
The Hillsdales in England

by
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In the summer of 1882, four members of the Hillsdale, Michigan, Rowing Club sailed to England to take part in the summer regattas there. The crew members were Captain C. W. Terwilliger, L. F. Beckhardt, H. P. Mead, and E. B. Van Valkenburgh. The Hillsdales had developed an unusual style of rowing in which they relied almost completely on the work of the arms. Using this style, they had won the national championship for four-oared shells three years in a row, and they had never been beaten. Now they hoped to test their skills against the finest oarsmen in Britain.

Amateur rowing had become very popular by the 1870s clubs had been started all over the country. These clubs were separate from those at colleges and universities, and the two types of clubs did not compete with one another. In 1872, the National Association of Amateur Oarsmen (N.A.A.O) was established to set the standards for amateur rowing. The Association's definition of an amateur excluded anyone who had raced for money or who earned his livelihood through athletics. The Association in January, 1882, chose the Hillsdales as the crew to go to England. Amateur crews had rowed in England in earlier years and some of the them had run into difficulties, especially at the Henley Regatta. Henley rules required foreign crews to register much earlier than English crews, and barred persons who had ever worked as a mechanic, artisan, or laborer. The Henley committee had charged that some of the members of American crews were laborers or professionals and this action had aroused ill-feeling. The N.A.A.O. forbade the Hillsdales to enter the Henley regatta, but the association did expect that the Michigan team would participate in all the other English regattas. The crew looked forward to a summer of racing. After arriving in England in June, 1882, the Hillsdales learned that a group of English oarsmen had recently established the Amateur Rowing Association - an organization that was apparently set up primarily to stop the unbeatable Americans. The Association adopted rules similar to those used at Henley and decided that the Hillsdales, because of "vague descriptions" of their occupations, could not be considered as amateurs. The Hillsdales now found themselves barred from most English regattas. They won a race at the Marlow regatta in early July, but only the host team competed against them. The other crews, fearing the wrath of the Amateur Rowing Association, withdrew. The Hillsdales spent the rest of

the summer practicing and trying to get their amateur standing accepted. Most of the English press and all of the American sporting papers supported them. At an August meeting, 150 English oarsmen supported the Michigan men and denounced the British Association.

Finally, in late August, a cable arrived from the Yale University crew, certifying the amateur status of the Hillsdales, and the Amateur Rowing Association withdrew its objections. A race between the Thames Rowing Club (the champions of Henley) was arranged for September 15. The crews would row from Putney to Mortlake on the Thames, a distance of 4 1/4 miles, and a long distance for the Americans who were accustomed to rowing a 1 1/4 mile course. A large crowd lined the banks of the Thames on race day. The Hillsdales took a good lead but soon turned to avoid a barge and fouled the Englishmen. The Americans regained the lead and kept it for half the race until their captain's sliding seat broke and the crew was forced to stop. The Thames crew swept into the lead and won by five lengths, with the Hillsdales fourteen seconds behind them. Even without the disaster of the broken seat, the Hillsdales would have lost the race because of their foul. They hoped for a second race but failed to get one. The race results were inconclusive. American papers claimed that the Hillsdales were still the stronger crew while the British press applauded the Thames club and some claimed that the Americans had deliberately fouled their opponents. The question of the superiority of English or American rowing styles was not satisfactorily decided. Because of the poor treatment received by the Hillsdales during their summer in England, Americans remained angry at English rowing rules for many years. A few Americans rowed singles at English regattas, but no American crew was sent to England for a quarter of a century. The Hillsdales, who never raced again, had won fame for themselves. for their home town, and had stirred up American sportsmen against the undemocratic restrictions of English clubs.



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