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SPORTS DESK

COLLEGES; Never Rowed? Take a Free Ride

By JULIET MACUR (NYT) 1763 words

On the day Ohio State freshmen signed up for extracurricular activities like sororities, paintball and recreational badminton, Amanda Purcell heard a sales pitch. Two women on the university's varsity rowing team begged her to join.

Purcell, a 5-foot-9, 250-pound French horn player and music major who had never played a sport before, said no, but the women persisted. Finally, she decided to give it a try.

Suddenly, she had a new hobby -- and a new way to pay her college education.

A junior now, 60 pounds lighter and physically fit, Purcell has been on scholarship for more than a year and is competing in Ohio State's top varsity boat at this weekend's N.C.A.A. women's rowing championships in Sacramento. She is even thinking of the Olympics.

"I'm still shocked," Jim Purcell, Amanda's father, said. "She was always afraid to touch any sport, but look at her now."

Purcell and her family quickly learned a fact of life in the 21st century Title IX world: women are getting scholarships in sports they have never tried, perhaps never even heard of.

As an effort to satisfy Title IX legal requirements for gender equity in federally funded institutions, many colleges have added nontraditional sports for women, like rowing. It is a phenomenon particularly true of universities like Ohio State, an institution with a major football program that skews the balance of sports participation and scholarships in the men's favor.

Ohio State elevated its women's rowing program to varsity status nine years ago. Now, as the men's club team runs programs such as Rent-a-Rower (\$50 for four hours of chores like raking leaves, cleaning garages or moving furniture to raise money for equipment and travel), the women are fully funded.

The team has an N.C.A.A. maximum 20 scholarships, and 16 women receive full rides. The remaining money is divvied up among other rowers. The team's annual budget is

nearly \$900,000.

"In the fall, rowing is a sport that you carry 70 to 80 people, then in the spring at least 46 kids get out and race," Ohio State's athletic director, Andy Geiger, said. "It's an expensive sport, but it's worth it. It really does help offset football."

Rowing has become a popular way to equalize any imbalance between men's and women's sports because it requires high numbers of athletes. A single varsity eight boat requires nine people: eight rowers and a coxswain, a small but vocal person who steers the boat and shouts commands.

Most teams have at least two eight-person boats on varsity and two more on the novice team. Many crews also have four-person boats, which carry four rowers and a coxswain.

It isn't easy, however, to keep rowers on the team. Rowing is a year-round activity, with fall and spring seasons, and weekly races from March through May. Many women who try the sport don't make it through the winter.

Though the National Collegiate Athletic Association puts limits on the number of practice hours, the time commitment is still daunting. Many teams practice twice a day, with a predawn workout on the water that could last several hours. In the afternoon, rowers head to the gym to lift weights or train on the rowing machine.

Blisters form on hands because of friction against oar handles. Pain and soreness develop in nearly every muscle because rowing uses the upper and lower body.

"Sure, you might get a scholarship," Geiger said. "But it's not going to be easy."

Eighty-five Division I colleges this year had women's rowing teams, a 55 percent jump from 1997, the year women's crew became an N.C.A.A. sport. And now the top teams aren't only the traditional rowing powers like the Ivy League universities and, say, the University of Washington.

Michigan, Virginia and Tennessee are all in the top 10. Ohio State is ranked third going into the championships. Cal is ranked No. 1.

"When we beat Princeton and Brown this year at Princeton, the silence was deafening," Ohio State Coach Andy Teitelbaum said. "But these changes haven't happened overnight. It's taken awhile for us to build our programs."

With so many programs offering rowing scholarships, recruiting has become instrumental in keeping new programs on top. The problem is that there aren't enough high school rowers to go around.

"We'd be recruiting a kid who'd already have three scholarship offers from Louisville,

Texas and Michigan, and we'd be like, 'O.K., this isn't how it used to be,'" said Mike Zimmer, coach of the women's crew at Columbia, which, as an Ivy League university, does not give athletic scholarships but can offer grants and need-based financial aid.

"Now even the women who are on the middle of our list are being chased by a lot of different schools."

And recruits aren't coming strictly from New England prep schools anymore. They are coming from high schools across the nation, even parts of the country with no history of rowing.

They are also coming from overseas. Ohio State's top varsity boat has rowers from schools called College of Olympic Reserve, Gymnasium Grosse Stadtschule and Red October. Seven of the nine people in the boat are international rowers: five from Germany, one from Russia, one from the Netherlands.

"Rowing has grown so unbelievably fast -- it is where soccer was 10 or 15 years ago -- so the supply and demand is unbelievably off," Mark Rothstein, coach of Michigan's women's crew, said. "But the idea that there aren't enough rowers to go around is changing pretty quickly."

Still, Rothstein sends a letter to all of Michigan's incoming female freshmen, trying to lure them to the first rowing practice. (He purposely fails to mention that varsity practice begins at 5:45 a.m.)

And at Cal, as at most universities, coaches scour high school rosters for athletes of all kinds who may not want to continue their sport in college. If a woman is tall, aerobically strong and willing to work hard, says Cal Coach Dave O'Neill, chances are she can be a good rower.

"It's not necessarily an easy sport to learn because you have to have certain genetic variables, but it does reward people with a strong work ethic," O'Neill said. "Someone who is a 6-1 swimmer who blew out her shoulder or is sick of being in the pool, now that's the perfect scenario. It's more of a gamble, but it's something that we just have to do."

Heather Mandoli, a 5-foot-10 athlete who played basketball, soccer and rugby in high school, fits into that category. She scarcely had one month's rowing experience when she was flooded with scholarship offers and wound up at Michigan.

"I thought, a scholarship?" she said. "O.K., for basketball, maybe."

As a high school senior in a small town in British Columbia three hours inland from Vancouver, she won a week's worth of rowing lessons at a start-up rowing club. She didn't actually get on the water in a boat, but she learned her technique on a rowing

machine. The machine -- called an ergometer, or erg -- generates a computerized score when set for a specific time or distance.

A few weeks later, Mandoli sent her ergometer score to Canada's national team, and soon she was fielding calls from colleges throughout Canada and the United States, including Michigan, Princeton and Washington.

"After Michigan offered me a scholarship, the first thing I said was, 'You know I can't row, right?'" said Mandoli, who this month was chosen the Big Ten Conference women's rowing athlete of the year. "They just said, 'We're recruiting you on potential.' That was enough for me."

Such stories have been enough to promote the growth of high school and recreational rowing programs. In Oakland, Calif., for example, a local water-sports facility started a rowing program this year strictly for public school girls. None of the 21 who signed up could pass the swimming test, and 16 didn't even have bathing suits. Still, DeDe Birch, executive director of the Jack London Aquatic Center, pushed forward.

"Whatever we can do to get these girls a scholarship, we'll do," she said. "Hey, if colleges gave kayaking scholarships, we'd start that team, too."

None of the talk about scholarship opportunities in rowing had reached Purcell before she signed up for crew that day at Ohio State. She knew nothing about the sport until she showed up for the first practice. But she quickly learned one thing: she was good, particularly on the erg, where her scores were among the best on the team.

But she could not juggle the time commitment with her music studies and her job as a waitress. So she quit the varsity program and joined the club team.

A year later, seeing her potential, her club coach took her to an international rowing machine competition in Boston. Purcell pulled the second-best score of 293 women in the competition and the top collegiate score -- 6 minutes 48.9 seconds for 2,000 meters.

Later that day, she had voicemails and e-mail messages offering scholarships to Fordham, Michigan and San Diego State. She chose to stay at Ohio State, and now the university not only pays her tuition, but it also sends her a monthly check for about \$900 for room, board and books.

Purcell's erg scores were so good that she was invited to a national team training camp last summer. There, she realized how far she could go in rowing. Now she wants to make the 2008 Olympic team.

"In the second grade, I tried the viola, but the teachers said I had no musical talent," Purcell said. "Now look at me. I'm a music major. Rowing has kind of been the same

thing. Nobody ever knew I'd be good at it. I guess I can thank Title IX for that."

CAPTIONS: Photos: Amanda Purcell, who had never rowed before joining Ohio State's rowing team.; The Ohio State women's eights, leaving the dock at 6:30 for a morning practice. (Photographs by Kevin Fitzsimons for The New York Times)(pg. D1); Amanda Purcell, third from left, is on full scholarship at Ohio State, and she also receives a monthly check for room, board and books. (Photo by Kevin Fitzsimons for The New York Times)(pg. D6)

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