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They Row for Each Other

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By Maureen Schlangen

When the fall semester ended Dec. 7, the UD women’s varsity rowing coach wished his team a successful finals week, suggested a cache of voluntary workouts, bade them a merry Christmas and said it would be fine for them to travel over the holidays — “just find an erg wherever you go — and whatever the case, stay active and fit.”

For these 36 student-athletes, Christmas break is no vacation, said Mike Wenker, head coach since October 2010.

The team works hard all year long — often completely under the radar of the rest of campus, Wenker said. To wit: By 5:30 a.m. on an in-season weekday, they’ve already eaten breakfast and boarded a van for the boathouse 4 miles away. By 6 a.m. — still well before dawn — they push off from the dock.

They cover 20,000 meters (about 12.5 miles) at various intensities, return to the dock by 8, put everything back on the racks and arrive back on campus in plenty of time for a second breakfast and a 9 a.m. class.

“That’s part of the draw, I think, ” Wenker said. “It’s sort of a badge of honor that they’ve done all this before anyone else is even out of bed.”

On Nov. 10, they rowed in their last fall-session regatta — a dual event with Ohio State, which the Flyers won handily.

The next day, winter training began. These “captain’s practices,” led by seniors Sadie Wonders and Lauren Jabir, are strictly optional, but the team dutifully reports at least eight hours a week, lifting weights and logging meters by the thousands on a long rank of ergs lined up in a musty, windowless room on the east end of the Frericks Center.

On Dec. 30, about a dozen of them left for a week of intensive training in Florida. Though athletics covered part of the cost, each rower bought her own plane ticket and ponied up a $200 share of the fee, which entitles her to a bunk, a place to shower, 30,000 meters a day on the water … and lots and lots of calories.

“If they’re not rowing, they’re eating,” Wenker said. “During the season, they need to eat about 4,000 calories a day.”

The reward for all this work is intrinsic, not economic. UD is the only non-scholarship rowing program in the Atlantic 10 — yet the Varsity 8 took first in the 2011 Atlantic 10 Championships by the largest margin of victory in A-10 history, and Wenker was named coach of the year. In the spring of 2012, the Varsity 8 took eighth of 33 at the Dad Vail Regatta in Philadelphia — second in the petite finals, just three-hundredths of a second behind Drexel. And, though the team finished fifth in the A-10 in 2012, all four boats made the grand finals, and the Varsity 8 took third, trailing second place by less than a second. This spring, they’re after an A-10 title.

Wenker and assistant coaches Annie Lawson and Lydia Caldwell are undaunted at having a team of all walk-ons: “We can build a better team with enthusiastic volunteers than we can with a couple of scholarships,” Wenker said.

And, aside from the school loans they take, the rowers don’t consider their non-scholarship status a major disadvantage.
Shepherding the refs

Rob Durkle ’78 has a great volunteer job in March with the NCAA basketball tournament.

One drawback — he doesn’t get to see much basketball.

Durkle, assistant vice president for enrollment management, will, like many basketball fans, be waiting to see what happens on Selection Sunday (this year coinciding with St. Patrick’s Day). But, unlike the rest of us, he will on that day get a list — of referees arriving the next day for games at UD Arena.

On Monday night, the referees arrive for each of Tuesday’s games. Durkle gets them to their hotel and works on any needs or conflicts. On Tuesday morning he meets with them, the games’ timekeeper and shot-clock keeper and gives them any needed directions. Last year, one needed a dress shirt and got directions to the nearest Wal-Mart. Then he gets them to the games 90 minutes early, taking care of logistics such as making them aware of the locations of first-aid and television monitors for replay.

“Then I’m off to pick up the next group for the next day’s games,” he said. “I get home at maybe 1 or 2 a.m., then up again to pick up the referees from the first set of games to get them to the airport for a 5:30 flight.”

On Wednesday, the process repeats itself. And, this year, the whole cycle does as the University of Dayton hosts second- and third-round games as well as the First Four.

Much is planned. Some can’t be. For example, Durkle said that at the women’s tournament one year, “An official forgot to pack socks. I was thinking I’d have to drive through game traffic to the store. And how would I get back in through our traffic-control people? Luckily, [UD equipment manager] Tony Caruso unearthed a pair of black men’s socks — a bit large but functional.”

Perhaps the most serious mishap with officials was a traffic accident. The car a group of them was using was stopped at a traffic light on their way to dinner when it was rear-ended. “Nobody was hurt,” Durkle said, “but I had to arrange for another car.”

Durkle’s father, Fred, before his death in 1996 did similar volunteer work for the NCAA, as well as run the local high school tournament, which Rob Durkle has also done since his father’s death. “I run,” he said, “the drawing, collect records, check eligibility, get tickets to schools, check finances, file reports to the high school athletic association, organize the officials, handle parking passes, programs ...”

Why so much basketball volunteering? Durkle admits that’s a question his wife, Paula, has asked.

One reason: “I like to hear it,” he said, “when NCAA officials say, ‘This is the best-run tournament we attend all year.’”

For another reason, he pulls out his phone and flips to pictures of smiling grandchildren at the center of Blackburn Court in the University of Dayton Arena.

— Thomas M. Columbus

Dayton Flyers Rowing 101
daytonflyers.com/womens/rowing/rowing101/

Want to help them out?
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For details, see daytonflyers.com.
- March 16: Oak Ridge Cardinal Invitational, Oak Ridge, Tenn.
- March 23: Marietta Invitational, Marietta, Ohio
- March 30: Indiana University scrimmage, Bloomington, Ind.
- April 13: Knecht Cup, Camden, N.J.
- May 4: Atlantic 10 Championships, Cooper River, Pennsauken, N.J.
- May 10-11: Aberdeen Dad Vail Regatta, Philadelphia

Jabir was willing to put off her student teaching — and her graduation — until next fall in order not to miss any regattas, but she was able to work out the schedule with her adviser and her coordinating teacher.

For the past two semesters, the rowing team has led all other teams in the use of academic support services, including tutoring, supplemental instruction and the on-campus writing center, said Jenifer Gerard, who coordinates academic support for women’s rowing and other Flyer teams.

“We do well even without all the extra resources,” said Jabir, an early childhood education major. “The difference is, they row for money; we row for each other.”

That difference shows in both training and competition, Wonders said: “We want it more. At other schools, their education depends on their rowing. We just generally love it and are willing to do the work.”

They’re as driven about academics as they are about rowing. Their team GPA is about 3.4, Wenker said.

Every fall, the rowers do the recruiting themselves. While they’re helping move first-year students into their residence halls, they talk up the academic support, the exercise, the time management skills and the team GPA. But it’s the fun, friendship and competition that really sell.

“We’re like a family on the team,” said Wonders, an accounting major working toward an MBA. “If someone is having a difficult time, they know that one if not all of us are there for them.”

If prospective members disqualify themselves because they haven’t rowed before, a team member is quick to note: None of this year’s seniors had, either. “It’s a sport that’s easy to learn, hard to master,” said Jabir, an early childhood education major.

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