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OUT GOING

The strokes

Oars will hit the water and inner strength will be tested at annual San Diego Crew Classic

By Wendi Whitmore

March 30, 2006

Admittedly, those new to crewing stifled giggles upon first hearing and having to say coxswain. Ultimately, this word came to represent one of the most essential people to an eight-member crew on a racing team. Coxswains are the only people on a team who don't row. They shout instructions, motivate and steer a 60-foot shell and its eight members to victory – or defeat.

Watching a race, with the sound of oars slicing into blue water as an eight-member crew rows in perfect synchronicity, is a great experience. More than 3,400 athletes will participate in the 33rd annual San Diego Crew Classic Saturday and Sunday at Crown Point on Mission Bay. It's the first major regatta of the collegiate rowing season.

According to the coach of the women's crew team at the United States Naval Academy, Mike Hughes, crewing carries a sense of adventure with it. "People really feel like they are accomplishing something special because the training is so hard."

There is a profound element of pain, an intense burning of muscles, say crew members, but the determination to push through it is stronger.

If triumph over pain is a running theme, another is the bond of friendship. At the University of California San Diego, the coxswain for one of the men's crew teams, Chilesne Mabula (known as Chile), spoke of what is called the "best man" speech the first day of tryouts. "They said to look to your left and to your right, that these people are your brothers and friends and will probably be your best man one day."

DATEBOOK

33rd annual San Diego Crew Classic

7:30 a.m.-5 p.m.

Saturday; 7:30 a.m.-2:20 p.m. Sunday; Crown Point Shores, Mission Bay; \$7, 13 and up; \$10

The coxswain of the other men's crew, Joe Gram (who has been nicknamed Keebler), joked about being small but able to make guys 6-feet-5 cry trying to get everything perfect in the boat. "It's about a mutual respect. They have to be willing to do all that for me and pull harder when I say harder, especially when I'm just standing there yelling at them."

*for two-day pass;
parking, \$10 per car or
use the free parking and
shuttle from Ski Beach;
(619) 225-0300 or
crewclassic.org*

A member of Gram's crew, Will Stuart, said, "I trust him. We know that he is telling us what do to is in the best interest of the boat. And, if we win, we get to throw him in the water." That is a tradition.

Sarah Smolley, an assistant coach for the UCSD women's crew team – and a former crew member – says that the bond among members is phenomenal. It builds an "us against the world" feeling that makes them very close. "Before races, we stayed together the entire time. We ate together, ran together, wouldn't leave each other's side," she said of her earlier experiences.

Other things a crew does to raise morale might include sticky notes with beloved or encouraging phrases written on them and posted on each other's backs so they can see them during the race.

One person on Smolley's team always wanted to have her partner, the girl who rows next to her, braid her hair before every race.

"Ultimately," Smolley said, "I realized none of this was going to make the boat go faster. And all we want is to go faster and win."

■ Wendi Whitmore is a San Diego writer.

GOING TO THE ROWING

Food and beverage concessions including a beer garden will be set up.

Rowing apparel, equipment and paraphernalia as well as Crew Classic logo merchandise will be on sale.

Take a chair, beach blanket and sunscreen.

Races are shown live, start to finish, on a giant screen.

Tents are not allowed except as permitted by the Beach Master along the fence in the crew staging area. See the Beach Master before erecting any tents. Groups can reserve a tent in Alumni Row.

GLOSSARY

Regatta: race

Racing shells: boats

Paddles: oars

Coxswain: steers boat and directs crew

Cox toss: when coxswain hits the water at the end of a winning race

Crab catch: when rower fails to get the oar out of the water at the end of the stroke

Waynuff: coxswain's call to stop

Cadence: uniform stroke rate

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