sometimes you love them."

One of the hardest lessons for new rowers, say Saftstrom and Koubsky, is

**Bob Smietana is features editor of the *Companion*.**

learning how to keep going when you feel like you've reached your limit.

"After a minute or so of rowing your body says, 'Stop'—you feel like you are going to die," says Koubsky. "But because of your conditioning, your mind says keep going."

Grant says he sometimes he has to keep team members from walking out of practice. "There are many mornings when I have to [stand by] the door to keep women from leaving," he says, "to tell them they are being challenged and that they can meet the challenge."

Without the intense training, says Grant, the team could not compete with other programs.

"The standard in this sport is high," he says. "You can't get away with anything less. And you definitely don't get a gold medal at a national championship regatta unless the standard is set very high."

Rebecca Bowman says she's learned how to keep going, no matter what obstacles she faces. It's a lesson that will help her in sports, she says, and life.

"I tend to be a quitter when things get hard," she says, "and I learned I could persevere and push through."

The team spent most of January and February training indoors at the rowing center in Skokie, where their boats are stored. There are future plans for

a dock on campus, but for now the team trains on a stretch of river north of the campus. From there, they can row three miles north to Wilmette, or all the way south to downtown Chicago.

The training schedule and road trips to regattas—most were more than 200 miles away—meant that the team had lots of time to build close relationships. Rebecca Bowman says that besides becoming friends, team members had long conversations about God and would pray for one another. That kind of community was something Bowman, who transferred in as a junior from a college in California, missed at her previous school.

## A Morning on the River

### Anne Lindahl

It's 4:45 a.m. My alarm kicks me awake, and I have fifteen minutes to get ready and leave my apartment. Flying around, I throw on all my layers of clothes and junky shoes, and I'm out the door. It's just another morning of crew.

I meet the rest of the team in the parking lot. It's dark and cold, but the vans are warming up. Before long, we're off to the rowing center in Skokie, our hub for practice every day.

We pull up to the Boat House—the left garage is opened and lit—we're on the water today! The stars are still shining overhead as we listen to Coach Tim give us the lineup.

I'm in the four person women's boat, and I am to sit in three-seat. The four of us crowd around our boat, and lift it off the racks. It feels heavier this morning, but it must be our arms straining to wake up.

We carry our boat down to the water.

"Ports to oars, starboards to locks," yells the coxswain as we all scramble to our positions. We push off, and glide out a bit on the water as we continue to ready ourselves.

After warmups, comes the sprint—

2,000 meters of heart racing, body pounding rowing. We begin. Our seats roll forward together at the catch.

"Pull!" yells the coxswain.

Our arms nearly rip out of our sockets, and our legs explode back on the seat. Again and again we pull and slide, pull and slide. Sweat is dripping from our faces (and this is only practice). We hear "Way enough" from our coxswain, and slowly come to a stop. Our breaths are gasping—it's been a good row.

With all of the grueling practices, our hard work paid off at the end of last season in Topeka, Kansas. Our novice crew team, not even one full year in existence, won the gold in two major events. The women's lightweight four boat and the men's novice eight boat all returned home proudly with their first place medals around their necks.

Though the medals were a great accomplishment, the true prize was getting to be a part of something so great. The crew team for me was more than just a team, it was my family. And, through it all, I learned count-



less lessons on unconditional love, physical strength, and a reliance on Christ to carry me through when I couldn't possibly do any more.

This year, the crew team at North Park University became a women's varsity sport. This would not have been possible without the support of many different individuals. Many thanks to Dr. Jeff Nelson, Coach Tim, the Science Division at NPU, and to all of the people who contributed prayers and financial support during this past year.

We still have a ways to go but the North Park crew team has truly been an opportunity that I will never forget. □

Anne Lindahl graduated from North Park University in May. She was a member of the women's crew club in 2002-2003, and rowed during the fall varsity season. This reflection originally appeared in the Winter 2003-2004 issue of *The Pietisten*.

"I was so starved for those kinds of conversations," she says.

Her sister Cori has found parallels between rowing and her own spiritual life. "In rowing, you can't rely on yourself," she says. "You need the support of your team. You have to have faith in the people who sit behind and in front of you in the boat. You have to trust your coxswain to steer a straight course . . . just as you have to trust God not to steer you into something you can't handle."

That community feeling and sense of trust was tested at times. Because of costs, only the Novice 4+ team was able to go to the Dad Vail Regatta. Saftstrom says it was difficult to go to Philadelphia without the rest of the team. A few days before they left, some crew members left a message (in sidewalk chalk) for the Novice boat crew on a bridge along their training route.

"Go North Park," the message read. "Row hard in Philly."

"When we went out that morning and we rowed by and saw that message," Saftstrom says, "it made us feel so good. It was cool to know so many people back at school were cheering for us [when we got to Philadelphia]. We could still feel their support—even though they weren't there."

In their last race at the Dad Vail, all the team's hard work and the lessons they learned along the way paid off. Just before the final began, the team decided on a new strategy. Normally in a 2,000 meter race a crew sprints at the beginning, settles into a steady rhythm in the middle, and then sprints again at the end of the race. But Grant and the team decided to start sprinting in the middle of the final race.

It was a risky move—if the team got ahead, Grant felt their conditioning was strong enough to hold off Purdue's final sprint. But if they failed to get an early lead, they would have nothing left at the end.

Much of the responsibility fell on Saftstrom, as the most experienced rower, and on Treatch, the coxswain.

Treatch was to keep the team focused and call the sprint at just the right time.

At five feet tall, and just over 100 pounds, Treatch is the smallest member of the team by far. On race day, her role is the most emotionally stressful. She's the only team member who can see what's going on in the race, and she has to keep rowers focused while making strategic decisions on the fly.

By halfway through the race, North Park, Purdue, and Vermont were tied for the lead in the eleven boat race.

So Treatch, a first year student, called the first of four sprints, and slowly the North Park boat started to slip ahead.

"When we sprint," Treatch says, "the rowers tend to get chaotic and start to fall apart, and I didn't want that to happen. I didn't want to raise my voice and get too excited. I tried to keep it level."

That approach worked until the last 250 meters, when North Park shot ahead, and "it seemed like everyone else was going backwards," she says,

"I was screaming into the microphone—'You are in first place,' " she says. "I just kept screaming into the microphone."

On the shore, Grant could see the look of determination on his team's faces and knew they were going to win.

"They were not going to let anybody catch them," he says. "I think they could have gone another mile at that point. It was really an awesome, awesome sight. A little unexpected, but it was really a beautiful moment."

Grant says the long-term goal for the North Park team is to compete for a Division III championship. To do so, the school would need to have two varsity level, eight-person boats.

That's a long way off, he says.

But it may be closer than anyone realizes, if crew members like Koubisky have anything to do with it.

"We have got a lot of work to do," she says. "Now that we know what it feels like to take a gold medal at a regatta like Dad Vail—it'll push us even harder to do well at the next level." □

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