



The path of most resistance

Exploring the whys and wherefores of rowing: a quintessentially British sport.

Refer to their favoured pastime as “an elitist sport” amongst savvy rowing enthusiasts, and you’ll likely get more than a few quizzical stares which ask: “Elitist in which sense of the word?” In terms of athletic endurance and performance, it is unequivocally so. “What rowers confront isn’t a wall; it’s a hole - an abyss of pain, which opens up in the second minute of the race,” as one former US coach Ashleigh Teitel once put it. “Large needles are being driven into your thigh muscles, while your forearms seem to be splitting.”

Robert Treharne Jones, an Olympic commentator and 35-year member of Leander – the Henley-on-Thames rowing club he refers to as “The Wimbledon, the Royal St Andrews or the MCC of rowing – agrees. “In terms of stamina, strength and speed, it combines all three in a way that is shared by few other sports – the one that comes closest is Nordic skiing,” he says. And, by the way, Treharne Jones should know - Leander has won 123 Olympic Medals in the last 100 or so years – “a haul that many small nations would consider decent reward for their excruciating efforts,” he laughs.

A genuinely ancient sport - in *The Aeneid*, Virgil mentions it as part of competitive funeral rites, while competitive rowing on the Thames goes back to the 16th century, when wagering between passengers of the watermen who served as the era’s taxis led to official races – rowing’s in its modern iteration in particular, Treharne Jones says, is unfathomably skilful. “I like the swan analogy – it looks so easy, it looks so graceful, and yet there’s a massive amount of [unseen] stamina, speed and endurance that’s being generated. Some call it the ultimate team sport, because everyone’s doing precisely the same thing at the same time. If someone decides to speed up the whole thing goes pear shaped.”

So how about elitist in the other, more delicate sense of the word? The answer is not clear-cut. “Neither of the two most notable events in the rowing calendar as far as the public is concerned, The Boat Race and Henley Royal Regatta, are typical of rowing as practiced at the 600 clubs in the UK,” as Treharne Jones points out. And, lest we forget, Steve Redgrave – winner of gold medals at five consecutive Olympic Games from 1984 to 2000 – attended a comprehensive school while Christopher Dodd’s excellent book, *Pieces of Eight*, emphasises the role of working-class men at the Thames Tradesmen’s Rowing Club in the 1970s in British rowing’s recent resurgence.

But take a stroll around Eton College’s private 2,000m rowing lake, or mingle on the riverbank at the Henley Regatta each summer, and one’s earworm is soon likely to morph into Lieutenant George and General Melchett’s rallying cry to victory, learned in their gilded days as privileged shoe-ins to Cambridge, in *Blackadder Goes Forth* (“Row, row, row your punt, gently down the stream. Belts off, trousers down, isn’t life a scream, oi!”).

Oxford and Cambridge are no longer class quarantine zones, but let’s be honest, Australian activist Trenton Oldfield’s disruption of the Boat Race in 2013 would have looked even more misguided than it did had the teams’ coxswains been educated in Dagenham and Toxteth. And let’s not think that rowing’s high-born connotations exist only in Britain: John Brendan Kelly Sr - a triple Olympic Gold

Medal winner and one of the highest-achieving rowers in American sporting history, was a construction multimillionaire (and indeed the father of Grace Kelly, Princess of Monaco).

Democratised rowing may now be, but when it comes to the culture of rowing – the ceremony, the regalia, and the history - a feel around the more rarefied echelons of the broader rowing milieu will harvest juicier fruit. Blue-blooded rowers are more likely to start young: at many UK public schools, new entrants are classed immediately as either rugby players or rowers depending largely on bulk and height, with personal inclination often an afterthought (indeed, the sport is so important in this arena, educational establishments have been known to entice European or American talent by offering them a hefty scholarship in exchange for their efforts with the oars).

Those deemed rowers will immediately be given a highly reverent tutorial about the school boats, the legacy they have left to the school and who they are named after (the sanctity of a boat’s name continues into higher education – Oxford’s current racing shell is named ‘Daniel’ after Dan Topolski, a legendary and often notoriously blunt Oxford coach and athlete). The fledgling rower will soon have the importance of rivalry drummed into him, with schools in the same area desperate to beat each other (while Eton, universally, is considered a big scalp).

The Oxford/Cambridge rivalry, meanwhile, is on another level altogether. “It’s so gladiatorial, absolutely one-on-one - each university just has one race every spring to devote their entire energies to,” says Treharne Jones. “The way the coaches bring them on for that particular race is rather different because it’s a mental battle as much as a physical one, so for that 20 minutes or so that’s the focus of your entire existence for that whole year. The rivalries – the needle if you like – that they want to exhibit during the time of their race does carry on at a low level throughout their lives.” Iain Mandale, this year’s President for Oxford University Boat Club, agrees. “The competition between the two teams is hard to avoid,” he says. “Talking to some of the ‘Old Blues’ - past members of the club - I get the feeling that the competitive spirit never really leaves you after the depth of feeling that comes out of a Boat Race campaign.”

The fierce competitive spirit may be either cause or effect when it comes to the symbolism and regalia that rowing, in these circles, engenders – as neatly typified by the classic rowing club blazer, easily as potent – and distinctly more elegant – symbol of tribal belonging as the replica football kit: “Our club colours have huge symbolic importance,” says Mandale. “Once the Blue Boat and Isis, the reserve boat, are selected to race, those oarsmen are eligible to get their rowing ‘Blues’ blazer and racing top, called a zephyr. It’s hard to overstate the significance of those two items of clothing to a selected oarsman; they are unique items of clothing that you cannot attain by any means other than being selected for The Boat Races.”

Which, of course, brings us full circle back to that other meaning of ‘elitist’, and its applicability to a sport in which both those on the river and those on the banks frequently suffer memory loss – albeit for very different reasons.