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Subject: Beach Crew News - LB Post Sports Article and Video
Date: November 27, 2008 3:29:56 AM PST
To: bgrams@csulb.edu

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BEACH CREW - CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LONG BEACH ROWING TEAM



GETTING UP WAY TOO EARLY WITH LONG BEACH STATE CREW

Wednesday, November 26, 2008 - Pete Archer Rowing Center



Mike Guardabascio and J.J. Fiddler from the Long Beach Post visited the Pete Archer Boathouse this week to see what this prestigious program at Long Beach State is all about. They also filmed video highlights of the morning. Take a look...

Story by Mike Guardabascio

Long Beach Post Sports

Link to Article: lbpostsports.com



"I can't feel my lungs"

Driving to JJ's house at 5am, something is gnawing at the back of my exhausted mind. I haven't slept, because I just finished putting out that day's edition of the site about ten minutes ago, so at first I dismiss it as a side effect of work-induced insomnia. Then I realize what's bugging me: the streets are empty, deserted. Long Beach looks like the set of some post-apocalyptic zombie movie right now.

I pick JJ up and we head south, towards the water. Sprinklers blur the meridians, and a thin vapor clings to the streetlights down Studebaker. JJ and I communicate primarily through grunts, and one of us realizes, about halfway to the shore: "These kids do this five days a week."

The kids we're thinking about, the ones we're on our way to visit, are the hardy student-athletes who make up the Long Beach State Crew team. There are over fifty members of the team, and as we cross through Spinnaker Bay, we're suddenly part of a caravan that seems to include all of them. "This is like Field of Dreams," JJ says, as we're swept into the boathouse parking lot with about ten vehicles in front of us and another ten behind. We climb out of the well-heated car into a blast of frigid ocean air. Standing on the shore of Marine Stadium, we can see people jogging, or walking dogs across the water. "Jesus," JJ says, with a mild note of distaste.

Don't get me wrong—it's not that we aren't motivated, hardy young men. Between us, JJ and I put in about 200 hours of work a week on this site. We're nearly as dedicated to Long Beach sports as it's physically possible to be. But: five in the morning? I cough, and JJ shivers, and we turn to look inside the boathouse, where members of the Crew team are working the weights, laughing, and generally looking as if it weren't, you know, five in the morning.

"You get used to it"

A few members of the team drag us in out of the cold and give us a tour of the team's bay, which is basically a big garage where they stow their boats. I become suddenly very self-conscious of my sleepy stumbling when someone points out that a boat I'm standing next to cost around \$40,000, or more than double the price of my car. The bay looks like it belongs in a movie, or in the middle of a road trip—the walls are covered with little messages, mementoes, pieces of history from a team that's nearly 50 years old, though it's never officially been part of the university's athletic department.

The rowers talk about the boats, and it's clear that they know them intimately—each one seems to have a personality, a history to match their names (My favorite is the Maxson, named for the former LBSU president). Our crew counterparts chuckle when we tell them we're tired. "You get used to it," they say. "Really, within a few weeks, it's not a big deal anymore. You take naps, go to bed at ten or eleven. It's not that bad." I find this impossible to believe, but they both look chipper and alert, so I take them at their word.

Then we're led out of the bay onto the concrete launch area, where a burly-looking man clutching an It's A Grind cup is drilling three rows of young women, having them do pushups and situps, while each row holds onto a long oar. The burly guy is Todd Mehl, a conditioning and training expert with NAVY SEAL experience. My respect for the team begins to grow beyond my appreciation of their ability to not hit their snooze buttons.

Coach Counter

"So, I know it's a club team—what are each of these athletes paying for the right to be here right now?" I ask Brian Counter, head coach of Beach Crew. JJ and I have met coach a few times before, and found him instantly likeable. He's a prototypical Long Beach coach, incredibly passionate and knowledgeable about his sport, and his athletes. He's a lifer, too, having arrived at Long Beach State via Patrick Henry Elementary, Marshall Middle School, and Millikan High. He got into rowing after a rotator cuff tear prevented him from playing water polo for Rick Azevedo at Long Beach State his freshman year. He rowed for the team, and has now graduated to coaching them.

"A thousand dollars a year," he says. "Our operational budget is \$80,000-100,000-a-year, though. The Athletic Department does help out some, but other than that we have to do fundraising, ask groups like the Century Club and the Long Beach Rowing Association for money, and we hold pancake breakfasts, letter-writing campaigns. We just sent out about 270 letters. And we're getting reconnected to a lot of our alumni, which helps." What if that's not enough? Counter grins. "Car washes."

Watching these students do their pre-dawn pushups, the sheer weight of their dedication hits me, like an oar to the stomach. While attending school and either paying for their own tuition or getting scholarships, they're also finding a thousand dollars a year in order to pay for the privilege of five-days-a-week practice. "We don't get priority registration," says Counter. "We practice this early because it's the only time nobody has class."

No kidding. I was a pretty good student at Long Beach State, but I got a C in the only 8am class I ever took, because my attendance was so low. JJ and I agree that every student at the university who's willing to be awake right now must already be on the Crew team.

"This makes so much more sense on the water"

We go out on the water with coach to observe his women's varsity team, who are rowing Grevling, the women's varsity 8 craft. We are standing on what amounts to the hood of a wakeless boat Counter is piloting, leaning on a very thin rail as JJ takes photos and video, and I try to make my rapidly numbing fingers grip my pen. I'm wearing a long-sleeved shirt, a jacket, pants, and shoes, and as the boat gets moving the wind cuts through all of them. In the Grevling next to us, half of the rowers are wearing short-shorts.

The sun is coming up. It isn't warm, but it is beautiful, turning the dark waters of Long Beach glassy and reflective. There is no noise but the gentle swish of the oars cutting into the water, and the odd strained squawk from a gull. Counter occasionally shouts something to his coxswain for the WV8, Marlina, who passes the message on to the rowers. This all makes so much more sense on the water—what it is about the sport itself that attracts so many athletes to the Beach Crew team that have never rowed before. It's peaceful on the water, but a challenging kind of peaceful.

We head down Marine Stadium and take a lap around Naples Island—the 2nd Street Bridge is so low, JJ and I have to squat all the

way down onto the hood of the boat. Counter points to the graffiti underneath the bridge, names scrawled in wiry black spraypaint. "When you win a national championship," he says, "You earn the right to put your name under the bridge." A few feet over, his rowers are pushing now, picking up speed and momentum out of the bridge.

They've already had success this year, with their men's novice team beating UCI and coming in first place at the 1st Annual Long Beach Fall Classic, and the women's varsity team performing well, too. When Counter talks about the future of the team this season, he calls those results, "Encouraging."

After our circuit around Naples is complete, we head back to the boathouse. Between shivers, I find myself wishing we could stay on the water longer. I think about my bed at home, and decide I'm alright with wrapping up.

"Seriously, guys, you get used to it"

Marlena del Hierro, the coxswain for the women's varsity team, is something like the fifteenth person to laugh at our haggard expressions. She is chipper and bubbly, and thus inexplicable. At least, I think to myself, it's light out now.

"If you're out here," she says, "It's because you love it. You really do get used to it, even though it's hard. I mean, I don't think most people on the team would call themselves 'morning people,' but you just have to do it, to be part of the team." Marlena loves the open water, loves her teammates—one rower on the team, she says, had never been a member of any competitive team before, but is now among the best at Beach Crew, because of how dedicated to training she's been.

It's a dedication shared by all of Marlena's teammates, all of Counter's athletes on Beach Crew, an indomitable spirit that has them up doing pushups on freezing concrete an hour before sunrise, rowing around Long Beach's shores hours before most of her citizens will be awakening for their morning commutes. A dedication powerful enough to bring them back, on their own dime, five days a week.

"Oh," Marlena says with a wicked smile. "Six in Spring."

Mike Guardabascio is a freelance writer, CSULB grad, and a Long Beach native. He played AYSO soccer, YMCA basketball, and pickup games of everything else, in every park from Cherry to El Dorado. He loves what he does.

A recent Long Beach State journalism graduate, J.J. Fiddler is a local sports guru, particularly at the prep and college level.

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