

Lake Sunapee



Rowing Club

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Jim Block*

If you are interested in rowing, this club is interested in you.

It may be August, but it is a bit chilly at 5:45 in the morning. The unseasonable weather, including the light mist in the air, isn't deterring a group of 11 rowers and their coach from meeting at the Georges Mills public boat launch area. The members of the Lake Sunapee Rowing Club (LSRC) are a dedicated bunch, and some iffy New England weather isn't going to deter them from their daily row on Lake Sunapee. >>>>



LSRC, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that provides rowing opportunities to the communities surrounding Lake Sunapee, is in its fourth season. Brenda Balenger, a Sunapee resident, wondered why she was making a 30-minute drive to Hanover, N.H., to row with the Upper Valley Rowing Foundation. “With all this beautiful water, why aren’t we rowing here?” the Sunapee resident says. Brenda contacted fellow rower Marylee Verdi, a New London resident, and they co-founded LSRC in fall 2007.

“We had 75 people participate the first year,” recalls Brenda Balenger. “We were shocked. We didn’t have enough resources to accommodate everyone.”

At the first informational meeting, 30 people showed up. “I remember thinking, well, we’re on the right track,” Balenger says.

Water water everywhere

Experienced and novice rowers meet at a shed on Cooper Street. Two white boats, called shells, are almost unnoticeable up on their blocks next to the shed. It’s the baseball-capped crowd standing on the side of the road that gets your attention; the group is telling jokes and sharing stories as they sign in for session three of the sweep rowing program.

Head Coach David Pook begins giving instructions:



Head Coach David Pook

“Barbara, you’re stroking. Tracy, 7. Brenda, 6. Are the kids here? MacKenzie, 5, and let’s put Liz in 4. Claire in the bow,” he says. “And, Chris, I’ll have you cox to start.”

“No, no,” says Chris Dorman of New London.

“I’ve never done it before.”

That’s because Chris is 6 feet, 2 inches tall. Most coxswains are much shorter, but their

personality makes up for what they lack in height. The coxswain not only steers the shell, but also motivates and unifies the crew — and that means a lot of talking with the help of a microphone.

Everyone laughs. “That’s exactly what I said when he made me do it,” one woman says.

The rowers climb down the embankment and each person takes a position on either side of the shell, called an eight because it seats eight rowers and the coxswain. Pook, a Warner resident, provides direction: “Hands on. Up to shoulders in one, two.” He pauses and explains, “They have to be focused on what they are doing. This is a 200-pound boat, and it is 60 feet long.” The boat, named the Anne Locke Bixby, was donated to LSRC by the Upper Valley Rowing Foundation. “It’s a pretty old boat but a good shell. Still, we’d be excited to upgrade it.”

After carrying the shell down Cooper Street and past Sargents Marina, the crew has reached the lake. They stop on the grassy area, put the boat down, remove their shoes, lift the boat in unison again, and wade into the shallow water. They flip the shell into the lake — under the direction of the coxswain — then a few rowers wade back to the sandy beach to get the oars.

“Testing, one, two,” Dorman says into the microphone. His voice can be heard loud and clear thanks to speakers under each seat in the shell. “You ladies look beautiful this morning.”

The joy of rowing

LSRC had a short first season in 2008: three weeks. “We had 75 people participate the first year,” recalls Balenger. “We were shocked. We didn’t have enough resources to





Working hard (left to right): Barbara Faughnan, Tracy Bragdon, Liz Brunst, Nancy Vespoli, Kathy Muller, Happy Callaway, Trina Hill and Clare Menzel

accommodate everyone.”

The group also didn't have a boat-house or a dock. The town of Sunapee provided access at the Sunapee State Beach in Newbury, but it was a wet launch, “walking into the water with a boat,” says Balenger. The Fells, also in Newbury, provided a wet launch in 2009, and Georges Mills in 2010.

None of this was a deterrent to the Sunapee-area residents who wanted to row on their lake. “After a learn-to-row session, a rower said to me, ‘When do

we get to do this again?’” says Balenger.

Rowing is a “walk on” sport; no prior experience is needed. And it's great exercise. According to the U.S. Rowing Association, rowing is one of the few athletic activities that involves all of the body's major muscle groups. It is a great aerobic workout, in the same vein as cross country skiing. “It is low impact so it's good for someone like me, whose knees can't handle running or other high-impact activities,” says Tracy Bragdon, a resident of Unity. “It truly is

something that you can do your whole life. We have people in the club ranging in age from 12 to their 70s. It's something that you can do recreationally and still get a good workout out of it.”

But the real desire to row is more than just taut muscles or a healthier heart. “I get a little taste of it and all I want is more,” laughs Balenger, who coaches rowers of all ages at local schools and with the LSRC.

Bragdon agrees. “The real reason I row is the feeling it gives me. It's >>>>

almost meditative, but at the same time it takes all your concentration. It's a mental challenge to keep up with your crew mates when your muscles and lungs are screaming for oxygen," she says. "And yet you can lose yourself out there in the early morning when the water is like glass and you feel the bodies in the boat moving together, the rhythm of the blades in the water, and the run of the boat beneath you.

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It's that quest for the always elusive perfection — both within yourself, and when all bodies become one with the shell. You can feel it for a few strokes at a time every now and then, and it is so magical you keep trying so that you can experience that feeling again."

A real puzzle

During a typical LSRC session, two boats are on the water. Today it is an eight (eight rowers and a coxswain) and a pair (two rowers who brought their own boat). Pook and the 11th rower, Bob Saturley, are riding alongside in a motorboat. That way, Pook can see what the rowers are doing and provide direction.

"Coaching is kind of a misnomer," says Pook. He's been rowing for 20-plus years, including competitively at the University of Pennsylvania, and is currently a coach at the Derryfield School in Manchester and with LSRC. "Sure, I do some coaching to the novice rowers, but my job is really to create a good atmosphere for an early morning row." This includes the boat line up — placing each rower in the seat that works best for them. "Some people are designated to a certain side of the boat; some can row on both sides so I can switch them around. Some rowers come on a daily basis; some share seats, rowing Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday. Then each seat has its own personality."



Hands on: rowers carry the shell to the lake.

Take, for example, Barbara Faughnan in the stroke seat. The Wilmot resident has been rowing for 48 years and "is an extraordinarily good time keeper," says Pook. "I can tell her that I'd like the boat to row at 28 strokes a minute, and she will dial it in exactly at that

pace, and then can move the rating up or down a stroke at my request. And since everyone is following the stroke, it's crucial to have someone who can keep time."

This doesn't mean that you need experience to row. "Everyone is at a different place in their learning," explains Balenger. "The coach's job is to get the boat to work together as best as possible. Moving together so the technique is the same and the boat moves fast on the water."

One of the reasons Pook was attracted to the coaching position for the club was the diversity of experience. "I have the opportunity to work with people of all ages," he says. "We have rowers ranging in age from 12 years old to 75 years young and they all work together. The members are kind, generous people who love the sport and love the connection to the water. LSRC is an incredible opportunity that exists right here in people's backyards."

It's still dark out

The coxswain works closely with the coach, but he can't really see what the rowers are doing — he can only tell if someone is out of sync by the way the blade cuts through the water. He's there to motivate the crew, "walking them through warm ups and drills," says Balenger. "There's the old joke in rowing: God, coach, coxswain, rower."

The ports (the rowers with one oar in the water on the right side of the shell) get in first, then the starboards (rowers with an oar on the left side). Chris Dorman is adjusting the headset over his baseball cap. The shell slowly drifts away from shore as the crew settles into position.

"Stern pair — can you back us?" asks Dorman. He's asking the folks in the rear of the boat to turn their blades





Coach David Pook (left) provides direction while the crew takes a breather. From left to right: Hunter Moskowitz, George Gelzer, Mackenzie Garrity, Ann Donnery, Liz Brunst, Melissa Thompson, Andrea Gelzer, Suzi Garrity and Happy Callaway.

backward and row backward to move the boat toward the stern instead of toward the bow.

“Can you turn it up just a little?” someone asks.

Dorman adjusts the microphone again. “Still learning. Arms only. Arms and back.”

Within minutes, the two shells are out of sight. The houses along the lake are still dark — not a single light is on — and the LSRC members will have rowed to the harbor in Sunapee and back to Georges Mills before many folks have gotten out of bed. Halfway through the morning row, Pook swapped Dorman to a rowing seat, and Bob Saturley took a position in the eight. “We usually have two changes a practice,” says Pook. “If we have an extra rower, we’re adept at making quick switches while taking a breather.”

By 7:30 a.m.,

the rowers are back in their cars and on their way home or to work.

Looking for a home

This year, LSRC will be back at the Sunapee State Beach for the adaptive rowers and at George’s Mills for the club. They are still looking for a permanent home so more people can participate.

“If we had a boathouse and a dock, we’d be able to offer rowing to a larger community,” says Balenger. She’s talking about master’s programs, collegiate rowers, and junior programs for high school students, and adaptive rowing programs for children and adults with special needs. “We would need a dock to do more.”

New this year is a \$25 nonrowing membership. “If someone wants to be supportive, involved, and aware of what’s happening — but doesn’t want to row — this will allow them to

do so,” says Balenger. LSRC also accepts donations for the purchase of equipment, such as a trailer, and a scholarship fund for rowers who can’t afford the cost of participation.

Balenger invites anyone who is interested — even the “never-ers” — to give rowing a try on National Row Day: Saturday, June 4. “We’re growing and we see such potential,” says Balenger. “We want everyone to try this sport. Although it may not be for everyone, we can’t believe they wouldn’t love it. Rowing is a way to get fit, learn respect for waterways, and a way to connect with others.”

“LSRC has reawakened this joy of rowing that I had forgotten I had,” says Bragdon. “It has also given me the opportunity to meet some wonderful people — people who innately understand my desire to get up at 5 a.m. and carry a 200-plus pound boat into the water because they are there beside me carrying it, too.” **K**

Get Your Row On

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