

NOT AS FAST AS YOU THINK.

I FIGURED DORM LIFE HAD ENDED FOR ME BACK WHEN I finished my freshman year at UVA. But considering I had just spent two consecutive pre-elite camps living in college dorms, I realized how wrong I was. Then on July 31, 2004, when my friends and I pulled into the parking lot of yet another dorm, this time in Ontario, Canada, I began to think that if I wanted to keep rowing after college, I might have to get used to the whole sharing rooms and sleeping in twin beds thing again.

Here I was, two months past graduate school, and when I showed up for my first international race—the Royal Canadian Henley—it was back to a dorm for me.

Because our dorm room lacked air-conditioning, my roommate and I opted to leave our windows open at night while we slept. This left me stirring at every unexpected and unidentified sound that crept in through them. And so, on the night before my Champ Single race, it was no different.

All of six nights after we arrived in Canada, my nervousness for my first 2,000-meter race in a single kept me awake later than I would have liked. Whenever I awoke, I noticed things I had not before. Things like how short and narrow my twin-sized bed felt.

How flat and unsupportive my pillow was. And how I wished I could trade in my scratchy blanket for something softer.

During my search for comfort that night, I repeatedly readjusted my pillow, then inadvertently untucked my sheets, which exposed my toes. With my every subsequent shift, my nerves mounted. Until my mind fixated less on my bed and more on my big race.

By morning, I found I must have fallen asleep somehow because I felt (slightly) rested.

Because my race was not until later in the day, I had time to eat breakfast and run through some of my standard race-day thoughts. My thoughts were both nervous and excited as I attempted to convince myself that everything would be okay. Eventually, after I ran through nearly every possible scenario for how I hoped the day would go, I breathed to calm myself, then made my way to the course.

When I arrived at the racecourse for my Champ Single race, the conditions were the polar opposite of what I had pictured while I ran through my race-day thoughts. The course was a complete mess. A significant wind had developed overnight, and as a result, the conditions were worse than subpar. They verged on dangerous.

It was with this in mind that the race organizers had no choice but to suspend the entire regatta—all rowing races, not just the Champ Single—until the weather calmed.³ A little relieved, I waited.

When it became apparent that the weather had no intention of improving, the race organizers weighed their two options: cancel everything or race with the conditions as they were. Bearing in mind how far people had traveled, rather than canceling, they opted to resume the regatta with what else? The Champ Single.

³ “Regatta” in the sport of rowing is another name for a series of races.

James, the coach who had accompanied us to Canada, informed me of the race organizers' decision as soon as he heard it. While I listened, my cheeks dropped, and my stomach turned. I then stared past him and down the racecourse to take in the whole scene. It was nothing but a sea of whitecapped waves.

Why they chose to resume racing on such precarious, washing-machine-like conditions with the smallest, most unstable boat of all, I will never know. But I had gone all that way, so I headed in the direction of my equipment and prepared to launch.

Understanding my apprehension, James helped me carry my equipment to the dock. He then held my boat steady while I sat down in it, then adjusted my butt on its tiny, wheeled seat. For as narrow as an eight had once seemed to me, it may as well have been a barge compared to where I sat in my barely-as-wide-as-I-was single that day.

While I carefully put on my socks and secured my feet in my shoes, my boat bobbed beneath me. Once I had my feet set, I then gripped my oars with my visibly trembling hands and looked up at James.

With every passing second that I tentatively bobbed there by the dock, water splashed over my boat's gunnels, steadily filling it. As it filled, James and I both knew I had to shove, or I would sink. Upon recognizing this, James carefully lifted the scoop-like blade end of my dockside oar, then guided me off the dock. As he walked slowly, bent over to keep me stable, he looked me in the eye once more, and in his Irish accent, gave me one final piece of advice.

"You know, you'll get out there and realize they aren't as fast as you think they are."

When he smiled, I smiled back. It was exactly what I needed to hear. With his one final push, I was off the dock and on my own.

From there, I cautiously rowed my way toward the start line. With my every stroke, I ran five aims through my head. The five

things that would allow me to consider my first ever all-out 2K in a single a success. First, make it to the start without flipping. Second, lock onto the start bridge (similar to the starting blocks for a swimming race) without flipping. Third, leave the start line without flipping. Fourth, cross the finish line without flipping. And fifth, make it back to the dock. Without flipping.

I repeated these five aims to myself as I slowly but surely bumped my way to the start. All the while, water washed over the bow of my long, skinny single, submerging its bow ball. Every so often, a slightly larger wave rolled far enough up the boat to splash me in the back. Whenever that happened, my hands gripped my oars all the tighter.

Still, I pressed on. Until eventually, I made it to the start line, then carefully rowed into my assigned lane. When I did, I completed aim one. I then turned the stern of my boat (the end I stared at as I rowed) toward the start bridge, where a kind volunteer attempted to help me. He steadied my boat in place until the other racers and the race announcer were ready. Aim two complete.

It was just as I completed aim two that the race announcer chimed in with a change. “This will be a countdown start,” the announcer said.

This meant the start command would happen faster than usual due to the rough conditions on the racecourse that day. The last-minute warning was the official way of preparing us for the change. Even though I knew the start would happen faster than normal, because this was my first race in the single, I could not guess just how fast.

Until one brief moment later, “Attention...Go!” rang out across the whitecaps toward me.

In an instant, we six racers took off, and I completed aim three.

Over every stroke I took, my boat bobbed in nearly every direction upon the inconsistent surface of the water. With each

successive wave and consequent bobble, my hands tightened, and my knuckles whitened as I hung on for dear life. I knew even the slightest bobble could unexpectedly flip me into the choppy water below. I had no choice but to take it one stroke at a time.

At barely 250 meters into the race, having taken about thirty whole strokes, James's words flashed across my mind. *They are not as fast as you think they are.*

Upon that fleeting flash of a curiously hopeful thought, I—against my better judgement—turned my focus away from just me and cut my eyes to the right then left across the lanes to see how I was progressing. The instant my eyes darted, I could not believe what I saw. James was right. The other more experienced racers were not as fast as I thought. I was winning.

With my confidence bolstered by my being in the lead, I pushed my legs harder. Instantly, the wind blew more as if it to laugh at my gumption. The waves then rolled more. And in a few strokes more, I was breathing more. Meanwhile, my heart pounded more, while my boat rocked uncontrollably upon the tumultuous water.

Suddenly, one of my oars clipped the top of the very next wave that rolled past me. When it did, my oar handle nearly flew from my hand, which caused my grip to reflexively clench. In that moment, I could no longer think of taking strokes. Not even one at a time. Instead, my entire being focused on one thing—not letting go of my oars.

As my fingers attempted to clench further, my boat reacted by lurching right, then left in a frenzy of confusion and disastrous strokes. Then, on the very next stroke, my boat pitched to the left again, causing not my oar this time but my left leg to graze the top of another wave as it rolled past. While my boat flopped and collected more water, I felt like a rag doll and was certain it was all over for me. My heart pounded further, not from exertion this time, but from the surge of adrenaline that washed over me as I anticipated the inevitable. I was about to flip!

But no. I miraculously recovered. Somehow, I did not flip.

As a result of my near disaster, two things followed. First, I was no longer anywhere near the lead. Second, upon seeing my first of several catastrophic strokes, the crew in charge of athlete safety zipped across the whitecaps in its inflatable rescue boat to my lane, then followed me for every stroke of the race from there forward.

When I finally crossed the finish line, I was two lanes away from my own due to the diagonal direction of the wind, and...I placed dead last. Two minutes behind the winner. Since two *seconds* is considered a large gap over the typical 2,000-meter race, dead last barely scratches the surface of just how badly I lost that day.

As soon as I had crossed the finish line, I stopped rowing and instead let myself drift. The wind blew me even more diagonally, while my boat rocked in a circular motion over the waves that continued to mercilessly roll. As I drifted, I attempted to unfurl the white-knuckled death grip I had on my oars. Between the wind, waves, and misty rain that began falling midway through the race, I had no choice but to focus less on taking strokes and more on hanging on. But with the more I hung on, my grip tightened until my left hand went numb. Now that the race was over, I finally felt I could return my focus to taking strokes.

It was overcast, windy, drizzling, and I had lost the race by more than a lot. But because I technically achieved aim number four, I grinned at my small win, then caught my breath, and rowed back to the dock without flipping. In doing so, I accomplished the fifth of my aims.

When James asked me later what I thought of the race, I told him that it was going okay until I almost fell out of the boat and that it was otherwise not all that bad. Especially if I took out all the “crabs,” those times when my oars unexpectedly got stuck underwater and caused me to bobble.

In the end, my time was at least two minutes slower than a

typical time. The conditions really were that rough. But despite my dead-last finish, I could not be disappointed because I crossed the finish line without flipping. After all, I had never completed more than one thousand meters at race speed before then. I had to start somewhere. Even if that meant dead last.

Back in college, I had been voted an NCAA All-American—twice. That meant a majority of college coaches considered me one of the fastest female college rowers at the time. Yet, for all the speed I gained in college, I did not row the single except on occasion at pre-elite camp. As a result, I had yet to develop sculling skills. So when it came to my first big race after college, especially in rough conditions, like what I braved in the Champ Single, I felt less like an All-American and more like a complete novice, whose main measure of success was to make it from one end of the racecourse to the other without flipping.

During our seven-hour drive back to New Jersey, my friends and I laughed and talked about how much fun we had in Canada, both racing and otherwise. I found humor in my experience in the single and eventually came to be proud of it for one simple reason: it helped me grow more confident because I overcame something incredibly intimidating. Which I was pleased to discover made me even hungrier to keep rowing.

For the duration of our seven-hour drive, I thought about how much I had learned during my first two and half years as a rower, and I imagined what the next level in rowing might bring. Based on my Champ Single race, I figured it would likely require me to be even more open, adaptable, and brave because the competition and conditions would undoubtedly be tougher and the days longer. At the next level, everyone would be more experienced, stronger, taller, and have faster erg times. So I was sure that far more unpredictable and challenging circumstances would lie ahead.

These were all things I imagined I would experience if Tom

invited me to train full time. But because he had not extended me such an invitation before he headed to Athens for the 2004 Olympics, my future was still uncertain.

By late August that year, all I knew was that the Canadian Henley was over and that Tom wanted to meet with those of us who had raced in Canada and at Non-Olympic Worlds upon his return. With that meeting still a few weeks away, I had no choice but to wait (again) and to hope for an invitation from Tom to move to New Jersey to train full time.

August 2004,

It ought to be interesting where I end up...In New Jersey? Training? Who knows? I hope I get invited. We shall see how it all plays out. Big changes are coming in one way or another!

A few weeks later, when we finally met with Tom, rather than another impromptu individual meeting, we instead met as a group in a tiny back room at the Lake Mercer boathouse.

Lake Mercer is technically an official Olympic training site. One that the national rowing team shares with four high school rowing programs. The name might sound majestic, but I can assure you, it is a no-frills place. Just a simple cinderblock building with not much inside. Even less outside. Only the basics of what you need to train for rowing. It can be bone-chillingly cold in the winter there due to its inefficient electric baseboard heaters. The kind of cold that makes sweatpants and a stocking cap a must for weightlifting. Definitely not the kind of luxury accommodation you might picture for a national team.

When we met, Tom walked us through the boathouse's cubicle maze of an office area to a conference table that hid in a tiny, one-windowed back room. Because the table itself nearly filled the entire closet of a meeting space, the less than ten of us (nine

or so rowers, plus Tom) filed in one by one, then shimmied along the wall until we each found our own empty seat.

The only thing missing from making it exactly like your typical morning office meeting was the coffee and donuts or bagels, and someone sitting awkwardly at a tiny side desk taking down the meeting minutes.

It was our first sit-down group meeting. We had no idea what we were in for. But when coaches like Tom invite you somewhere, you go.

As I settled into my seat and thought of what Tom might say, I became a little uneasy.

Just two years prior to our meeting that day, Tom had been the assistant national team coach. But in a turn of events, he took over the team as head coach in the middle of an Olympic cycle (the four-year time span between each Olympic Games). So, on the day of our awkward, backroom meeting, though he was already two years into being the head coach, he was only just starting his first full Olympic cycle in that role. As it turned out, it was not just us rowers who were on the cusp of something uncharted.

Tom began our meeting by explaining that things would proceed differently than they had in the past. He told us the training would be nothing short of “hard,” and that the core training group would be “small,” no longer thirty or so athletes. He also told us the rowing itself would be mostly in singles because rowing the single is an incredibly effective way to gain fitness and to learn how to row efficiently. The two things our little group needed to focus on.

The single helps with fitness because until you become technically efficient (better at the actual rowing part), the only thing you can do to make the boat go faster is push yourself as hard as humanly possible.

As for how the single helps with efficiency, well, when you are the only person in the boat, you and you alone create or destroy

speed. As a result, the boat itself teaches you technique. It allows you to slow down to your own pace because you do not have to account for working with others. You can simply focus on yourself and the water. And because the water is always changing, you learn to pay attention to everything you do. As long as you pay attention to what you are doing when the boat goes faster or slower, then keep doing whatever helps you go faster, you will likely become more efficient at the actual rowing part.

Following his overview of the new training scenario, Tom told us that anyone who hoped to earn a spot on the next summer's national team would need to become fast in the single and improve on the erg. Not just on 2Ks like in college, but on erg tests as short as ten seconds and as long as thirty minutes. Neither of which I had ever done before.

Tom rounded out his description of how things would operate by stating that those who were the fastest on the erg would earn more chances to row in the team's most important boats. And though erg times did not guarantee spots on the team, Tom did say they would increase one's chances. This all made sense to me. How could becoming faster in the single and also on the erg not prove beneficial?

Once he finished describing the grand experiment that the United States' main rowing training center was about to become, the moment of truth finally arrived. The answer to whether I would be invited to train full time.

One by one, Tom rounded the table asking exactly three questions. "Do you have a place to live? Do you have a job? Do you have something here in New Jersey other than rowing?" As each of us answered in our own way, he took note of each response without judgment.

While Tom worked his way around the table, and I thought of how incredibly talented each woman sitting there was, I glanced over at Molly and thought of something she had once said. It

held true so often that I came to trust it: “You cannot count on something until you are in the process of doing it.”

As Molly’s wise words ran through my mind, my thoughts worked their way through anticipation and worry, with waves of excitement. *Would Tom ask me the same three questions?* I wondered. Finally, Tom turned to me.

More than anything, I hoped Tom would ask me the same three questions he had just asked every other woman sitting at that table. But because I knew it was not guaranteed until he actually asked, I did not take that moment for granted. For all I knew, he could still change his mind.

“Shoop.” Tom paused, with a gaze that pierced every layer of my confidence. “Do you have a place to live?”

With one question, just seven words, Tom broke eight months’ worth of tension.

“I’m working on that.” I replied.

As my anxious chill melted, I could feel my grin attempting to burst forth in gratitude. I wanted to jump up and hug Tom right there. But instead, I restrained myself as I answered simply, then listened as Tom continued.

Susan, another starboard who had been at both pre-elite camps with me, had been asking me all summer to live with her. Tom had asked her at the start of summer to move to New Jersey to train full time. As she considered Tom’s early offer, she attempted to plan ahead by asking me to be her roommate. Trouble was, I had not been invited when she had been. Her 2K time was more than ten seconds faster than mine (a significant amount faster at that level), and she was two inches taller than me. Her early invite made complete sense.

Because I had not yet been invited when Susan first asked me to live with her, I could not tell her yes. But given the questions Tom was finally asking me, I planned to take Susan up on her offer to live together immediately after our meeting that day.



Susan and me during our first fall of full-time training.

Tom continued. “Do you have a job? Do you have something other than rowing? This is going to be hard, so you need to have something else going on. You need to be sure you can afford to

be here...I want you to be able to go out for Chinese food or whatever it is you do for fun every now and again if you want.”

That was how Tom always said things. While seriously explaining one concept, he drops something that seems like a complete joke. It was his way of making sure we were listening. It also made things clear and honest. His “Chinese food” comment was a small thing, but it hammered home his point.

Once Tom officially extended me the offer to train full time, I considered it to be my one and only chance, so I fudged it a little. In my typical nervously enthusiastic Shoop fashion, I fumbled over an awkwardly long response about how my parents knew some people who could help me with a job. I then fumbled over having “something else” going on. In reality, I was not sure I would be invited, so I had not solidified anything. So no, I did not actually have a job nor a place to live. But I had options. I would simply find a way to make it work.

I was excited by everything I learned from our meeting. I was going to be part of a team again, albeit a small one. One that would start with just seven rowers. Five from our pre-elite camp and two from that outside club we had raced against at Worlds Trials. Plus, two coaches—Tom and Laurel.

Laurel was one of the women from that year’s Olympic eight who, after taking silver at the 2004 Athens Games, retired and planned to start coaching alongside Tom. After some time to herself, of course. Once she joined us though, our group would be seven singles and two coaches on one small lake in New Jersey.

Within a few days of our meeting, I was back in Virginia ecstatic to be packing my things to officially move to New Jersey to train full time with the national team coaches. Because the internet was slow back then and there were no really efficient search engines, I spent a good deal of time going back and forth over the phone in search of a place to live. Once Susan and I

finally agreed on a place, we achieved the first of Tom's three stipulations. We had a home.

After that, I just needed to find a job. Hopefully, that would happen before mid-September, when our first practice of the new Olympic cycle was scheduled to take place.

Three whole weeks after the 2004 Olympic Games ended, the next Olympic cycle, the one aimed at building toward the 2008 Beijing Games, began. When it did, it marked an opportunity to take yet another step.