

SIX MONTHS WITH A UNIVERSITY CREW.

BY RALPH D. PAINE.

“**S**LOW UP, slow up—steady, all together—heave—heave! Watch your feather, Bow; you’re behind, Five. Only a few strokes to the finish—show your sand and give her ten good ones. Now, one—two—three—four—heave—steady—seven—eight—lift her, everybody! V-a-a-s-t!”

It is the last pull on time over the four-mile course before the race. Dusk is deepening into night under the hilly bank where the finish flag flies. On this last mile the Thames lies black and glassy in the twilight hush. Close in shore the straining, dripping shell leaps three feet further with every stroke at this last appeal of the hoarse little coxswain. Eight brown, aching backs stiffen up with desperate “sand”; the stroke goes up one, two points without a flaw, and through every man there surges the thrill of mad excitement and fire that only an old oarsman knows. This swing and leap for the finish is like the free racing stride of the greyhound.

Half a mile away in the darkness a steam launch is tearing up the channel with a cloud of sparks eddying from her stack, carrying every pound of steam that the law allows. Two weather-beaten, stern-faced coaches stand on her bow with stop-watches in hand. The crew is lost in the dusk, but the voice of the coxswain comes clear across the water and echoes from the hills. As the listeners catch the call for the last “ten,” even these veterans are a bit nervous, and they follow the jerky second hands with a quickening of the pulse, until the long deep “vast” booms across the water to their ears, and “click” go the watches. “The four miles in twenty minutes, forty-six seconds; mighty well rowed, though the conditions are great,” says the stout, broad-shouldered man who evolved the “Cook stroke.” The two smile and beam gently until the click of locks and the regular swash, swash of oars is heard, and the eight swing across the bow headed for the quarters. Then they cease to smile, and frown as from discouraged hearts and broken hopes, in accordance with established coaching etiquette.

The eight steaming athletes sweep the shell easily and faultlessly over to the float at Gales Ferry, tired as few men

ever feel weariness, but still rowing with pride and power, for they know that their work has been good, and no man wants more than that.

Three days later another four-mile pull brings victory and reward for toil. This is the only part of a rowing man’s career of which the public knows anything—this brilliant climax of half a year’s daily work and sacrifice. Occasionally a reporter wanders into crew quarters and gathers some necessarily vague ideas on training and rowing. Even then he sees much that is picturesque and interesting, and but little of the monotony and grind.

A championship Yale or Harvard crew is the most perfect exhibit of trained muscular skill and delicacy, with complete harmony of interaction, that is evolved from athletic competition in this country. The preparation for the twenty minutes of racing at New London in June begins in the previous Autumn with light rowing and exercise for the new recruits. Active work “for the season” does not start until the term opens early in January.

Usually about forty men respond to the first call of the captain. There are the veterans of the year before who will form the nucleus of the eight—*blasé* young men with long-visored blue caps, and sweaters crested with a big Y over their shoulders. Next in point of promise are the members of the freshmen crew of the Spring before, from which some good material is usually hammered out. When there are a few “hangovers” who have tried before, and two or three green candidates who have the strength and brains to make them worthy of careful coaching. The saddest sight to a knowing observer is the squad of freshmen, buoyant and hopeful, who intend “to make the crew for the sake of the folks.” They come in assorted sizes, some of them so willowy that when pronounced too light to row they promptly try for the coxswainship, bound to be somewhere in the race.

The first week of training is a rheumatic nightmare even for the old men. Relaxed muscles stiffen and apparently warp in hard knots from the unaccustomed exercise. The work of these first few days is therefore made light, but by

the end of the first fortnight the daily programme leaves tender freshmen hanging exhausted on fence pickets far out in Fair Haven. It is as follows:

The squad reports in the dressing-room of the gymnasium at four o'clock in the afternoon. They put on heavy woolen jerseys, a couple of sweaters, long stockings and rowing tights, and expose an expanse of bare knee to be in good form. A long residence in New Haven is necessary to accustom one's self to the startling spectacle made by one of the Yale teams bowling along the streets. Through the city and out into the snowy country the line winds at a brisk trot. The air is bracing, and after the first four miles becomes precious indeed to the laggards whose lungs are hard pressed. There are usually one or two broad-beamed youths whom Nature never intended to run, and the trail along a block behind, amid prodigious puffing, grunting and stumbling. A few of these six and eight mile spins weed out the weakly candidates without the reed of a mandate from the captain. They return from the jaunt in a damp and wilted condition, and adjourn to the exercising floor of the gymnasium. This means more tears for the unfortunate freshmen.

A series of movements for developing the arms, back and legs is led by the captain. First with the arms above the head, the men bend back *à la serpentine*, and then forward, bringing the hands down until they touch the floor, with the back but not the knees bent. This is a favorite feat in parlor entertaining, and the young man who can touch his fingers to the floor with his knees straight receives a volley of feminine applause. But try, if you please, doing this trick seventy-five times, as rapidly as you can, away up and down, after a little jog of half-a-dozen miles, and with the bulk of your work still ahead of you. Next stand erect and squat as low as possible, then straighten again, down and up, forty times per minute for two minutes. If you still thirst for work lie on the floor with your hands clasped beneath you, and keeping the legs perfectly straight, raise them to the perpendicular and let them down again to the floor seventy-five times.

All this is the preparation for the afternoon row in the tank, which as an instrument of torture should be shown

with the Nuremburg treasures. In this contrivance the boat remains still, and the water is rowed by. You never get anywhere after the most tremendous effort, and may gain much the same effect by raising lustily at your boot-straps. The tank is about forty feet long and twenty-three wide, divided in the middle by a narrow box, rigged with eight out-riggers and sliding seats like a racing shell. There is about two feet of extraordinarily dense water in the tank, and the sweep of the oars forces the current round and round in each side, separated by the boat in the middle. Each end of the tank is semi-circular, in order to facilitate the sweep of the current which flows down with the wash of the oars, up inside of the blades, round the curve and down again with the oars in perpetual motion. A small section is cut out of the oar blades in order to lessen the drag of the water. A remarkable improvement was one day noticed in the rowing of a freshman candidate. He tore his oar through the water with such a dash and vigor that he was usually several strokes ahead of his laboring fellows. A quiet investigation on the part of the captain revealed that the intelligent freshman had sought the tank under cover of darkness and whittled out the hole in his blade until he might as well have been rowing with a picture frame.

Not more than eighteen strokes per minute can be rowed in the tank, and while the prime principles of blade and body work are taught, the slowness of motion makes oarsmen lifeless and awkward when they get on the water. About an hour is spent in the tank, rowing stretches of from ten to twenty minutes. The coach or captain, if he has no veteran adviser with him, walks, and sometimes prances, along the edge of the tank and talks earnestly and vividly to individual and eight.

For two days of the Junior Promenade week in January the room is crowded with "Prom" girls and their escorts. This causes an alarming expansion of the jersey chest measures of the proud and callow neophyte, but the veteran is thoroughly bored by this intrusion in business hours. So closely are the visitors packed along the edges that a Baltimore belle was once crowded into the surging waters. The oarsmen had often debated their line of action

in the event of such a catastrophe, and as one man they arose, clasped their hands above their heads and dove fearlessly into the green depths, two feet in the middle. They made a thoroughly artistic rescue and furnished a genuine "tank drama." Discipline, when in the boat, however, is extremely rigid, and in a trained crew a man never removes his eyes from the back of the man in front of him however distracting outside events may be.

That this afternoon's work is severe is shown by the loss of weight. In the two hours of daily exercise the average loss is four pounds, and some men have lost a daily average of seven pounds in this short time. Food and sleep return nearly all of this weight in twenty-four hours.

When the ice breaks up on the harbor late in February, the long runs and the indoor rowing end, and the heavy working barge is gotten out. The first day on the water is an epoch-making event in the season's annals. It is more than likely that the wind is freezing cold and the spray turns to ice whenever it strikes oar, brace, or those weather-beaten bare knees. The coach, metamorphosed by sweaters into a Polar bear, sits in the coxswain's seat, and the eight men who are picked as the "first crew" take the old barge up the river for a couple of miles, making very bad work of it after the staid and pacific tank. Perhaps, as has happened more than once, a submerged oyster stake rips the boat's bottom, and the shivering castaways have to shoulder their oars, splash ashore, break the thin ice beyond the channel and run two or three miles to the boathouse. But one seldom catches a cold at this sort of a matinee, and it is rather jolly to talk about after it is over.

With the first of March the training table is started. For the next four months the men are ordered never to 'smoke or eat or *drink anything at any time except at the training table, and to go to bed as early as half after ten every night. A dozen oarsmen are now left after two months of a struggle for survival. Ten of these will be finally taken to New London, the eight and two substitutes. The training fare is no longer raw beef and dry bread as in the old days, and a pleasant variety of muscle-making food is provided in

decidedly wholesale quantities, Fruit vegetables, oatmeal, toast, mutton, beef, chicken, eggs, oatmeal water and milk are consumed in a way that would fatally shock a New Haven landlady.

The social life of the season begins with the training table. Ten thoroughly manly fellows, the pick of a great university for intelligence, pluck and strength, thrown together and bound by the strongest ties of common toil and a common aim, could not fail to get much that is good and pleasant out of such communion.

During the Easter vacation the sluggish barge is exchanged for the skittish racing shell. Now every stroke counts for Harvard. The old coaches begin to flock back, and until the end there will be an ex-captain, who has the knack of teaching what he has learned, perched on the bow of the fast steam launch, every afternoon, rain or shine, calm or blow. The pleasure of rowing is first tasted in these balmy Spring days. The wind often comes fresh from the Sound in the early afternoon and the shell does not leave the boathouse until sunset brings a calm. So the oarsmen stretch out on the float in the sunshine, and doze and tan and lazily talk shop. The first month of rowing in the shell is taken up in coaxing the fractious creature to be steady on its bottom. This hollow paper dish is sixty feet long and only twenty-four inches wide, and the most delicate handling of the twelve-foot oars and the eight heavy bodies is required to bring harmony and speed. There are sixty odd things one can do wrong in rowing a stroke, and the wobble of a knee, the "cocking" of a blade or the slightest break in time will destroy the rhythm of the swing and set things at sixes and sevens. Rowing has been compared in delicacy of touch and harmony of action to the response of a well-trained orchestra to the baton of the leader.

In May the four-mile pulls over the harbor course on time show first what the crew is doing. About twice a week this long course is rowed over and on the other days eight or ten miles is covered in stretches, with perhaps a mile sprint against the watch.

May slips away and June brings New London. By the second week of the month the crew has moved up to its quarters on the Thames, coaches, shells,

and household brigade of waiters, cooks and camp followers. There are three weeks before the race, and the crimson flag has been flying from the Harvard quarters at Red Top for a full week. Gales Ferry, where the blue banner floats all day, is five miles from New London—a sleepy country town which wakens for only two weeks of the year. The postmaster, and owner of the house wherein the pride of Yale is sheltered, is Captain Latham Brown, an ancient mariner whose whiskers are surprisingly black every Sunday and progressively dingy through the week. High on a bluff over the shining stretch of river the salty breezes from the Sound keep the shady piazzas cool even in the middle of the hot June days. On a lawn above the river is stretched a big tent, which is the lounging ground through the day and evening for crew and coaches. For the first week examinations make life a burden. A tutor from New Haven lives in the quarters and conducts his sessions whenever the coaches let their charges off. Studying is nothing less than torment with the sleepy sounds and languorous airs of Summer all around, and long, hard pulls on the water morning and afternoon. The merciful faculty realizes this, and the fatal blue pencil passes lightly over the New London papers.

One day's routine is the story of all the rest. "Ha' pas' six, captain!" shouts the darky waiter in the first bedroom he enters. "Ha' pas' six, number seben!" in the next, and so on until the heavy-headed household is in action. In ten minutes the cheery voice of the captain shouts, "All ready!" and in white flannels and sweaters the squad tumbles downstairs and out into the cool, sweet air of the early June morning. As the dozen men stride up the country road the pleasure of living comes to them with bracing lungfulls of morning air and the pervasive vigor of their physical condition: clear heads, muscles that stand out clean and beautiful under skins burnt black, and young blood running free after ten hours of dreamless slumber. Across the dewy sheep pasture, down by the shore and up the grassy lane the captain leads the way back to the quarters—and breakfast. There is a loafing time now until ten o'clock, while one of the coaches takes a couple of luckless wights out in the

pair-oared tub and makes them paddle in circles until they get the "catch" just right, or smooth out some fault in the finish.

As soon as the launch comes puffing back from New London with provisions and mail the half dozen coaches tumble on her bow and the eight get out for the morning work. The sun has furnished tan jerseys for the shell load, and shirts would be a burden. "Hold her starboard, in port—in starboard. Shove off! Ready, first four, row, vast, all ready—row! Up! Up!" and up the river shoots the eight, while the Harvard substitutes scurry down to their float and are soon pulling madly after their legitimate prey.

Only after much maneuvering can one eight get on the water without drawing the rival "subs" to the spot with field-glass and stop-watches. A masterly stroke of diplomacy occasionally baffles this espionage. One afternoon two seasons ago the Yale freshmen were dressed in Y shirts and university caps and sent over the first mile of the course. The Crimson "subs" chased them madly, while the *bono-fide* university crew sneaked up the river and rowed measured distances without restraint. During that same week the Yale coaches were anxious to send the crew over the four-mile course without allowing Harvard to catch the time. The conditions were perfect in the late afternoon, but the substitutes from Red Top lay off Gales Ferry and calmly waited for the Yale eight. At the usual hour the Dark Blue crew swung its shell into the water and pulled up the river, away from the course. At an easy stroke they jogged up for two miles and down again, then paddled up to the float and carried the shell into the boathouse. Presently a row of white figures ran to the edge of the float, splashed buckets of water on each other, and ostentatiously fought for towels. The captain sang out, "Hurry up for supper, fellows!" and the spies paddled down to Red Top and put up their boat. Half an hour later the Yale shell shot out across the river into the shadows of the other shore, and was off down the course—for the fastest time of the season, without evoking a sign of life at the Harvard quarters.

The thermometer is in the nineties in the shade, but the barebacked, bare-

legged oarsmen are hardened to all sorts of weather, and even a headache is a rarity. Two hours later, after six or eight miles of short stretches, the eight men stagger up the bank and throw themselves down under the tent to rest until lunch at one o'clock arouses them. From two until five the launch carries the crew for a sail down the river, out into the breezy Sound, with a stop at New London, and then up the river again for the hard pull of the day. This time there is little individual coaching, and the experts in the launch watch the crew as a unit or machine. There is hardly a ripple on the Thames, and one may see and know good rowing now even if his eye is unskilled in the finer points. After a mile "to get shaken together," the coxswain gives the word for a long stretch, and the captain of the launch pulls the "jingle bell" for full speed ahead. The eight blades flash out of the water so that from behind only one oar can be seen on each side. They go back, fast at first, then coming down to the water until, with the lightning lift of shoulder and arm, they grip the water clean and sharp, while eight backs swing up as one and eight pairs of thighs finish up the stroke. With bodies erect and heads up the handles come in easily and gracefully with the bending of the arm, then shoot away with lightning speed. The backs sway ever rhythmically, the slides start with the quick jerk of the toes and then slow down until just as arms and back are getting tense for the next stroke this mass of fourteen hundred weight stops and starts back so delicately that the sensitive shell feels no shock and shoots along between strokes without stop or jar. Thirty-four times a minute those eight men combine this terrific lift and heave, this delicate finish, lightning recover, and slow, careful slide action, all as one man, even when heads are throbbing and back and lungs strained and wearied until each stroke is agony. Not an oar splashes the surface for three miles; the shell runs as easily as a barge, and the rhythmic swing and leap of each stroke is the poetry of motion. The coaches have little to say and the few remaining days before the race will be used only to keep the present form. There is little left of the day when the bath and supper are over at eight o'clock.

In the old-fashioned parlor an ex-captain of a decade back sits at the tinkly piano and sings "Jolly Boating Weather" in a mellow tenor, while the oarsmen shout the chorus lustily. The substitutes tell alarming tales of the day's work of the Harvard crew, and the captain and coaches whisper in the dining-room over the times made by the rivals in the afternoon. Nine o'clock is welcomed, and at the captain's "All ready!" the white-clad company files out into the road and stalks specter fashion up the road in a long line. This bedtime walk is only a mile, and the night air, laden with the odor of the hay fields and hedge roses, is a wonderful sleeping potion. Just beyond the country cemetery and the little white church, to which the crew men stroll on Sunday mornings, the procession turns homeward and to sweet oblivion. Thus the three weeks go by and the only variation of the routine is the call of ceremony upon the neighbors at Red Top.

It is the turn of Yale to make this annual call, and on the Tuesday afternoon before the race which is rowed on Friday the sons of Eli array themselves stunningly. White flannels with a blue monogram on coat pocket and cap and white Y sweaters are the dress uniform. The launch bears them to the enemy's camp, and the Harvard men receive them in crimson jackets with much cordiality.

The conversation is rather desultory, heightened by an attempt to match the coxswains for a bantam-weight contest. Rowing topics are carefully avoided, and neither party deeply grieves when the visit ends.

The last night's walk and the last night's sleep are sure to linger in the memory. There begins to be an unwonted quietness about the house in the evening, and men are prone to absent-mindedness and general restlessness. Even the veteran of three races tosses for a couple of hours before going to sleep, and wakes at frequent intervals until morning. The man who must row his first race goes over every mile of the struggle again and again until he is all of a fever, and finally sleeps by fits and starts. The race is to be rowed at five o'clock in the afternoon, but the attack on the breakfast is usually light, and lunch is treated very gently indeed. In the morning the eight get out and

practice a few starts, and through the long afternoon they try to read, decide the race by throwing dice, and play "penny-ante" with feverish absorption. All the coaches go down to New London after lunch to board steamers, and the quarters are still and lonely. At half-past four the thin-faced, bright-eyed athletes are dressed, sitting in a bunch on the float, waiting for the referee's whistle over at the start. They are not so nervous now, and sing "Jolly Boating Weather" until the captain tells them to save their wind. The racing shell, used only three times, its bottom pot-leaded, is brought out after three shrill toots echo from the referee's boat. The stern-faced captain calls the men into the boathouse and simply says, "If you are licked, I want you to know that I feel that every man has done his best—you can't do any more. Get your oars." Mrs. Brown throws an old shoe from the bluff for luck, and the shell is shoved off.

Up here all is still and hushed, while three miles down the river thirty thousand people are tumultuously waiting to see that wisp of a shell. There is the familiar swing and power to the stroke as the Yale eight pull easily across the river to the start, and this brings nerve and confidence. They watch the Harvard boat come over, and notice that there is ragged blade work and an uneven swing. This steadies them too, until the paddle alongside for the start, and see for the first time that the Harvard men look far stronger and more business-like than their own eight. One look at the knotted muscles and heavy bodies of their rivals, and the gorgeous observation train winds up and stops right abreast of the waiting crews. Only a glance, and then the referee from his launch shouts, "Harvard, are you ready?" There is no reply, and before he can say "Yale," there flashes through each man's mind the things he must think of. Number Five says to himself, "Watch your time, start your slide, and keep your blade down," and then comes the start.

"Gentlemen, are you ready? Go!" There is a frantic plunge and shower of spray as the oars dig, dig, and the two shells are under way—down that four miles that is the end of it all. In the Yale boat the men are not going through the complicated mental gymnastics so

often imputed to the oarsman's mind in a race. Every man has his eyes on the neck of the man in front of him, and through his head is running the refrain of the faults that he must watch, every stroke, "slow, slow, *heave, heave*, hands out quicker, don't drop over." Harvard has a lead of half a boat length, but after the first twenty strokes Number Five can see out of the tail of his eye the Harvard coxswain slowly drawing up; the eight men go by one by one and Yale has taken the lead. The Yale men are working well together, and slowly they draw away until at the Navy Yard dock, two miles down, there are two good lengths between them. Out in the stream the roar of cheers from the observation train is unheard, and the air is as still as in a practice pull. The leaders can begin to think of victory, for rowing is a matter of instinct now, as the shell flies through the long lane of yachts and steamers, where the air is dense with cannon smoke. Number Five begins to think of the speech which he will make at the banquet in New Haven to-night, and is conscious that he never felt so happy in his life. Aching backs are unnoticed, although every stroke is pulled for life to break the four-mile record if possible. The word is passed from stern to bow to raise the stroke for the final spurt, and up it goes. "Vast!" yells the coxswain, as the pier of the railroad bridge flies by, and eight half-naked, dripping, crazy men turn and hug each other, and yell, at great danger of upsetting the shell. Then comes the triumphal return to New Haven, the procession, the fireworks, the banquet and speeches, and the congratulations that come pleasantly along all through the summer. The victors alone stop to cheer the splendid pluck of the beaten crew which staggers across the line, every man rowing his best. With breaking hearts they gasp, "Rah, rah, rah! rah, rah, rah! rah, rah, rah, Yale!" Numbers Five and Three sway and grow faint for a minute, and then they creep almost unnoticed up the Thames to their quarters.

Joy so keen and sorrow so bitter while they last are not often felt by men under circumstances so alike, but so different. A twenty-minute test for six months of toil and self-sacrifice, and all is over until another year.