

THE RACE

BY TOM MATLACK '86

PHOTOS OF 2007 CREW TEAMS BY BILL BURKHART

Tom Matlack '86 remembers the year men's crew got serious about training. What happened next was life changing.

New London, Connecticut. April 1986. The water rushes by a mere six inches below me. I do not notice. I have spent hundreds, perhaps thousands of hours in this position. I am the “seven man”

in an eight-man racing shell, meaning I have only the “stroke” in front of me. I mirror his every motion. I pick a spot in the middle of his back and concentrate on it. Our arms, backs, and legs coil up in preparation for the entry of the oar into the water. As we catch at full compression, there is a “plop” when all eight blades hit the water simultaneously. The boat surges forward. I can hear the bubbles run along the keel as I drive my legs down, pry open my back, and finally finish the stroke by drawing the handle to my body with my biceps. My outside hand taps down on the oar, removing it from the water, while at the same time my inside hand twists the blade parallel to the surface of the water. My leg and abdominal muscles remain taut, while the recovery of the stroke begins again. The boat gradually slows until we hit the next catch, when it once again surges and I again hear bubbles.

The boat is rowing well. It is rock steady. The power is on and then it is off, on then off, on then off. The key is to relax on the recovery, to collect and fully prepare for the next stroke by getting in the appropriate position. This we are doing. The pattern is almost unconscious. I can simply feel it. I become one with my oar. I am my oar. I become one with the other seven oarsmen. Our minds become a single entity. We are part of a machine ready to compete.

The coxswain, Karen, calls for all to “way enough.” We take one final stroke and then stop, oars an arm’s length from our bodies. The boat runs out in a glide, our bodies perfectly still, all eight blades off the water balancing without effort. Finally Karen calls “blades down” and all eight blades hit the water at the same time. Each of us moves to take off his warm-ups. From a patchwork of favorite hats, sweats, and stinky shirts emerges our common racing attire, a white shirt with Wesleyan red and black trim. All the now extraneous clothing is passed up man to man until it reaches Karen, who puts it under and behind her seat. She calls, “Count down when ready!” The words “bow, one, two, three, four, five, six” are heard. I add my “seven” and finally David completes the count with “stroke.” Now we are ready...

Just off our port gunnels is the Coast Guard Academy varsity heavyweight eight. No one can remember beating this crew since their rowing program was founded by Olympic gold medalist Bill Stowe in 1971—a 15-year losing streak. The last two years I have been humiliated by our performance against them. Both races were “horizon” jobs—our boat was still on the horizon as Coast Guard crossed the finish line.

I drift back to our pre-race discussion the night before. We were sitting in what generally served as a coat room after dinner at one of the fraternities on campus. Our coach, Will Scoggins, had told us to simply stay with it, his blue eyes burning with intensity. “The race,” he said, “begins at one thousand meters, at the halfway mark. Whether you are a length up or a length down, simply know that the second thousand meters is yours. Poise is the key. Don’t try anything special. Just do what you do. The same stroke time and again, a length up or a length down. Give everything and you shall receive everything. You have to believe, gentlemen.”

We have been preparing for this event since September. The fall in collegiate rowing is a warm-up season consisting of longer “Head” races that are timed but don’t mean much. Our new coach had spent the fall starting from scratch, trying to get the most basic principles of the sport into our brains. It feels natural to come up the slide on the recovery of the stroke, he had told us, with your shoulders in your eardrums. It is a power move and your body wants

to tense up in preparation. The problem with that style is that it is like approaching a 250-pound barbell, bending over it and trying to lift with your arms only. It cannot be done. You have to use your legs to drive the barbell upward, gaining momentum. That fall, when I would revert to rowing with tense shoulders in practice, Will yelled in his megaphone,

“MATLACK! Would you please make my day and report to the catch. You are late. Get your head out of your ass and relax on the drive. This is a finesse move. We aren’t trying to kill it. Get the damn blade in the water.”

I had patiently improved my technique over the course of Will’s instruction. But I was still more comfortable in the middle, fat, part of the boat called the “engine room,” where strength is more important than rowing pretty.

During the winter months leading up to the racing season, rowing teams engage in various forms of off-season conditioning verging on torture. Our prior teams had taken winter training lightly. Will did not. We built our own

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barbells by filling empty industrial tomato cans with cement and sinking in them lengths of pipe that we painted black. We used these in a circuit training routine called “The Bear.” Every day after class we met in the lightly used Nicholson dormitory lounge, cleared away the furniture, and cranked up the David Bowie on a boom box, “*Ch-ch-ch-ch-Changes*.” Will often pointed out that acorns don’t become oak trees by growing into big seeds. They have to set down roots and change form completely.

The homemade bars weighed around fifty pounds. The rule was they could not touch the ground at any point during the workout. We did a rotation of exercises, fifty seconds on and then ten seconds off—just enough time to prepare for the next set. A deep squat to a military press was followed by a triceps curl with the bar behind the head, a lat pull to the eyeballs, and a jumping lunge with the bar overhead, getting up in the air high enough to switch legs forward and back simultaneously, ideally without crashing over sideways.

Four simple exercises over and over again. The first 10 or 20 minutes there is laughter and bawdy humor back and forth. Then it gets serious. Muscles ache. Breathing becomes labored. Will suggests that we pair off, pushing each other, looking into each other’s eyes for strength. Half an hour in, the music gets turned up. The intensity in the room is palpable. Some of the weaker team members begin to falter. Will starts talking. “This is gut check time, gents! This is where fast boats are made, right here! Don’t give up on your mates!” Sometimes he would tell us up front how long we were going to go. Sometimes he would just make up his mind along the way. Generally it was an hour, though 90 minutes was not unheard of. Towards the end of the session Will would sometimes go so far as to grab an extra bar himself and do lunges in someone’s face—blue jeans, cowboy boots, and chewing tobacco be damned. Finally, he would call the workout over and we would collapse in exhaustion, bodies strewn everywhere on the floor.

Students coming back from class to their dorm rooms, or on their way to Mocon for dinner, would walk by and look at us, wondering what the hell had happened.

Winter training also included various forms of running for strength and endurance. We

would do timed miles on the track or take long runs in the snow. But many Saturdays during the winter we would meet in the cemetery on the edge of campus, set on a particularly long and steep hill. The road up twisted and turned, flattening out in a false peak, only to reveal its steepest section just before reaching the top. Will devised a system in which each team was composed of an equal number of strong and weak oarsmen on the hill. He split up each team into three separate race squads, pitting oarsmen of similar hill climbing ability against one another. He would sit at the top of the hill on the back of his pick-up truck with a clipboard in his hand, keeping score. We generally ran 10 hills, taking about an hour and depleting whatever resources were left from the week of training.

On one Saturday, I had a memorable exchange with a younger teammate. I knew Jon had been out late the night before, but I still expected him to excel at the hills since he was the best runner on the team, often beating

me at the long runs that were my specialty. We battled out the first couple of hills, snorting and swearing upon reaching the top. Then I noticed that he would stay with me for one hill and slow down on the next one. As the captain of the team, I was trying to reinforce the coach’s demand for consistency of effort and it started to gall me that Jon appeared to be dogging it. I was busting my ass on each repetition and he should be too. On the next hill I finished first. As I came down I saw him bringing up the rear of our group. “What the hell are you doing?” I barked in his face, pushing him into the snowbank as he tried to complete the hill. He came up swinging, landing a couple of crisp shots to my jaw, before our teammates separated us.

Up on the top of the hill, sitting on the back of his pick-up truck, Will smiled. He told me later about the Olympic gold medal crew that reached the dock after their victory and broke out in a brawl. The process of developing underlying trust as a team involved spilling your guts along the way, even showing raw emotion. He had made clear from the very beginning that this was about rowing, but it was really about a lot more. It was about growing up and learning the hard way how to avoid making excuses. He liked to say that he was really an educator and an artist who happened to choose boats and oars and men as his medium. The

measure of success was how well our crew rowed. But he firmly believed that excellence on the water had less to do with technique and strength and more to do with the development of the soul. We worked hard not so much to condition our bodies, though that was a necessary prerequisite, but to condition our minds. The payoff was that this development of the mind could be applied to any situation in life later on, whether on the water or off. To his way of thinking, the fight on the hill was a sign of progress—a sign of growing faith in one another.

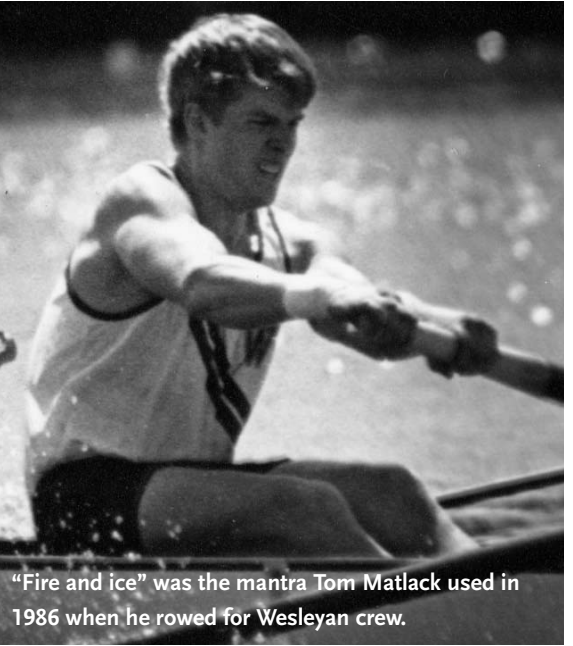
Back on the racecourse, I have to admit that right now I do not believe. I am scared and shaking. Will has tried to change my old pattern of working extremely hard in practice and leaving my best efforts home when it really counted. Everything we have done has pointed to this moment. His whole message has been to prepare for the big race. His aim in working with us is to cultivate poise and relaxation at the moment when the natural tendency is to tighten up. But I am not sure.

I try to regain concentration. I block everything out but the phrase Will had spoken the night before about one inch from my face, looking into my heart: “fire and ice.” This for me is the key to unlocking the perfect stroke. On the drive, when my oar is in the water, I have to have the fire of a madman, while on the recovery I have to be as

cool as ice. I keep repeating this phrase to myself a few times and begin to feel a bit more confident.

I envision a huge bubble enclosing me and the rest of my boat. I stare at the bottom of the boat and a little smile comes over my face. I can feel our competition next to us but I do not look up. I concentrate only on our crew. Nothing comes into our bubble and nothing leaves. I can feel the power build among us. I notice that a strong headwind has picked up, causing a chop off the port bow. No problem. There are no distractions. They are there to weaken the other crew. They make us stronger. There is a chop. Good. We have an old fiberglass boat. They have a new carbon fiber one. Good. We are prepared to do battle. Will says Spartan warriors were taught never to come home from battle without their shields. They came back with their shields or on top of them. Today, he has us believing that we will win or die trying.

The starter calls us to the line. We paddle up. He begins the process of getting the boats aligned for the start. I take a deep breath, in and out. Finally he tells us that we are even. The coxswains must now get their points, meaning they must get their boat pointed directly down the course. Karen sits with her hand in the air to indicate we are not ready. “Give me two strokes bow,” she says. “Good.” I take a really deep breath, way in and all the way out. Fire and ice. “This is it, gents, sit tall,” Karen growls.



“Fire and ice” was the mantra Tom Matlack used in 1986 when he rowed for Wesleyan crew.





The starter bellows, “I see two hands...I see one hand...I see no hands... READY ALL, ROW!”

We are off. Karen counts out 20 short quick strokes to get the boat moving and up to speed. The boat wobbles a bit on stroke 14 and 15. No problem. Then on stroke 20, Karen commands “settle!” The rating (strokes per minute) drops from 40 to 34 in a single stroke. A wave hits the side of the boat. We flop for a second but get it back quickly. Karen begins to call us off the other boat. We are seven seats behind. We have time. Fire and ice!

We cross the 500-meter mark. We are now a full length down. Stay steady. The boat is not rowing particularly smoothly but the power is there. Relax! I am surprised, at the 1,000-meter mark, to feel remarkably rested. But we are still a length down. “The race starts here, right now, gentlemen!” Karen screams. Just as she says that I realize that I do feel pain, almost like my body is playing a dirty trick on me. At each catch my back and legs burn as I explode off the foot stretchers. My stomach tightens into a ball. For a moment I am not sure I can go on. But as we continue, my body goes numb. I am floating above it, watching what is going on. The discomfort is a distant ache. I put my blade in, pull as hard as I am capable, and take it out. Simple.

We come out in front of Coast Guard’s new boathouse. Seven hundred meters to go. I faintly hear the crowd

cheer. But mostly I am intently focused on Karen’s call. “You are bow to stern. Now you are moving! Yes! Their coxswain is on the bow ball now. Keep him coming! This is it. Last six hundred. Now he is on you, Alex! Pass him down to Peter. Yes you have got it! They are dying. This race is ours. Let’s go. Keith, give me that coxswain! He is on you, Tom. Only two seats now. FIVE HUNDRED METERS TO GO. Give me that coxswain! Give him to me! YES, GENTLEMEN WE ARE EVEN!!!” (Particularly loud to make sure the other boat hears her)... “Walk me down that boat! I am on their stroke...I am on their seven man...I’m on their six man...I am on their bow ball!!!! Give me a full length!”

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As soon as Karen calls us even, all the pain disappears. We are a single consciousness now. I hear the “plop” of all eight of our blades hitting the water simultaneously at the catch. The boat surges forward as we drive our legs down, pry our backs open and draw the handle through with our lat and bicep muscles. The boat glides out rock steady on each recovery. Once again, bubbles.



Now we are a length ahead. Now we are open water between our stern and their bow. There are 100 meters to go. I start thinking, “We are actually going to win this thing!” Where is the finish line? Come on, where is it? No mistakes now. Just stay steady. Don’t blow it. Just a little farther. Maintain concentration.

Karen calls the rating up for the final sprint. Then we pass the finish observatory. “We did it!” Karen screams, jumping to try to hug us without tipping the boat over. I raise my fist and shake it in the air. We are all yelling. I look over to shore and our teammates are going crazy. Someone in the Coast Guard boat mumbles a “congratulations” and “nice row.” Yes, I do believe. Will, it all happened just as you said it would.

Back at the boathouse, the Coast Guard oarsmen approach with shirts in hand. As is customary, we have bet shirts on the race, so as the victors it is time to collect our spoils. There is nothing quite as humiliating as handing over the shirt on your back to the victor or as satisfying as receiving it.

Jon, the same teammate that I pushed into the snow bank on the cemetery hill, comes up to me. He has become the little brother I never had. We have had our fights, as brothers often do. But we are best friends, as well. He tells me that even though he didn’t row the race he felt there was a lot of him out there. And he was proud to be a part of it.

The rest of the day I can’t stop smiling. We have broken through our limitations individually and as a team. In September none of us thought this day was possible. We had changed ourselves into a boat capable of poise under pressure and of competing at a high level. The rest of the year we keep winning but no victory is as sweet as this first one.

Looking back, I realize how few chances there are in life to look one’s demons directly in the eye and see who flinches first. In a sporting event barely worthy of the local paper, at least on that spring day, I had the opportunity to look and see that my demons were nothing but shadows.

[Excerpted from *To the Moon and Back*, a book in progress by Tom Matlack.]