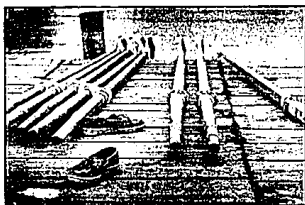


photos by LAURA CASTLE

A Detroit Boat Club crew rowing team takes its eight-man shell under the Belle Isle Bridge during a recent practice. The ninth man is the coxswain.



# CREW

## Pulling oars pushes them to the limit

typically eight-oared, four oars on each side. The eight people who pull the oars are called...? Sure! "Oarsmen." Add the "coxswain" who sits in the back, steers the boat and commands the rhythm, and you have a crew.

With oars fitting into an outboard rigger, the shells run 55-70 feet long and weigh 300 pounds. How does the sport work? Well, your crew gets into the shell and starts rowing. Fastest boat wins.

"Very simple," Bell laughs, shaking his head. The balding, bearded Lathrup Village resident has a quiet manner but under his shirt, the mus-

cles have the look of iron.

"Very simple. So long as you keep your balance, so long as you don't flip the boat or someone else doesn't run into or wake you, so long as the entire crew is doing the same thing at the same time."

"Rowing is the only true team sport. In football, someone can miss a block and the team can still score a touchdown. But in crew, if someone misses a beat you have serious problems."

THIS TEAM effort is achieved through long, grueling practices, held on the Detroit River early in the morning.

"We row down on Belle Isle, right at our home, the (Detroit) Boat Club. We start at 5:30 a.m. and go until 7." That's both for schedule convenience and for practicality. "To get good, flat water you usually need the very early morning."

After suiting up in trunks and T-shirts, the coxswain calls the crews to their boats and practice begins, an exacting training regimen similar to that of runners. "We're both middle-distance sports, like running the mile."

"We row on the Detroit River all year, until the ice forms. We were rowing last March and had some

snow. But you can't beat it! It's just great in the morning; the natural beauty of the river. And the sunrise, the beauty of the city as the sun comes up... And the water! The water has different moods. You can't beat it!"

Bell pauses from his lyrical enthusiasm for an offhand grin. "Of course, you don't feel much like moving afterward."

What kind of people get up to practice at 5:30 in all weather, exerting all muscles in a punishing sport?

"The average oarsman is disciplined. You're strong, with a lot of endurance and ability to discipline yourself," Bell observes. "You must be able to go the course and not give up, plus be able to subordinate yourself to the needs of the team. In many ways we look for the breaking point in the individual. But people like it."

IN SHORT, you prove yourself in a tough arena where merely finishing is a victory; winning is gravy. "You're constantly testing yourself," Bell, an Olympic rowing coach and Wayne State team captain, observes. "Pushing yourself to the limits of endurance."

But it's important to explain this for anyone who thinks of joining: it's fun! Notwithstanding all the talk of endurance, it's fun. There's an awful lot of camaraderie... it's sort of like a fraternity. You're all exerting yourselves to the utmost, trying together to make something move quickly. You test yourself to the maximum and you get a fantastic feeling of accomplishment. Plus you're outside, watching the dawn on the river.

It's the toughest all-around sport, next to cycling, but crew is also an amateur sport. It takes a lot of money to keep the boats operable, but there's no professional league. Rowing is an end in and of itself. The very existence of such a taxing sport in the face of such difficulties must say something about the dedication and love of the participants.

The few, the proud, the crew.



Peter Macey (right) of Birmingham endures a cold spray from the Detroit River during a recent competitive practice.

By Chuck Moss  
special writer

"Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! (Bail! Bail! Bail!)"

To most people, the sport of competitive crew rowing is a pleasant vision from the 19th Century: striped blazers, soft colors beside the Thames or Cam. But crew is an intense, punishing sport that demands total concentration and discipline from its members. That, and getting up at five in the morning.

"You're pushing your physical abilities to the maximum," says Richard Bell, a glint of steel in his gaze. Bell is coach for the Detroit

Boat Club. Founded in 1837, this Belle Isle-based club is rowing's oldest continuing organization in the world. It's also a breeding ground for international champions in this familiar-looking but strange sport.

There's a mystique and an aristocratic cachet to crew: The sport reached America from England, where it was a character-building device for future lords of the empire. The first U.S. intercollegiate athletic event was a crew race between Harvard and Yale. But the modern sport is egalitarian: Anyone with dedication can join.

ACTUALLY, CREW rowing is simple: You start with a long narrow boat called a "shell." The shells are

challenges. Actually, there are several rowing clubs in the Metro area:

- The Detroit Boat Club: Call Richard Bell 559-5824.
- The Ecorse Boat Club: 381-9735.

- The Wyandotte Boat Club: President Jeff Krett, 284-5560, after 7 p.m.

There are also rowing clubs in Toledo and across the water in Canada. Several Michigan universities offer crew, including the University of Michigan, MSU, and Grand Valley. Some area high schools have affiliated programs, so check your local school system for further information.

How do people get involved in crew? "Word of mouth, mostly," Bell says. "Me, I had some friends that were going down to the river and they talked me into going along."

That was when he was 16 years old. "What can I say?" Bell spreads his hands. "Rowing can be a lifelong sport."

## Here's how to put your oar in the water

Rowing is more than a grueling pastime for people of conviction: It's an internationally recognized Olympic sport. Above the American crew clubs reigns the United States Rowing Association, the governing body of the sport. One step below come the six regional clubs. Michigan is in the Midwestern Rowing Association.

"But the Midwestern area takes in a lot of ground," explains Richard Bell of the Detroit Boat Club. "It goes down to Texas. Here in Michigan we tend to race the Ontario clubs, as Canada is a hotbed of crew. Our tendency is to race east, to Buffalo, or the crack clubs in Canada."

Races are called "regattas" and can range from two-shell runs to multi-club fleet competition.

This competition and the intense dedication has made the Detroit club a breeding ground of champions, with Olympic and national winners coming out of Detroit.

If this kind of dedication and romance appeals to you, how do you get into the sport? "Call me," Bell