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More high schoolers get on board with rowing



WINSLOW TOWNSON FOR THE GLOBE

Members of the Arlington-Belmont boys' and girls' crew teams carry their boats to practice in Arlington.

By Kathy Shiels Tully | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 15, 2014

Crew is a sport that's over a century old. So why is interest in it growing at some public schools?

Sleek crew boats, called shells, sliding low in the water along the Charles River are a familiar sight; color-coded oars signal the collegiate or prep school. But in recent years, the same picture has developed on once underused rivers, ponds, and lakes.

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From Malden to Lowell, Shrewsbury to Boxborough, an increasing number of Massachusetts public high school students are getting on board with the elite sport.

“Crew’s exploding,” said Rich Whelan, program director of Gentle Giant rowing club, which trains on the Mystic River in Somerville, launching from the Blessing of the Bay boathouse.

There are plenty of reasons why teens are being drawn to the sport.

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Book shows how blazers define sport of rowing

Carlson returns to the Head of the Charles for the

annual fall competition, and to promote his new book, “Rowing Blazers.”

2014 Head of the Charles schedule and information

“I was never good at sports growing up,” said Katie Weidmann, a senior at Milton High School and co-captain of the girls’ crew team.

Although Weidmann played field hockey, “I wasn’t good at eye/hand sports,” she said. “Then I found crew.”

Robert McCollough, also a senior and co-captain of the Milton boys’ team, grew up hearing stories about it.

“My grandpa rowed at Brown University, and at the Head of the Charles,” he said.

Arlington High School senior Catherine Tiffany said that she “never had any other boating experience” before joining the Arlington-Belmont crew team.

Tiffany, who played soccer in middle school, figured she wasn’t good enough for the varsity high school team, but wanted to play something. Crew was the only sport that didn’t require years of prior experience.

“It’s a different sport, one kids never had access to before, unlike sports like baseball, basketball, and soccer,” Whelan said.

And it’s easy to learn, says Tiffany, who co-captains the Arlington-Belmont girls’ team.

“You only need to know one motion: the ‘drive’, a backward motion [pushing back with your legs and leaning back, pulling the oars in with your arms], then ‘recovery’, the exact opposite,” (pushing the oar out, leaning forward, rolling up in your seat which slides, then repeating).



WINSLOW TOWNSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Arlington-Belmont crew member Adrian Tanner leads a boys team while they carry their boat to the water.

“You pick it up pretty quickly,” she said. “It’s drilled into you at practice.”

For teens who shy away from the spotlight, and the pressure to perform, it may be the ultimate team sport. After all, there’s no room for a star player, like a quarterback or a goalie.

“Everyone has to work together, whether it’s a long or short race,” said John Rhee, who cofounded Milton high school’s team, “or the boat doesn’t move.”

Because crew’s done sitting down, people have misconceptions about the sport.

Crew is a total body aerobic activity, Rhee explained, using major muscle groups in both upper and lower body.

Students with smaller, lightweight bodies typically become coxswains, (pronounced “cox’s’n”), the “brains of the boat,” in Rhee’s words, strategically directing rowers through the water like a jockey rides a horse.

Private prep schools have long had a rowing league. In 2001, public schools decided they wanted their own, and the Massachusetts Public School Rowing Association formed.



WINSLOW TOWNSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Arlington-Belmont girls coach Laura Rothman directs crew team members through a megaphone during practice.

Starting with eight teams, the number of MPSRA teams doubled by 2005. Katy

Ruderman, the league president, program director at Brookline High School, and head coach at Riverside Boat club, says today MPSRA counts 19 member teams.

Another seven teams are in process of joining.

Scholarship opportunities are a big draw, said Laura Rothman, Arlington-Belmont coach, “because there are a lot. We’ve had kids go off and row in college.”

Crew is not one of the 19 sports sanctioned by the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association, which include baseball, swimming, ice hockey, and wrestling.

Ellen Minzner, who oversees all Community Rowing Inc.’s public school programs, says their rowing program for girls, called “G Row,” started 16 years ago.

After boys pleaded for their own program, a parallel program was added three years ago. An average of 80 Boston high school students row, she says, the split roughly 50 girls and 30 boys.

Crew clubs like Gentle Giant’s program, founded in 2002 by two former members of Northeastern crew team, includes 20 teens in its fall program — drawing from Medford, Malden, Everett, Somerville, Lynn, Winchester, and elsewhere.

During the spring, Gentle Giant helps Malden High and Somerville High, which have their own programs, with equipment and transportation.



WINSLOW TOWNSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Arlington-Belmont girls crew team during practice.

The cost of crew can be prohibitive: a new 8-man boat costs \$32,000; a used one about 10 years old is \$9,000-\$10,000; 4-man shells, \$25,000; \$7,000-\$8,000 for a used one; and new oars cost around \$3,600; \$1,000-\$1,500 used.

Teams charge fees, typically from \$400 to \$700 per student per season.

Another factor in the sport's growth: enthusiastic parents, like Elaine Davis of Milton.

When her son, Whitman, a sophomore who rows varsity, first joined Milton's team during his freshman year, "I saw a very family-oriented atmosphere," Davis said.

"There's spaghetti dinners the night before the regatta," she said. "Families are together all day (sometimes up to 12 hours) to watch your kid race for only 2 minutes."

ROOM TO ROW

Formed in 2001 with an initial eight public school teams, the Mass. Public School Rowing Association today boasts 19 teams, with another seven in the process of

joining.

1. Arlington-Belmont
2. Boston Latin
3. Bromfield-Acton-Boxborough
4. Brookline
5. Cambridge Rindge and Latin
6. Duxbury
7. Hingham
8. Lowell
9. Malden
10. Medford
11. Milton
12. Mystic Valley
13. Nauset
14. Row Boston
15. Shrewsbury
16. Somerville (now Somerville-Everett)
17. Wayland-Weston
18. Westford-Littleton
19. Worcester



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The Gentle Giant club draws students from Medford, Malden, Everett, Somerville, Lynn, and Winchester, among others.

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