

Boys in the Boat (Brown)

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The Boys in the Boat: *Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936*

Berlin Olympics

Daniel James Brown, 2013

Penguin Group (USA)

416 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780143125471

Summary

The story about the American Olympic triumph in Nazi Germany

Out of the depths of the Depression comes an irresistible story about beating the odds and finding hope in the most desperate of times—the improbable, intimate account of how nine working-class boys from the American West showed the world at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin what true grit really meant.

It was an unlikely quest from the start. With a team composed of the sons of loggers, shipyard workers, and farmers, the University of Washington's eight-oar crew team was never expected to defeat the elite teams of the East Coast and Great Britain, yet they did, going on to shock the world by defeating the German team rowing for Adolf Hitler. The emotional heart of the tale lies with Joe Rantz, a teenager without family or prospects, who rows not only to regain his shattered self-regard but also to find a real place for himself in the world.

Drawing on the boys' own journals and vivid memories of a once-in-a-lifetime shared dream, Brown has created an unforgettable portrait of an era, a celebration of a remarkable achievement, and a chronicle of one extraordinary young man's personal quest. (*From the publisher.*)

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Boys in the Boat (Brown) - Author Bio

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Author Bio

- Birth—N/A
- Raised—San Francisco Bay Area, California, USA
- Education—B.A., Diablo Valley College; M.A., University of California at Berkeley and University of California at Los Angeles
- Currently—lives near Seattle, Washington

In his words:

I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and attended Diablo Valley College, the University of California at Berkeley, and UCLA. I taught writing at San Jose State University and Stanford before becoming a technical writer and editor. I now write narrative nonfiction books full time. My primary interest as a writer is in bringing compelling historical events to life as vividly and accurately as I can.

I live in the country outside of Seattle, Washington with my wife, two daughters, and an assortment of cats, dogs, chickens, and honeybees. When I am not writing, I am likely to be birding, gardening, fly fishing, reading American history, or chasing bears away from the bee hives. (*From the author's website* (<http://www.danieljamesbrown.com>) .)

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Boys in the Boat (Brown) - Book Reviews[Summary](#) | [Author Bio](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Discussion Questions](#) | [Full Version](#) | [Print](#)**Book Reviews**

For those who like adventure stories straight-up, *The Boys in the Boat*...is this year's closest approximation of *Unbroken*....It's about the University of Washington's crew team: Nine working-class boys from the American West who at the 1936 Olympics showed the world what true grit really meant.

New York Times

If you imagined a great regatta of books about rowing, then Brown's *The Boys in the Boat* certainly makes the final heat.

Boston Globe

The astonishing story of the UW's 1936 eight-oar varsity crew and its rise from obscurity to fame....The individual stories of these young men are almost as compelling as the rise of the team itself. Brown excels at weaving those stories with the larger narrative, all culminating in the 1936 Olympic Games...A story this breathtaking demands an equally compelling author, and Brown does not disappoint. The narrative rises inexorably, with the final 50 pages blurring by with white-knuckled suspense as these all-American underdogs pull off the unimaginable.

Seattle Times

Cogent history...and a surprisingly suspenseful tale of triumph.

USA Today

This riveting and inspiring saga evokes that of *Seabiscuit*...Readers need neither background nor interest in competitive rowing to be captivated by this remarkable and beautifully crafted history. Written with the drama of a compelling novel, it's a quintessentially American story that burnishes the esteem in which we embrace what has come to be known as the Greatest Generation.

Associated Press

A stirring tale of nine Depression-era athletes beating the odds and their inner demons to compete at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. You can Google the result and spoil the sport, but that won't dull the many pleasures in Daniel James Brown's colorful, highly readable celebration of a grueling collegiate challenge.

Bloomberg News

This riveting tale of beating the odds (and the Germans) at the 1936 Olympics is a rousing story of American can-do-ism. It's also a portrait of the nine boys who first rowed together for the University of Washington, and of the one in particular who made the sport his family and his home.

Parade

Brown's book juxtaposes the coming together of the Washington crew team against the Nazis' preparations for the Games, weaving together a history that feels both intimately personal and weighty in its larger historical implications. This book has already been bought for cinematic development, and it's easy to see why: When Brown, a Seattle-based nonfiction writer, describes a race, you feel the splash as the oars slice the water, the burning in the young men's muscles and the incredible drive that propelled these rowers to glory.

Smithsonian Magazine

Brown tells...an all-American story of humble working-class boys squaring off against a series of increasingly odious class and political foes: their West Coast rivals at Berkeley; the East Coast snobsand ultimately the German team.... Brown lays on the aura of embattled national aspiration good and thick, but he makes his heroes' struggle as fascinating as the best Olympic sagas

Publishers Weekly

In this sweeping saga, Brown vividly relates how, in 1936, nine working-class rowers from the University of Washington captured gold at the Berlin Olympics.... [T]hese athletes overcame the hopelessness common during the Great Depression by learning to trust themselves and one another, and by rowing with grace and power.... [A] superb book. —Jerry P. Miller, Cambridge, MA

Library Journal

(*Starred review.*) If Jesse Owens is rightfully the most famous American athlete of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, repudiating Adolf Hitler's notion of white supremacy by winning gold in four events, the gold-medal-winning effort by the eight-man rowing team from the University of Washington remains a remarkable story.... A book that informs as it inspires. —Alan Moores

Booklist

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Daniel Brown (American writer)

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Daniel Brown (American writer)

Birth Date : 1951

Known As : Brown, Daniel James

Nationality : American

Occupation : Writer

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about this author

SEARCH for books
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Entry Updated : 02/28/2014

Awards:

One of the Best Books of 2006, American Library Association, for *Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894*.

Personal Information:

Born October 8, 1951; married; children: two daughters. **Education:** Attended Diablo Valley College, the University of California at Berkeley, and University of California at Los Angeles. **Avocational Interests:** Birding, gardening, reading American history, and reading Shakespeare. **Addresses:** Home: Near Redmond, WA. **E-mail:** danieljamesbrown@comcast.net.

Career Information:

Writer. Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, technical editor; previously taught writing at San José State University, San José, CA, and Stanford University, Stanford, CA.

Writings:

- (With Bill Burnette) *Connections: A Rhetoric/Short Prose Reader*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1984.
- *Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894*, Lyons Press (Guilford, CT), 2006.
- *The Boys in the Boat*, Viking (New York, NY), 2013.

Sidelights:

Daniel Brown was born October 8, 1951. He had a diverse educational experience, having attended Diablo Valley College, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of California at Los Angeles. He has held a number of writing-related jobs, including teaching writing at both San José State University and Stanford University before ultimately settling down to work for the Microsoft Corporation in Redmond, Washington, where he served as a technical editor. Eventually he decided to write full time, while spending his spare hours with his wife and daughters and tending to the family's assortment of pets, chickens, sheep, and honeybees. Brown is the author of *Connections: A Rhetoric/Short Prose Reader*, which he wrote with Bill Burnette, and *Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894*. The American Library Association named *Under a Flaming Sky* one of the best books of 2006, and the work was also named a finalist in the Washington State Book Awards for 2007.

Under a Flaming Sky tells the story of the massive firestorm that took place in Hinckley, Minnesota, in 1894, when two separate fires, aided by weather conditions, joined forces. Brown feels a personal connection to the story as his own grandfather was in Hinckley at the time and was one of the survivors of the experience. The fire itself was a horrific event and arguably the worst fire the state has ever known. It grew sufficiently hot that the railroad tracks actually melted and warped, thousands of acres of property burned, and approximately five hundred people died, many due to their own fatal error of seeking shelter in the local millpond, where the water proved too shallow to offer adequate protection. Brown recounts the events of the day, including details from the

1. Did you know much about rowing before reading *THE BOYS IN THE BOAT*? If not, what aspects of the sport surprised you most? If so, did you learn anything about rowing that you didn't know before? And if you don't generally follow sports or sports history, what made you want to read this book?
2. Compare how the Olympics were regarded in the 1930s to how they are regarded now. What was so significant about the boys' win in 1936, right on the dawn of the Second World War? What political significance do the Olympics Games hold today?
3. Thanks to hours of interviews and a wealth of archival information from Joe Rantz, his daughter Judy, and a number of other sources, Daniel James Brown is able to tell Joe's story in such fine detail that it's almost as if you are living in the moment with Joe. How did you feel as you were reading the book? What significance does Joe's unique point of view have for the unfolding of the narrative? And why do you think Joe was willing to discuss his life in such detail with a relative stranger?
4. While *THE BOYS IN THE BOAT* focuses on the experiences of Joe Rantz and his teammates, it also tells the much larger story of a whole generation of young men and women during one of the darkest times in American history. What aspects of life in the 1930s struck you most deeply? How do the circumstances of Americans during the Great Depression compare to what America is facing now?
5. Brown mentions throughout the book that only a very special, almost superhuman individual can take on the physical and psychological demands of rowing and become successful at the sport. How did these demands play out in the boys' academic and personal lives? How did their personal lives influence their approach to the sport?
6. Despite how much time Joe Rantz spent training with the other boys during his first two years at the University of Washington, he didn't really form close personal relationships with any of them until his third year on the team. Why do you think that was? What factors finally made Joe realize that it did matter who else was in the boat with him (p. 221)?
7. Joe and Joyce maintain a very loving and supportive relationship throughout Joe's formative years, with Joyce consistently being his foundation, despite Joe's resistance to relying on her. How did their relationship develop while they were still in college? In what ways did Joyce support Joe emotionally? What about Joyce's own challenges at home? How do you think her relationship with her parents affected her relationship with Joe?
8. Al Ulbrickson's leadership style was somewhat severe, to say the least, and at many times, he kept his opinions of the boys and their standings on the team well-guarded. Even with this guardedness, what about him inspired Joe and the boys to work their hardest? What strategies did Ulbrickson use to foster competition and a strong work ethic among them and why?
9. George Pocock and Al Ulbrickson each stand as somewhat mythic figures in *THE BOYS IN THE BOAT*; however, they were very different men with very different relationships to the boys. Discuss their differences in leadership style and their roles within the University of Washington's rowing establishment. What about Pocock enabled him to connect with Joe Rantz on such a personal level?
10. At one point, Pocock pulls Joe aside to tell him "it wasn't just the rowing but his crewmates that he had to give himself up to, even if it meant getting his feelings hurt" (p. 235). How do you think this advice affected Joe's

interactions with the other boys? How do you think it might have affected Joe's relationship to his family, especially after the deaths of Thula Rantz and his friend Charlie MacDonald?

11. What was Al Ulbrickson and Ky Ebright's relationship to the local and national media? How did they use sportswriters to advance their teams' goals and how did the sportswriters involve themselves in collegiate competition? Were you surprised at all by the level of involvement, especially that of Royal Brougham? How does it compare to collegiate sports coverage today?

12. When Al Ulbrickson retired in 1959, he mentioned that one of the highlights of his career was "the day in 1936 that he put Joe Rantz in his Olympic boat for the first time, and watched the boat take off" (p. 364). Why do you think that moment was so important for Ulbrickson? What about Joe was so special to him and how did Joe become the element that finally brought the boys of the *Husky Clipper* together?

13. Later in the book, it is noted "all along Joe Rantz had figured that he was the weak link in the crew" (p. 326), but that he found out much later in life that all the other boys felt the same way. Why do you think that was? And why do you suppose they didn't reveal this to each other until they were old men?

14. What was your favorite hair-raising moment in *THE BOYS IN THE BOAT*? Even knowing the outcome of the 1936 Olympic Games, was there any point where you weren't sure if Joe and the boys would make it?

Author Bio

Daniel James Brown is the author of two previous nonfiction books, *UNDER A FLAMING SKY* and *THE INDIFFERENT STARS ABOVE*. He has taught writing at San Jose State University and Stanford. He lives near Seattle.

The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics

by Daniel James Brown

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families whose survivors chronicles the disaster. He also looks at the ultimate effects the fire had on the state, particularly on the local lumber and shipping businesses that had previously been a mainstay of Minnesota's economy. Brown further addresses questions relating to what Hinckley is like now and how its citizens have taken advantage of the tragedy of the firestorm to create a lively tourism business, with numerous places around town carrying the name of the fire, whether they are genuine tourist attractions, such as the fire museum, or mundane locations such as the local bar. A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* opined that "this deft slice of regional history will attract disaster and weather buffs." Ray Olson, writing for *Booklist*, dubbed Brown's effort "riveting, moving, white-knuckle reading to rank with classic accounts of the 'perfect storm,' Krakatoa, and other storied calamities." Suzanne Fischer, in a review for *Public Historian Web site*, found that Brown occasionally switches directions in his narrative, or pauses to provide additional facts that, while educational, are not immediately applicable and which slow the pacing of the book. Examples include an informative but unnecessary lecture on the weather patterns in Minnesota, the ways in which trains were constructed in the late nineteenth century, and how a serious fire was fought in California in 1972--nearly a century after the Hinckley fire that was the subject of his book. Ultimately, however, she declared that "Brown's book is totally gripping, particularly the parts where he focuses on particular individuals and families caught in the firestorm, and their horrific or heroic stories of escape, survival and tragedy. The book reads like an ensemble disaster movie." Fischer also commented on the accuracy and detail of the writing, noting that "Brown was thus able to reconstruct a minute-by-minute portrait of the spread of the fire, the trains' arrival into town, the time when Sandstone was destroyed, what time his grandfather got on the train to Duluth," and other fascinating details.

Related Information:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, April 15, 2006, Ray Olson, review of *Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894*, p. 23.
- *Bookwatch*, July 1, 2006, review of *Under a Flaming Sky*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, March 13, 2006, review of *Under a Flaming Sky*, p. 54.
- *Trains*, November 1, 2006, review of *Under a Flaming Sky*, p. 83.

ONLINE

- *Daniel Brown Home Page*, <http://www.danieljamesbrown.com> (June 16, 2008).
- *HarperCollins Web site*, <http://www.harpercollins.com/> (June 16, 2008), author profile.
- *Public Historian Web site*, <http://publichistorian.wordpress.com/> (February 22, 2008), Suzanne Fischer, "The Hinkley Fire and Very Small History."

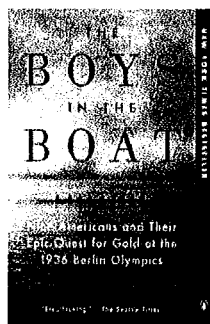
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About the Book

The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics

by Daniel James Brown

Daniel James Brown's robust book tells the story of the University of Washington's 1936 eight-oar crew and their epic quest for an Olympic gold medal, a team that transformed the sport and grabbed the attention of millions of Americans. The sons of loggers, shipyard workers, and farmers, the boys defeated elite rivals first from eastern and British universities and finally the German crew rowing for Adolf Hitler in the Olympic games in Berlin, 1936.

The emotional heart of the story lies with one rower, Joe Rantz, a teenager without family or prospects, who rows not for glory, but to regain his shattered self-regard and to find a place he can call home. The crew is assembled by an enigmatic coach and mentored by a visionary, eccentric British boat builder, but it is their trust in each other that makes them a victorious team. They remind the country of what can be done when everyone quite literally pulls together --- a perfect melding of commitment, determination, and optimism.

Drawing on the boys' own diaries and journals, their photos and memories of a once-in-a-lifetime shared dream, THE BOYS IN THE BOAT is an irresistible story about beating the odds and finding hope in the most desperate of times --- the improbable, intimate story of nine working-class boys from the American west who, in the depths of the Great Depression, showed the world what true grit really meant. It will appeal to readers of Erik Larson, Timothy Egan, James Bradley, and David Halberstam's THE AMATEURS.



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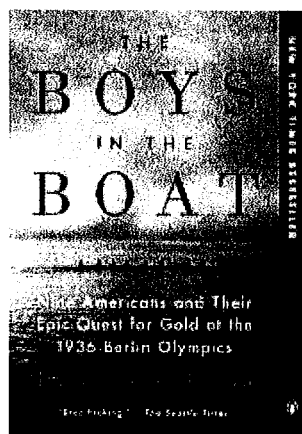
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Discussion Guide

Six Minutes in Berlin

In 1936, nine American rowers took on the Nazis in front of Hitler and 75,000 screaming Germans. The story of the greatest Olympic race you've never heard of.

By Michael J. Socolow

(Continued from Page 1)

The Huskies' first big triumph came in the Intercollegiate Rowing Association national championship in June. In that race, Washington successfully deployed its signature strategy. The Huskies always maintained a stroke rating below their opponents', ignoring those moments when their competition opened up enormous leads. When all seemed lost, the coxswain Moch would call on Hume to raise the stroke rating. Employing near-perfect technique and synchronization, the boys would put their shell, the *Husky Clipper*, in a higher gear. At the IRA Championship, they sat in fifth place after the midway point, but blasted past the competition once the sprint began. It was a dominating, intimidating performance.



A few weeks later, the Huskies cruised past the competition in the Olympic trials. After surviving the funding scare, they crossed the Atlantic on the **S.S.**

This photo, published in a German cigarette company's review of the Olympics, shows

THE GREATEST UNDERDOG, NAZI-DEFEATING AMERICAN OLYMPIC VICTORY YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF **Manhattan** with the rest of

the American Olympic team. In today's world, where Seattle and Berlin are separated by nine hours of jet flight, it is difficult to imagine how they felt to be travelling to Europe. McMillin told me the trip was "a dream"—like most of his teammates, he had never left the state of Washington before taking up rowing.

Unlike its competition from the Ivy League, the Washington crew was composed of kids from working- and middle-class families. Rowing, then as now, was considered an elite sport. The 1924 Yale crew that won the gold medal in Paris, for instance, featured both **a Rockefeller and Benjamin Spock** (yes, Dr. Spock). But the Husky rowers could barely afford lunch, much less a trip to Berlin. Several paid their college tuition and living expenses from money earned through the National Youth Administration, a New Deal organization. "We used to sweep out the pavilion that was used for basketball and other events, we did the football field, we sold tickets, we ushered," McMillin remembered. His teammate Gordon Adam worked as a janitor's assistant, washing windows and scrubbing floors for \$15 a month.

Despite third-class accommodations, the crew enjoyed themselves on Advertisement the passage to Europe. But Don Hume and John White caught colds on the boat, and others felt seasick. When the *Manhattan* arrived in Hamburg, the team was relieved to be back on land. But gray fog encased Berlin throughout the Olympics, with rain and an unseasonable cold spell chilling and dampening the massive Köpenick police barracks where the team was bunking. A particularly brutal qualifying race, in which the Huskies set the Olympic record while narrowly edging out a strong British eight, only exacerbated Hume's illness. He passed out at the finish line, only to revive when Moch splashed cold water on him. The victory, however, allowed the Huskies to rest while other boats fought through additional qualifying races.

MORE: America's fat, English-hating, gold-medal-winning Olympic heroes of the early 20th century.

On the morning of the final, Hume was in terrible shape. He shivered uncontrollably, and he appeared mentally and physically wan. With his eyes closed and his mouth slack, he barely pulled his oar during warm ups.

THE GREATEST UNDERDOG, NAZI-DEFEATING AMERICAN OLYMPIC VICTORY YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF...

The race began in typical fashion for the Huskies. "We all know the Washington crew is probably the slowest-starting crew in the world," said CBS' Bill Henry with a chuckle. "It gives everybody heart failure." With the Americans "dragging along" in Henry's words, the Italians and Germans were more than a boat length in front at the halfway mark of the 2000-meter race. McMillin, rowing in the middle of the eight, sensed something was amiss. "Somewhere about the middle of the race I knew we were not doing well and we were behind," he told me. "I thought, God, we've come all this way from Seattle, and to end up our season like this ... it can't happen."



The German crew at the start line of the Olympic final.

Photo courtesy U.S. National Archives.

As the shells whizzed past, cameramen perched atop buoys captured the race for Germany's top filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl. German dominance on the water ensured that rowing events

would feature prominently in ***Olympia***, her classic propaganda film on the games. But the day of the rowing final was a disaster for Riefenstahl, as Olympic authorities, who were concerned about lightning, forced her to ground the balloon she'd set up to track the race from above. (When gas from the descending balloon escaped too quickly, cameraman Walter Frentz fell into the Spree River. He was not injured.) Riefenstahl ultimately interspersed her limited actual race footage with pre-recorded, dramatized film and audio. Every in-boat, water-level shot in the clip below was filmed before the final race, with fanciful audio mixed in. (Bob Moch did not call out "Push! Pull!" on every stroke.)

THE GREATEST UNDERDOG, NAZI-DEFEATING AMERICAN OLYMPIC VICTORY YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

As the German crew powered toward the finish line, the crowd chanted “Deutsch-land! Deutsch-land!” in time with each stroke. The noise swelled, and the rowers sensed the finish line closing in. The Americans had to make their move. Moch, the coxswain, stared at Hume's face. With about 800 meters remaining his eyes opened and he began rowing with authority. Responding to Hume's emerging strength, the boat's stroke rating rose.

High above the grandstand at the finish line, CBS' Bill Henry watched the final sprint unfold:

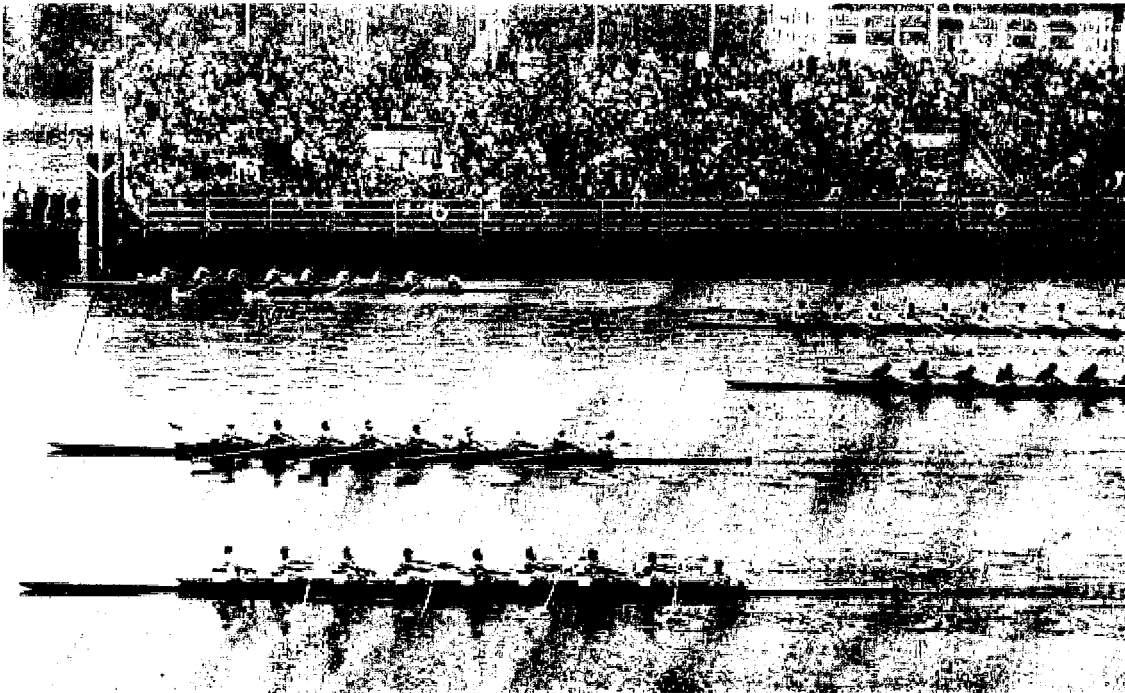
It looks as though the United States [is] beginning to pour it on now! The Washington crew is driving hard on the outside of the course, they are coming very close now to getting into the lead! They have about 500 meters to go, perhaps a little less than 500 meters, and there is no question in the world that Washington has made up a tremendous amount of distance. ... They have moved up definitely into third place. Italy is still leading, Germany is second, and Washington—the United States—has come up very rapidly on the outside. They are crowding up to the finish now with less than a quarter of a mile to go!

Click on the player below to listen to Henry's call:

THE GREATEST UNDERDOG NAZI-DEFEATING AMERICAN OLYMPIC VICTORY YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

The resolve built from countless hours of practice kicked in. Within 300 meters, the Huskies pulled even with the tiring Germans and Italians. A supposed transcript of the German radio call, as published in a post-Olympic program, captures the excitement: "Still Italy! Then Germany! Now England! Ah, the Americans—their powerful spurts are irresistible! Their oars rip massively through the water!"

The crowd's roar became deafening as the three boats matched each other stroke for stroke. As they crossed the line together, the rowers couldn't tell who had won. The men in all three boats recoiled or collapsed in exhaustion as the crowd quieted down to await the results. "Nobody said a word," Moch remembered.



The American crew (top) crosses the finish line first.

Photo courtesy University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW1705.

After an interminable wait, the announcement came over the loudspeaker: USA 6:25.4, Italy 6:26.0, Germany 6:26.4. After almost six-and-a-half minutes of racing, just one second separated the

three boats.

It would be the most physically demanding race any of them would ever row. "God, we were out of gas at the end," McMillin remembered. "How I struggled through that last 20 [strokes] I don't know."

After regrouping, the Americans paddled their boat to the dock in front of the grandstand to receive the victors' laurel wreaths. In a separate ceremony in Berlin's

THE GREATEST UNDERDOG, NAZI-DEFEATING AMERICAN OLYMPIC VICTORY YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

McMillin, George Hunt, Joe Rantz, Don Hume, and Robert Moch received their gold medals.* McMillin told me it was the most emotional moment of his life.

Hitler’s reaction to the U.S. victory was neither recorded by the assembled press nor described over the radio. “I didn’t give a damn about Hitler,” Bob Moch told me. “We didn’t care whether he existed or not. We were there to do a job.” The German radio broadcast reveled in the overall quality of the race, with the announcer boasting that Deutschland’s “bronze medal has a golden glow.” As the “Star-Spangled Banner” played, the crowd gave the Nazi salute to the American victors.

In the days after their victory, the American press swooned over the crew, with major articles appearing in all the dailies. The gold-medal performance still resonated the following spring, with *Collier’s* and the *Saturday Evening Post* paying Ulbrickson to **describe the race**. Seventy-five years later, though, the feats of the Washington crew have largely been forgotten. The first of the Huskies to cross the finish line, bowman Roger Morris, was the last to die. **He passed away in 2009**, and with him went the last participant memories of one of the greatest U.S. Olympic teams. Yet their legacy lives on in those still rowing on Seattle’s Montlake Cut. This June, Washington’s varsity men’s crew set a new course record in **winning the Intercollegiate Rowing Association Championship**. The men of the *Husky Clipper* would have been proud.

Corrections, July 26, 2012: *This article originally stated that rower Joseph Rantz had the nickname “Shorty.” That moniker belonged to his teammate George Hunt. (Return to the corrected sentence.) A photo caption originally misidentified one of the rowers in a photo of the U.S. Olympic team in Indian headdresses. The man pictured is George Hunt, not Gordon Adam.)*

Read the rest of Slate’s coverage of the London Olympics.

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FIVE-RING CIRCUS

SCENES FROM THE OLYMPICS.

JULY 23 2012 6:35 AM

Six Minutes in Berlin

In 1936, nine American rowers took on the Nazis in front of Hitler and 75,000 screaming Germans. The story of the greatest Olympic race you've never heard of.

By Michael J. Socolow



The 1936 U.S. Olympic rowing team from the University of Washington. From left: Don Hume, Joseph Rantz, George E. Hunt, James B. McMillin, John G. White, Gordon B. Adam, Charles Day, and Roger Morris. At center front is coxswain Robert G. Moch.

Photo courtesy of University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW2234.

Sportswriter Grantland Rice called it the "high spot" of the 1936 Olympics. Bill Henry, who called the race for CBS, said it was "the outstanding victory of the Olympic Games." The event they're describing

wasn't staged in Berlin's Olympic Stadium, and it had nothing to do with Jesse Owens. It took place in the suburb of Grunau, when a group of college kids from the United States took on Germany and Italy in front of Hitler and 75,000 fans screaming for the Third Reich.

The results of the 1936 Olympic regatta were the inverse of that year's track and field competition. **On the track**, American men won gold in the 100, 200, 400, and 800 meters; the 4-by-100 relay; both hurdles events; and the high jump, long jump, pole vault, and decathlon. (American women also won the 100 meters and the 4-by-100 relay.) German oarsmen, however, dominated on the water, capturing five gold medals and one silver in the six races preceding the eight-oared final. When a British pair finally beat a German shell, Henry and his CBS broadcast partner Cesar Saerchinger were relieved, according to **Saerchinger's book *Hello, America!***, as they'd "had to stand up for the German anthem and the 'Horst Wessel' song [the Nazi party anthem] after every event, until we were nauseated."

A few minutes before 6 p.m. on Aug. 14, the final race was about to begin. The crowd, which included Hitler, Hermann Göring, and other Nazi officials, awaited another German victory.

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At the starting line, American coxswain Bob Moch looked anxiously into the face of Don Hume. Hume, the stroke of the crew, was tasked with setting the pace for the seven oarsmen rowing behind him. Yet something was very wrong. Hume's eyes remained closed for most of the warm-up, and his breathing seemed labored. Moch knew that Hume had been ill since the team arrived in Europe, but he had never seen his close friend look so listless before a big race. As the rest of the crew stirred nervously, trying to banish thoughts of the tremendous physical punishment awaiting them, Moch glanced at Hume and then across the water at the other eights. Big Jim McMillin, sitting in the five-seat, later remembered his thoughts at the starting line. "I had felt that if we rowed the best we knew how, we could get there," he told me in 2004, a year before **his death at age 91**. But, McMillin said, "everything went wrong from that point on."

Advertisement

The story of the 1936 Olympics remains focused on **the brilliant achievements of Jesse Owens** and the filmmaking of **Leni Riefenstahl**. But the Berlin Games were just as important for inaugurating the era of the modern Olympiad. This was the first



Adolf Hitler opens the Olympic Games, Aug. 1, 1936.

Photo courtesy U.S. National Archives.

Olympics that featured **a torch relay from Mount Olympus**, and the German Broadcasting Company installed the world's most technologically sophisticated television system to broadcast the games to theaters throughout Berlin. The Germans also constructed a massive shortwave broadcast center to ensure worldwide Olympics coverage.

For the global radio audience, estimated at 300 million, the Olympics assumed a new prominence. Just four years earlier, the American radio networks (NBC and CBS) dropped live coverage of the games when the cash-strapped Los Angeles organizing committee demanded an exorbitant rights fee at the last minute. Because the Germans asked for no rights fees and offered their engineers and technical

apparatus for free, Americans were able to listen to the games live for the first time.

On the morning of Aug. 14, many people in Seattle woke up excited to catch the regatta's final event live on CBS. Those listeners had a vested interest in the race. The United States team, a crew from the University of Washington, came very close to missing the trip to Berlin. Immediately following the Huskies' victory in the Olympic trials, the team was informed by the U.S. Olympic Committee that it needed to come up with \$5,000 to pay its way to Berlin. Seeing an opening, Henry Penn Burke—chairman of the Olympic Rowing Committee and a University of Pennsylvania alum—offered to send his beloved Quakers in place of the Huskies. The sports editors of Seattle's top two newspapers, outraged on behalf of the local heroes, enlisted newsboys to solicit donations while hawking papers. With American Legion posts and Chambers of Commerce throughout the state chipping in, enough money was collected in three days to send the team to Berlin. As a consequence of the funding drive, **remembered Gordon Adam**, who rowed in the three-seat, "people in the city felt that they were stockholders in the operation."

MORE: How Olympians may reveal their nationality with just a smile.

The Washington crew had been rowing together for less than five months prior to the Olympics. Coach Al Ulbrickson had originally named a different group of rowers as the varsity at the start of the college season. The second boat, made up of strong but inexperienced oarsmen, knew they rowed faster than the first string and was angered by the slight. After the varsity shoved off the dock for their first practice, the angry eight carried their boat to the water silently. "We were standing about a little bit after we put the oars in the oarlock," Moch explained to me **the year before he died**. "Somebody said, 'You know this thing is going to fly.' "

The teammates soon devised a mantra. Quietly, they would repeat the letters L-G-B. When asked the meaning, they would explain it stood for "Let's get better." What it really meant was "Let's go to Berlin."

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