

Rowing Team Makes Lake Hopatcong Home

Contributed by Jessica Kitchin
Thursday, 17 September 2009

You may have noticed them, quietly gliding across Lake Hopatcong's waters, moving in unison. Or at least that's the goal. About 20 high school students are training on the lake as part of the Mountain Lakes Rowing Club, and this is the first year the group will row in the fall season, after three years of competing in the spring.

"Rowing is often called the ultimate team sport," said coach Maril Davenport, 25, who started with the team this month and is also an assistant coach at Blair Academy in the spring. "It can be extremely rewarding";

On a chilly September afternoon, Davenport, who started rowing at the College of Charleston after graduating from Roxbury High School, and assistant coach Tanya Lubanski led the more experienced rowers through a set of drills during one of the team's three weekly three-hour practices, known as pieces. Those experienced athletes, who are mostly juniors and seniors in high school, practice on the lake after school every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and the novice rowers practice on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

Lee's Park became the club's permanent home this year, housing the team's set of six four-oar shells, one eight-oar shell, and the coaches' small motorboat. Though it's called the Mountain Lakes Rowing Club, it is the only rowing club in Morris County, and welcomes participants countywide. Currently, most of the team members go to Mountain Lakes, Delbarton, or Villa Walsh high schools.

"Mountain Lakes is such a lacrosse town, but I wanted to try another sport," said Mike Emer, a 17-year-old from Boonton who a senior at Mountain Lakes High School and starting his fourth year with the club. "When the team started, I was a freshman, and I thought it would be cool to get into it. We've had a good group of kids, and it's been a lot of fun";

The team exclusively practices the sweep technique of rowing, which features one oar per person (the two-oar rowing style is called sculling). "Most teams are sweep at the junior level," Lubanski said. "And it can be difficult to move from one to the other." It also focuses on longer-distance races—usually 5,000 meters—during the autumn, with a focus on shorter, sprint-like races—usually 1,500 to 2,000 meters—in the spring, much like running offers cross-country and track seasons. As a result, the team trains more for endurance during the fall season, rowing for stretches of 10 to 20 minutes in a "pyramid" form, which builds up stroke speed during the piece and then eases it back down as it nears the end.

"Fitness is important, but 50—even 75 percent of this is technique," said Lubanski, 25, who started rowing at Wheaton College in Illinois after graduating from Kinnelon High School, and has been coaching while getting her doctorate at Rutgers and NJIT. "It's where you have your arms placed in different parts of the stroke and exactly how you move your body in the boat. You have to be in shape, but technique is such a huge part of it";

As such, Davenport and Lubanski ride alongside the rowers, critiquing their movements and cheering them on as they try to build their endurance and keep the oar strokes perfected. On this particular practice day, one shell held five girls (four rowers and one coxswain) and one held five boys. The teams are unisex because at the college level, only women's crew is an NCAA sport, so they are usually trained separately at the junior level as well. The weather was a bit windy, causing chop that makes the rowers' jobs more challenging. Wind and motorboat wakes are a rower's worst nightmare. "They're so low to the water, it can be stressful when motorboats come closeby," said Davenport. In other venues, current can be dangerous, too.

The club is gearing up for three regattas this fall: the Greenwood Lake Row for the Cure (a fundraiser for Susan G. Komen) on September 27, the Head of the Riverfront in Hartford, Conn., on October 4, and the Head of the Fish in Saratoga Springs on October 24. The team will host a scrimmage event on Lake Hopatcong on the morning of November 1.

In the meantime, the team continues to skim through Lake Hopatcong's waters six days a week, moving faster and more in unison with each stroke.