

Tough Enough to Make the Difference

When I arrived at Stanford in the fall of 1987, I had no organized sports experience under my belt, other than a brief foray into basketball in 8th grade. But my roommate turned out to be a teen rowing star. She had been on the US Junior Nationals Boat in high school; she was 5'10", strong and athletic.



Pinned all over campus were posters with a photo of women rowing in a shell and the words "Come try out for Stanford Women's Crew. Must be 5'9" or tough enough to make the difference."

Audrey brought one of these posters back to the dorm and handed it to me. "You should try out," she said.

"But I'm 5'6" and I've never rowed before," I said. "I'm not sure I even knew it was a thing until I met you."

Audrey fixed me with her signature stare, unblinking. (I would in later years find that stare infuriating and intimidating, but that day it was merely contemplative.) "You're tough enough to make the difference," she said.

Somehow, it turns out that I was.

Making the novice crew team was one of the luckiest breaks of my life; crew was, without a doubt, the most seminal aspect of my undergraduate education. When I think of Stanford, I think of crew.

Like any group working toward a common goal under intense conditions, my teammates and I

bonded quickly and abidingly. The very logistics of rowing seemed designed to foster camaraderie. Our friendship was forged on the fires of a common struggle: the challenge of reconciling the nocturnal possibilities for a college freshman with the early morning practices required by Stanford Crew.

We caught the crew bus at 5:30am Monday through Saturday, to take advantage of the smooth water on the bay. Waking at a time precisely calculated to give us the maximum amount of sleep and still make it to the bus seconds before it departed (5:09am for Audrey and me), we'd bike down to the athletic center—a ride that would be in the dark for much of the year—ghosting past quiet dorms where cafeteria staff were the only ones moving, a few stragglers staggering home from a party, or the occasional early morning jogger.



We owned the campus in those predawn hours. Eucalyptus spiked the air, fountains whispered in illuminated pools, the sky paled from black to gray— all for us, it seemed. At times we'd coast in silence, at others we'd shout just to hear our voices echo off the darkened buildings. Sometimes we'd get a shout in reply and we'd laugh in delight. Stepping into the warm bus for the 20-minute ride to the boathouse at Redwood City, we'd spill our stories of families, of classes, of boys and girls, of adventures we'd had and ones we imagined still lay ahead. In the cocoon of that bus, we traded pieces of who we were, forming the foundation of what we didn't yet know would turn into enduring friendships.



Crew was more than a sport; it was an identity, a *raison d'être*, a link to Stanford as strong as any other we created that year. We were the girls who went to bed at 9pm; we were the girls who sat in lectures picking at the calluses on our palms; we were the girls in 8am classes, straight off the crew bus, our clothes still salty and damp from a morning on the water; we were the girls high on the endorphins of sport and friendship, high on the sense of superiority that comes from doing more before breakfast than some people do all day.

In our first big race, in San Diego, we were in last place for the first 1500 meters. (Our coach later told us she had expected us to do poorly, but not that poorly.) And then something happened. Our coxswain talked to us as she always had, her words seeming to dip beneath the water and elevate us all, and suddenly the rowing was effortless. We were a machine, moving in unison, legs in sync, breathing ragged, blades knifing into the water simultaneously. The boat skimmed across the water as we passed the 5th boat, the 4th boat, and so on, our cox counting off seats as we overtook each boat, until we shot past the lead boat and won the race by nearly a boat length.

The feeling was incredible—not the feeling of winning (although that was undeniably satisfying) but the feeling of making the boat go that fast. In some ways this feeling defied explanation, so we mostly didn't try to define it. Knowing that we all felt it —and understood what it took to make it happen again and again—that was enough.

