



Race of a Lifetime

by Karl Zinsmeister

RIVERS AND LAKES OF THE U.S. AND IRELAND, AUGUST 1996: In the neon world of sport, rowing is a softly glowing candle. It offers little glamor for participants, and hardly any rewards at all to spectators. Yet from my first moments of taking up the sport as a college freshman, rowing had me in its grip.

I started as a football player at Yale and tried rowing as a lark, but I immediately switched teams when I found how much I enjoyed competing on the water. My freshman crew ended up being the first in recent memory to beat Harvard (rowing's superpower). That earned us a 3,000-mile trip to the sport's mecca—the

Henley Royal Regatta in England. My sophomore year I ended up in the heavyweight varsity boat, and that July I again journeyed to Henley.

Somewhere in the course of that sophomore year, a shift in the relative positions of my academic and athletic lives took place. I never liked the cultural and social scene at Yale, and it took me a couple of years to find the right direction in my academic work. Early on, it was rowing that saved me. Our dawn and evening practices were pure adventure, and my successes an unexpected gift. Every day on the water brought new possibilities.

But once I made the transformation from striving novice to established member of a top crew engaged in the sometimes grim job of winning a national championship (we did), rowing lost a measure of its joy. I began to feel ground down, caught in a giant machine. Almost simultaneously, I began to pull together the threads of my academic career. I laid out an exciting research project that would bring me to Dublin's Trinity College for all of my junior year, and then back to the National Library of Ireland the following summer to write a thesis of which I could be proud. One fever waxed as another waned, and I set off permanently down the path toward a life of the mind.

Rowing was the last thing I was thinking about as I stepped into Trinity's historic courtyard to attend my first class in Dublin. But as I was tripping along the waxy

cobblestones, I suddenly had company. The stroke of the Trinity rowing team, Jerry Macken, recognized me from my races at Henley, and instantly began to recruit me—hard. As I listened to his sweet Irish brogue, I thought, *Man, this guy could sell vacation homes in Lebanon*. By the time I'd crossed the wide courtyard I found myself telling him, like a lost adolescent encountering his first Hare Krishna in a bus station, that, okay, maybe I *would* row a little bit with them.

The Trinity Boat Club was just what its name implied—a student-run club, where everything from boat maintenance to fund-raising was handled by the rowers themselves. And notwithstanding its epic stature in the works of James Joyce, the Liffey is a narrow, tortured snake of a river. In places it's little more than a stream, thick with marshy grasses and dangerously protective mother swans. Racing 60-foot-long shells on such a watercourse was often a hair-raising adventure.

The contrast with the Yale crew—where we had professional riggers as well as coaches, large motor launches, indoor circulating rowing tanks, dozens of eight-oared boats, a training trip to Florida when the ice froze, buses, food service, and straight rivers—was, shall we say, sharp. But I was impressed by the ad hoc energy of my Irish teammates, and thoroughly won over by their hilarity and warmth. As our season progressed, a powerful momentum began to build. Our final four weeks of racing turned out to be some of the most exciting days of my athletic life.

One of our volunteer coaches that year once compared getting a boat to “swing,” as oarsmen say, to eight men trying to throw a single javelin. He might have said that it was like eight men trying to throw a single javelin while effectively blindfolded, under the direction of a ninth, non-exerting person—the coxswain.

My own attempt to describe what’s necessary for good rowing would be something like this: At medium power and speed, rowing is pure rhythm and fluidity; eight hearts beating in time. But at full tilt, it’s as if some quirky aeronautical engineer had invented a human-powered helicopter which, given sufficiently frantic efforts by an octet of bulky men, was occasionally capable of short bursts of wild, careering, high-speed flight—just along the treetops—yet subject to an instantaneous crash given the slightest letup.

Flight is not easily achieved, but it provides unspeakable exhilaration when it is. By the end of my year in Ireland, we were flying regularly. We were very, very fast, and we were going to Henley.



When the team arrived in England, I learned something interesting: My old Yale comrades had also had a fine season, and in pursuit of the world’s most famous regatta medal, they too had journeyed

to Henley. It made for a dramatic surprise meeting from across the ocean.

For Trinity, our long year of difficult training capped by the brilliant June workouts stood us well. We won our first three Henley races easily and made it to Sunday, Henley's final day. And our opponent was . . . Yale.

It wasn't until then that I took stock of my position. When I'd escaped Yale the previous summer, I could never have guessed that at the end of the following season I'd be facing old teammates, coaches, and memories (both sour and dear) from a seat in a crew occupying an opposing lane. It was a bittersweet, almost shocking little trick of fate that had brought together these two poles of my life.

Yale's Henley entry that year had crushed all of its American competition. Pale and comparatively undersized, our Irish crew must have seemed improbable behemoth-slayers. But I knew in the most intimate way possible—namely, months of communal life in both camps—that there was little difference in talent between our teams. And surprise would be on our side. Never before had I felt so flushed before a race.

Surprise was indeed ours. In what I still remember as one of the most sublime half minutes of my life, the Trinity team rocketed off the start and took nearly a length lead. It was the only time Yale had been behind another crew that entire year.

We were careering. We were way above the tree-tops. Our coxswain was screaming for us to pass their bowsprit, but our relative positions seemed to freeze. Like two great stags with intermeshed antlers, the two teams were locked. We stayed that way for a mile—five agonizing minutes.

As we approached the public enclosure, I'm told there was an avalanche of primal noise from the huge crowd. Yale began to creep closer. I felt as if my temples were flexing, fibrillating to the alternate pressures of blood from the inside and sound without. They were drawing within a few seats. Our stroke rating was in the clouds. Some later claimed that there was a choppy stroke in the mix—I have no recollection.

There is a mountain of hyperbolic melodrama attached to sport today. But I tell you this: When that race was finished, I was paralyzed. I didn't know who won, nor would I for several minutes. My first concern at that moment was to regain control of my body, clear my head, and force down the hysteria I felt choking me. I was afraid to swallow for fear I'd gag. Every milliliter of oxygen was precious.

As I slumped—gasping, drooling, knees locked—I listened to Jerry Macken suffering in front of me. We drifted. It was very quiet. Then it came to me: that beautiful, floodlit, musical race. We'd lost! The lead changed hands on the last stroke. Our times, by human standards, were identical.



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After we put the boat away for the last time, I realized how little I'd understood what was happening to me during the course of that year. I spent the final minutes of my season of "taking a break" from rowing . . . sobbing violently into a towel.



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