

From an athlete's perspective

The Agony and the Ecstasy

by Ed Winchester

It's an exercise in ambiguity. Rowing—fluid and furious, idyllic and ugly—it's sport that creeps into an athlete's life, consuming it forever.

It's recipe for success is simple—survive. To athletes, its appeal defies explanation. Why do you row? What's with those early mornings? Frequently asked questions with answers as elusive as Henley gold. At its best, it's demanding, triumphant, religious. At its worst, heart-breaking, painful, crushing.

Hollywood couldn't churn out a more winning formula. So why hasn't rowing emerged a greater player in the media game? Sure, Silken Lauman and Marnie McBean, both Olympic darlings, have attracted their share of endorsements. But for the rest of Canada's national team, their victories on the international scene—particularly Derek Porter's win in the men's singles at the 1993 World Championships—failed to rise from the pages of Rowing Canada

Aviron magazine or hometown rags. One answer may be hidden somewhere between the starter's call and the blast of the finish gun.

While team sports occupy most column inches in the sports sections of dailies across the country, rowing—often a team sport—is ignored. That's because for each crew member, the race experience means something completely different. It's an incredibly intense seven minutes—with the raw pleasure of a hang nail or an ache of a fresh canker sore.

There's no opportunity to flirt with fame. No game-winning homerun or overtime goal. And so the media and public's fascination with heroes finds little nourishment with rowing. But then again, that makes perfect sense. People can't identify with the masochism of rowing. They just don't get it. The television cameras completely miss the point: six crews travelling at a brisk clip, oarsmen and women happily tugging

in harmony. Mildly pleasing for a few seconds "My, those boats are long." "Yup. That's for sure." Cut to inside the boat. There's the baritone thump of the catch and release; the cacophony of shrieking coxswains. And then there's the pain—individual and collective. No columnist, no camera-man, no commentator could ever do it justice. So why bother. In the end, except for the mandatory Olympic coverage every few years, Canadian oarsmen and women battle it out day after day for nothing more than inner peace, the feeling of accomplishment—or some load of spiritual rhetoric. After all, there's nothing else. People looking for their 15 minutes of fame should go elsewhere. In a secular society, rowing is the purest form of salvation. So when it comes down to the last 500m, tear at the hangnail until it bleeds. Swallow hard. Chase those boats. Chase the clock, together and alone—across the finish line, into obscurity.

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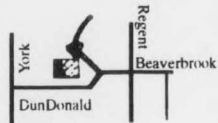
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