

Black Rowers Carve Space in A Historically White Sport

By Jalissa Breeland

Stretched across 130 miles, the Schuylkill River experiences a shift through the rowing world. Historically dominated by white athletes and institutions, the sport has reflected the barriers that have limited access and opportunities for Black athletes.

But for those who got to experience the oars paddling in the river for the first time like Howard Fulcher, the journey to represent Black rowers became more personal.

On a Saturday in May 1964, Fulcher made history alongside 12 others at Howard University, as the first all-Black crew team in the United States.

"It gave me confidence and let me know that things can be accomplished that seem impossible or not even realistic at the time," Fulcher said. "Nobody went to [Howard University] thinking about joining the crew team; it was either football or basketball."

The [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) desegregated public spaces, including swimming pools and beaches. Since then, the crew team was able to freely and openly use these entities.

"We finally had the opportunity to learn how to swim," Fulcher said. "The coach demanded we do it in case something happened, and accidents do happen."

Howard Ware, a Howard University alumnus who played a pivotal role in establishing the crew team as the coach and main benefactor, ignored the barriers keeping Black athletes out of the sport.

According to an [Ebony Magazine](#) feature of the team, Ware made it a goal to keep Black athletes in a space where not a lot of people looked like him.

"Even if I have to pay for it myself," he said, "they will have a rowing team at Howard."

"He saw that all the teams in the country were Caucasian," Fulcher said. "He said 'Well, why can't we do that?'"

Convincing the university to trial run the crew team into attaining varsity status, Ware donated his own money to buy the basics needed to race.

Fulcher and his team made their way to a [Dad Vail Regatta](#), an intercollegiate event on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia.

Six decades later, the Philadelphia Scholastic Rowing Association (PSRA) would host its [Flick-Horvat Regatta](#). This time around, the participants looked a bit different.

"The boys and girls are split 50/50," said PSRA President, Leslie Pfeil. "It isn't a sport dominated by white people anymore. There are many backgrounds here."

Philadelphia's BLJ Community Rowing, the only black-owned rowing club in America, is heavily involved within the Black community. Aligning with their mission statement, "We are passionate about providing access to the elite sport of rowing by removing boundaries and creating opportunities," their initiative is to foster Black athletes and their experiences.

"We remove the financial hurdles," founder and head coach of BLJ, Brannon Johnson, said. "Then we remove the boundaries. Our kids row absolutely free."

Philadelphia, among many major cities, homes [69%](#) of the city's low-income households, ranging below \$30,000 per year. However, 46% of Black households are cost-burdened.

"One of my kids didn't have food at home," Johnson shared. "It's like as a Black coach I know that you don't have food at home, but I know what this sport is going to give you because you're training for a full scholarship to college. [They] still have to show up when it's not okay."

The sport once defined by exclusion is now slowly being shaped into inclusion.