

HISTORY OF LOYOLA ACADEMY CREW

by Martin Fahey (1986)

1984

At the time this group came to be, Edward "Fitz" Dunne was a student in one of my Junior Ethics classes. One day after class, Fitz approached me with a request: "Mr. Fahey, would you be interested in helping me start a crew club here." Well, I do not exactly remember what my answer was, but it must have been a "yes" of some description. Fitz, having recently returned from seeing his older brother Pat row at Yale, was impressed enough by what he saw to spread the word amongst his friends. By the time he talked to me, he had already gathered a small but tight group of would-be oarsmen around him, needing only some faculty support to set the proverbial "ball rolling." And roll, it did.

Judge Art Dunne (Fitz's father) helped us to establish and maintain the appropriate links with the Lincoln Park Boat Club so that, within two months, we had secured the services of Coach Mike Fosbury and the use of boats and facilities belonging to the Lincoln Park Boat Club.

There were no "tryouts" to speak of that year and all the students who were eligible and interested were welcome to join us. Somehow, between March and May of 1984, Mike Fosbury (single-handedly) taught our 20 members the fundamentals of rowing and prepared them for a spot in the Midwest Scholastic Championships to be held in Orchard Lake, Michigan. Now, although many of the details of the first season are lost in the recesses of memory, I can still recall some highlights from this particular trip... probably because I thought it might be our last.

Lacking in formal accommodations, we slept in sleeping bags in the middle of a dew-drenched and mosquito-eaten football field, all, of course, except for Reggie Riley -- our token sleepwalker who spent the evening in various locations and in various sleeping bags! The morning of our first race we were introduced to the equipment which was being lent to us for the weekend. Words cannot describe the age, size and condition of that "shell" (read "barge"). Picking up on the non-verbal clues, the Orchard Lake coach assured us that the boat before us had a winning history stretching back to the 1947 Olympics. ("Which is when it probably celebrated its 100th birthday," Mike Fosbury added under his breath!)

Then to make matters worse, our novice team managed to crack the boat's rudder -- which had to be custom re-built overnight -- and break two of its seats and slides.

But the *coup de grace* came Sunday when our novice boat cleared the finish line. A dozen of us were gathered on a wooden pier near the judge's seats when we noticed that two of the oarsmen had stopped rowing in our boat. Despite this handicap, they were in second place with only a few hundred meters to go. In our excitement, we were jumping up and down and cheering, etc., when without warning, the pier cracked in half and dumped the lot of us into the lake. The trip had become a moderator's nightmare.

I awaited anxiously back at Loyola wondering when the bill for damages would arrive, but it never did. We ended the year with a third place finish in the Novice-Eight division, an encouraging way to cap off our first season.

Fitz and Hanley Dawson, already our unofficial leaders, were chosen as the team's first

captains as we looked ahead to our second season.

We started our second season a bit early, eager to get the troops in shape. We muddled through our first tryouts without the assistance of our coach, Mike Fosbury, as he had moved back to Tennessee in the interim, back to where he began his own career in crew.

Those who were with us during that season remember it for many different reasons, but everyone will agree that they ran like crazy and did so, with some very crazy people. In the coach's absence, we hit the streets and trails on our own. Fitz and Hanley were always a hundred yards or so ahead of the pack, and, as such were insulated from some of the things that transpired back in the ranks. I, for one, can remember thinking about three things almost anytime we ran together: 1) whether I'd make it make it back to Loyola alive, 2) whether Mike Rappel would ever tire of talking about TV trivia and, 3) whether Brian Scanlon would ever stop talking-period! (I finally resorted to the use of a Walkman.) Nonetheless, it was getting to be great fun and it was also great exercise to boot.

Pat Dunne, our new coach, arrived on the scene at the end of tryouts. After running with Pat and the gang for a week, I decided that I really should devote more time to administrative details and let Pat settle in as coach, i.e., I was exhausted.

Under Pat's guidance the team learned a great deal about conditioning and rowing. Pat proved to be a paragon of athletic prowess and an able taskmaster as well. Put another way, he worked them very hard. But the hard work was not without its lighter moments either. For instance, one foggy day in the middle of the season, I drove down to the Lincoln Park Boat Club to watch the team practice on the water. As I stood on the dock and watched the Varsity Eight pass by, I noticed that we seemed to have picked up an oarswoman in the #4 seat (!?). I waited. When they passed me going the other direction, the #4 "person" yelled, "Hey, Mr. Fahey," and I recognized the voice. Somewhere behind the 1950's style horn-rimmed sunglasses and beneath the blond women's wig fastened on with a red western-style bandanna was Jim Goodwin, the otherwise "normal" occupant of that seat. Crazy? Of course. Maybe the hard work and the intensity had begun to take its toll.

By all indications (racing results) we were having a successful season, all except for one novice that could just not seem to pull it together. Preparations for the Midwest Championships got under way and, as usual, that meant that more time was spent down on the lagoon and less time working out at school.

The Midwest Championships were being held in Cincinnati, Ohio this time. "East Fork Lake" had been the site of previous National Rowing Championships and was a better facility for the regatta than Orchard Lake. Even our accommodations improved. After spending seven hours on a bus coming from Chicago, we settled down to some nice flat hallway space in a drafty old field house with numerous other rowers. But at least it was indoors! Who could complain? The next morning we trekked en masse to a restaurant about a mile away. On the way, I listened to Brian Scanlon (who else?) quoting, as he was wont to do, some of the most bizarre and offbeat statistics from the most cryptic of sources about the most unusual and esoteric of topics one could imagine. He was a veritable encyclopedia of virtually unusable information. All of this before my morning coffee! But the laughter helped to stave off the hunger and the newly acquired soreness in my muscles; so why not? Breakfast proceeded without incident. When we returned to the field house, however, we discovered that half of our racing jerseys had been unceremoniously "borrowed" by members of another team. Images from the previous year's Midwest regatta darted across my mind's eye. "Not again," I prayed. But, with some support from the coach of

the team in question, the racing jersey incident faded into the background and the weekend grew more successful with every race.

Almost all of our boats made it past the qualifying heats into the finals on Sunday, including the "erstwhile" novice boat which had its share of difficulties during the regular season. To make a long story short, we left Cincinnati being the overall points winner of the regatta. And guess who led the way? ... the Novice-Eight boat with a first place victory in its division.

1985

Our second season ended in triumph and, as I walked into the Flanagans' house later in May for our end-of-the-year get-together, I was content in the knowledge that the team had not only tested its limits but had surpassed all reasonable expectations of success. Bravo!

Mat Nix, Mike Lane and Mike Dolan, all members of the original team, were chosen by their peers to lead them into the third season. Judge and Mrs. Dunne passed on the "torch" as parent sponsors to Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman, long-time crew enthusiasts and parents of Tim Hoffman. Pat Dunne, having fulfilled his promise to guide the team for a season, prepared to move out East to begin his own sculling skills in preparation for the up-and-coming Olympic time trials. And alas, since it is the habit of seniors to graduate, we had to say good-bye to Fitz and to Hanley, as well as to some other "Founding Fathers of Crew."

With the Dunne family moving on, it was comforting for me to know that the team would continue to be in good hands with our new captains and parent sponsors. And so we go to Round Three.

1986

The third season began amidst a powerful outpouring of student interest. Ninety+ students came to our first meeting inquiring about our 35 available seats. Late in the off-season, we were very fortunate to "hook" a coach to take charge of the team -- Bret Wilson, a recent graduate of Yale and a former teammate of Pat Dunne's. What luck! (in three years' time, we managed to acquire three people with the ability, interest and the flexible schedule necessary to lead a high school crew team. In the Midwest, this is an unusual feat.) So, this time around, the tryouts were much better organized and, I might add, much more competitive. After some tough choices for all concerned, a squad of 38 oarsmen was selected, a 50% increase in the size of the group.

I think the operative word to describe practices during this season was, "it erg." For those unfamiliar with the sport, the word probably sounds rather innocuous. For those who are familiar with the sport, well, it's almost enough, as they used to say, "to make a grown man cry." Yes, the ergometer became the measure of one's worth this season and, to the credit of all concerned, the "erg" was conquered during this season. Whereas a 5-mile "erg" piece had been a novelty the previous season, Bret made it a "regular" in the weekly diet of torture consisting also of aerobics, weight-circuits and, of course, running. Old records (except Fitz Dunne's) on the ergometer fell by the wayside as the team prepared for its debut at Lincoln Park. Pre-season laughs of disbelief gave way to proud miles of satisfaction as Bret recorded ever lower "erg" times for ever lengthening to "erg" pieces. By mid-season, any one of our oarsmen could have probably qualified for a position as an aerobics instructor! They got tougher by the day.

Early on in the season, Bret was joined by an Asst. Coach, Joe Keliényi who helped to monitor the progress of our expanded group and who also provided some "spice" to the daily routine with his unique brand of humor and his incomparable ability to "weave a yarn."

Slowly and surely, Bret forged a "team" out of the varied and disparate individuals (FreshmenSeniors, no experience to three years' experience) and, with Joe's assistance, something special began to take shape. I watched as a new and unusually powerful team spirit emerged, and I can speak from experience by saying that it was really unique to watch. The level of cooperation and camaraderie was increased and with this spirit, combined with the skills acquired through the many long hours of hard work, our team began to chalk up victories, one after the other.

At times, there might even have been too much cooperation. One chilly day, for instance, Bret was trying to speed things along at the dock by having the incoming varsity boat exchange oars with the outgoing novice boat. All other things being equal, this would have been a routine task. Bret instructed the port side oarsmen to take their oars out of the oarlocks and to pass them over to the corresponding oarsmen in the novice boat. One of novices, as the legend is told, instructed the varsity oarsman opposite him to relinquish his oar as well ... not knowing much about physics apparently. When the oar in question was dislodged from its oarlock, the shell capsized dumping the Varsity Eight into the frigid waters of the Lagoon. According to the story, Bret stood speechless for a few seconds before calmly delivering instructions again. He had never, in his career as an oarsman, seen such a feat. Ah yes, leave it to our Ramblers to be the trailblazers going where no crew had gone before. However, they learned that day why following directions can be advantageous.

Once again, the time drew near to commence our training for the Midwest Championships. This year, we were scheduled to travel to Oak Ridge, Tennessee. (Have you noticed yet that it's getting further away every year?) From the moment the decision was made on our yearly crazy Midwest Regional conference call --17 people talking at once from seven states - it caused consternation. Letters of protest were circulated from the minority voting bloc, many of which contended that the location wasn't even in the Midwest, much less a "central" location, however, a re-count left us with the same decision. So, Oak Ridge, it was.

As the date drew closer, the coach doubled the practice time and even took the team to Culver the weekend prior to the race for more intensive training. The Hoffmans handled the details of our odyssey. When May 7 arrived, it was "all systems go."

The bus trip was an adventure, as always. Joe and I traded unsubstantiated claims and friendly insults during an hour long argument about socialism, communism, and capitalism; war in the 20th century; Central America and the Middle East; dictatorships and democracy, etc. Mike Dolan, Brian Stalzer and Matt Nix kept an imaginary scoreboard up to date as each of us, in turn, fell into the other's snares. Meanwhile, Bret simply shook his head and laughed. After a while, our bantering seemed to act as a sedative to the group who gradually retreated into the world of Walkmans and early evening naps.

At 4:30 the following morning, we pulled into the Garden Plaza Hotel parking lot. This was a class act: "We have certainly come a long way in three years," I thought to myself as we unloaded the crew. If this was to be any forecast of our success during the weekend, I felt that we'd end up OK.

After being treated to a lavish brunch, we boarded the bus again for the course. The course was nice, very nice. But in the space of two hours, I visited both a doctor's office and an Emergency room. The first time, to repair my newly dislocated shoulder and the second time, to sew up Mike Dempsey's torn foot. Memories of previous Midwest regatta "episodes" loomed large once again. I knew the nice hotel was just an attempt to throw me off track. We were jinxed. What else could explain our 3 for 3 record for causing a stir at these competitions?

Nonetheless, our preliminary results were encouraging. And even though Sunday saw the elimination of some of our boats from the finals, we once again captured the Novice Eight division and placed third in the Varsity Eight division. All of this, mind you, in borrowed equipment. The real story there, however, concerns the morale of the group.

Had we left Oak Ridge without a single medal, I would still have been exceptionally proud of our team. Their display of team spirit, pride and good sportsmanship was really exemplary. Every boat received a warm send-off and returned to the same throughout the entire weekend. No other team struck me as being in the same class as far as those attributes are concerned. And, in the final analysis, those kinds of qualities are precisely what I hope they take with them when they leave Loyola. Medals, which can be won and lost in a weekend, can tarnish and fade away in significance. Fine character, which takes much more time and work to build, is forever. Now on to Round Four...

So much has happened since the L.A. crew was founded, that its humble beginnings a few years ago seem as distant as the Middle ages to me. In the midst of it all, however, four coaches, two sets of parent sponsors, a couple of thousand miles of travel and an overabundance of hard work, practice, patience and nurturing have made the team what it is today: one of the youngest and most competitive teams in the Midwest Region, the only high school crew Illinois, and, I believe, the fastest growing sport at Loyola Academy.

My heartfelt thanks go out to the Dunnes and the Hoffmans; Mike Fosbury, Pat Dunne, Bret Wilson and Joe Kellenyi; to our captains, Hanley Dawson, Matt Nix, Mike Lane and Mike Dolan and, especially to Fitz Dunne, for giving your moderator memories worth writing about. All oars ready? Row!