



Rowing

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My brother Jon and I taught ourselves to row at the AMVETS Lodge up at Higgins Lake, Michigan. My parents would take us there a couple of weeks each summer when Detroit was at its muggiest. We lived in the city surrounded by hot asphalt and cement. Every year the local paper had a story of someone frying an egg on the street. I wouldn't suggest preparing your omelet like that as a matter of course but it was hot enough in August to do so if you were so inclined.

The two weeks in the cool breezes of upstate were a special treat. The verdant forest and shimmering waters of Higgins Lake were worlds away from the heat of the city. We'd

start the trip by hopping into our 1950 Ford and recite "Are we there yet?" till our parents went crazy. Without my prompting, my children have acquired the knack of doing the same trick. Some well worn traditions never change.

Jon and I shared a room facing the lake. After devouring a monstrous breakfast of maple syrup soaked flapjacks, scrambled eggs (none of which had been fried on the street), mouth watering sausage, and crispy bacon, we'd run down to the lake shore. Our daily routine was to catch minnows in our nets and go fishing with Dad. We rowed out to where the depth was fifteen to twenty feet and drop our hooks. We'd sit for hours looking down through the crystal clear water at the perch playing with our bait beneath our boat. We had an understanding with the fish. The fish would bite our hooks and let us reel them in. In exchange we'd let them have our bait and we'd release them so they could do it again. None of us ever got tired of the game. Not Jon, not me, not Dad, not even the fish.

After fishing, we'd row back to shore to do other things. Inevitably Jon and I would each find our way back to the row boats. These were sturdy craft. All aluminum Grumman's. We always walked away with gray aluminum oxide stained swim trunks. The seats were fixed and always warm with the day's sun. They were the most beautiful, seaworthy vessels we'd ever seen.

We never tired of playing in the row boats. We had rowing races. We pretended we were pirates, each trying to ram the other. We played tag. We rowed in circles, clockwise then counter clockwise, and did figure eights. We'd swivel like tops rowing

our oars in opposite directions. When we got bored of one game, we'd play another. We never tired of making the boats dance with our oars.

As we grew older, summer jobs, dating, and school seemed more exciting than Higgins Lake. I made enough the first summer to buy a guitar. It was the '60's and seemed like a good idea at the time. With college, working meant meeting tuition payments. All too soon my brother moved out to Los Angeles and I to New York. Our folks retired just north of San Francisco. I got married, had children of my own, and worked to pay the mortgage. Rowing on Higgins Lake became nothing but a pleasant memory.

At the tender age of 39 years, I got the sailing bug and we moved to Douglaston, a community in New York City on the south shore of Long Island Sound just off Little Neck Bay.

As much as I love sailing, it is not considered an aerobic sport. Even hiking flat out in my sailing dinghy, sailing is not the kind of activity you think of to produce cardiovascular fitness. Peace of mind, a soaring spirit — yes. Calories burned — no. We've all seen more than one sailor with too much ballast onboard for their own good.

The kids and I have our own weather gauge called the 'jog-o-meter' (patent pending). We look out the window and count how many people jog by per minute on the road near the shore. If we see any number greater than five, the weather's pretty good. If the 'jog-o-meter' is less than five, it's probably not worth sticking our heads out the door. Incidentally, we count walkers, wheelchairs, roller bladders, and even runners. Motorcycles and ice cream trucks don't count, though we've had some disagreement about the latter.

Now, I have tried to contribute my share to the 'jog-o-meter'. I've tried running, jogging, and walking -- all in the interest of cardiovascular fitness. It all seems like too much work. I researched the options and found one on water sport is a meaningful form of aerobic exercise -- rowing. This was an incredible discovery. Spending time on the water messing about in a boat can actually be good for your health. Sculling not only uses both the upper and lower body but is forgiving on the knees.

For a year I scoured the classifieds for a used Alden Ocean Single, a popular recreational scull. I finally purchased a 1985 model in excellent condition. According to the gentleman who sold me the boat, it had only been on the water once. It was capsized on its maiden voyage and never rowed again. It's a beauty with blue deck, red hull, and white rub rail. On a windless morning, it seems to fly across the water. If there's wind and chop, the bow climbs the wave crests without complaint.

Many non-rowers find the narrow beam intimidating. However, when both oars are extended perpendicular to the boat, the beam is actually eighteen feet. With the wooden oars, it's almost as if I had a trimaran with two amas. If a particularly nasty powerboat wake overtakes me, I just stick the oars under my arm pits and grab the coaming. I couldn't feel safer.

The first month I rowed I concentrated on form not speed. As per the books, I started out by breaking down the stroke into two: the drive and the recovery. There

seemed to be so many little details to pay attention to. The blades were vertical when in the water on the drive but horizontal out of the water on recovery. At the beginning of the drive, the left hand is over the right, at least here in the Colonies. The legs extend before the arms flex on the drive but the arms extend before the legs flex on the recovery. The hands on the drive should be no higher than the bottom of the rib cage, or you might 'catch a crab'. If the hands are too low, you might 'sky', missing the stroke entirely. Getting the scull in the water, rigging it, and getting in the boat were nothing compared to the seemingly arcane mantra of rowing on a sliding seat. In reality, it all sounds much more complicated than it actually is. The practice is more easily accomplished than the theory.

After a few weeks the stroke became second nature. I no longer thought of it as the drive and the recovery but just a single, graceful motion. I rowed out to Fort Totten or Kings Point at the end the Little Neck Bay. At first I timed myself and took my pulse. Just had to make sure I got the recommended minimum of thirty minutes at 60%-80% of my estimated maximum heart rate for my age, gender, and body build. It didn't take long for me stop monitoring myself. I was just plain having too much fun to worry if I met the aerobically correct thresholds, which by any calculation I was anyway.

So far, I've only had three mishaps. I bumped into the midchannel buoy once when I forgot to look around half way up the bay. I didn't hole the boat but it made a resounding 'thump' echoed from Bayside to Udall's Cove. One of the few drawbacks to rowing is that you get a real good view of where you've been but not a very good view of where you're going. Some have said that's a fair metaphor for life too.

The next faux pas was a capsize near the dock. This also resulted from not looking where I was going. I turned in time to see that one of my oars was going to hit the dock so I retracted the oar and went immediately over. I bailed my boat in just ten minutes which my small audience of on-lookers found entertaining. I was more wet than embarrassed but not by much.

The last accident happened when I wasn't in the scull. I'd failed to tie down my boat on the boat rack before one of last season's seemingly endless number of storms. It flew off the rack and broke the rub rail. All three incidents were due to human error and not the fault of the boat itself. Boats are never wrong, but people often are.

I've offered a free introductory row to dozens of neighbors but only one, Bill Weinert, has been sufficiently foolhardy to accept. Bill took to it like a duck takes to water. He later got a scull and rows too. Weather permitting, we both row one to three times a week. That's got to count some how on the old 'jog-o-meter'.

During last winter I got a Concept II rowing machine to keep me in shape in the off-season. I hook up the heart rate monitor and count the minutes as I row, never doing more than the required minimum. I can measure calories burned, strokes per minute, or how long it would take to row 500 or 2,500 meters. I never get wet or have to carry the thing through the mud at low tide. It's never capsized or hit the midchannel buoy. Though I'd rather be on the water, it certainly does the job in the off-season without any of the fuss. It even comes close to the real thing if I pretend I'm back on Higgins Lake with my brother rowing those wonderful aluminum tubs.