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150 Years of Women at Berkeley

Cal Women's Crew Pre-Title IX

BY KARL DRLICA, *Cal Women's Rowing Coach 1967-69*

Background

Although men's crew had been popular since the late 1800s, women's rowing was informal, limited to a few venues where the focus was on exercise. These early groups generally competed internally; organized interclub racing was uncommon. That was not by accident. Women were seen by their male colleagues as taking up valuable rowing space, and the women were deemed not suitably serious. By the early 1960s, the Women's Movement in Philadelphia generated a male backlash that included armed intimidation, boarding up a women's restroom, and stealing boat parts. Even as late as 1970 a national physical education association took a protectionist attitude, opposing "cut-throat" varsity competition for young women. At some colleges, protectionism extended to women students being locked up at night. American society gave no support to competitive women's rowing: women could blush but not sweat.



Lake Merritt, Oakland, California, where the first Cal Women's Crews rowed. The longest dimension is 1000m, long enough for women's races of the 1960s and 1970s.

Within an atmosphere of disapproval, women's competitive rowing emerged in Philadelphia and at two West Coast centers, Oakland and Seattle. In Oakland, women's rowing was spearheaded by Ed Lickiss (Lake Merritt Rowing Club); in Seattle the leader was Ted Nash (Lake Washington Rowing Club). After an Oakland regatta in 1963, Lickiss, Nash, and Philadelphia's Joan Iverson decided to promote

women's competitive rowing by forming the National Women's Rowing Association (NWRA). A year later, Oregon State University women, led by Astrid Hancock, formed an intercollegiate crew (Oregon State had been active since 1952 at the intramural level). Cal Women's Crew started in 1965.

Art Sachs (Coach, 1965-67)

In the fall of 1965, Art Sachs, a former Cornell oarsman, moved from Seattle to Berkeley to attend optometry school. He joined the Lake Merritt Rowing Club to gain access to racing shells, and he then advertised for women rowers in the Daily Californian, the student newspaper for the Berkeley campus of the University of California. About twenty women students turned out. As the new crew at Lake Merritt, Cal had the lowest priority for access to racing shells. Nevertheless, Sachs soon had his crew in four-oared shells.



Art Sachs (1967) & Karl Drlica (1965)

After a few weeks, Sachs added Karl Drlica as his assistant. Drlica, a former oarsman at Oregon State University, was also a graduate student at the Berkeley campus. Their rowing program was distinguished by physical training off the water: they thought that the Cal women could win races against more experienced crews by being in better physical condition.

Sachs and Drlica emphasized after-practice running, sit-ups, push-ups, and sets of supine pull-ups (a broom handle was set across a pair of chairs as a pull-up bar). Often conditioning made up for the lack of experience.

Sachs tried to obtain official recognition from the University of California, but he failed. Perhaps it was his attitude: his motto was "We row to race; we race to win." He was promoting varsity-level competition when sweating by young women was actively discouraged. Perhaps campus turmoil contributed: in the late 60s, anti-war demonstrations and marches frequently distracted administrators. The result was that Cal Women's Crew could not use



the term "University of California." But the student newspaper was happy to print articles about races, and the men's rowing coaches acknowledged the existence of the women's crew (not all were happy that the women were rowing). Since the Cal women did not share equipment, facilities, or water with the Cal men, the women generally ignored negative comments.

Racing was primarily against West Coast crews: Lake Merritt Rowing Club (largely Mills College), Oregon State University, and Lake Washington Rowing Club. In 1966 the crew traveled to the Corvallis Regatta and the first National Women's Rowing Association Championship Regatta in Seattle. Race results were not carefully tabulated, but at the NWRA regatta the Cal women placed second in the pair without cox and third in the four-oared event. In 1967, the NWRA regatta was held in Oakland; Cal women placed second in the pair without coxswain, a deck-length out of first.



Cal Women's Crew, 1967

Left to right: Chris R., Pat S., Sydney S., Ilene W., Carol S.



Ed Lickiss, an early leader in women's rowing (1967)



Cal Women's Crew at the Lake Merritt dock

True to the spirit of beginning rowing programs, the crew raised travel money any way it could. For example, one woman arranged mortuary tours for which each attendee was paid a dollar. While this may seem to be a paltry sum, gasoline for a round trip to race Oregon State cost only \$20.

Sachs and Drlica were active in fundraising, mainly through paper recycling. The coaches and crew members would make late-night visits to Berkeley computer labs looking for used punch cards to sell as expensive wastepaper. In the 1960s, computer centers used thousands of punch cards daily and threw them away. Crew members would enter computer rooms as if they belonged, working past graduate students to reach the garbage cans. There they found piles of cards, usually as individual pieces about three inches wide and eight inches long. They separated the cards from dead cigarette butts and half-full cups of stale coffee before tossing them into the cardboard boxes they carried. They never passed up a dumpster outside the centers.

On a good night the crew filled the trunk of Drlica's '57 Chevy and drove the cards to Aquatic Park in Berkeley where Sachs had built a shed (he hoped to eventually relocate the Cal crew to this lagoon next to the I-80 freeway). After a few weeks of night-time collections, Sachs would borrow a pickup truck from a local construction company, move the cards to a recycling center in East Oakland, and sell them, probably for a few cents a pound.

While Sachs was striving to beat Ed Lickiss and Mills College, another intense rivalry developed between the women's crews from Lake Washington and Lake Merritt. The intensity increased when in 1965 a Lake Merritt crew traveled to Philadelphia, beat the Philadelphia crew, and claimed to be national women's champion. The Seattle group disputed the claim, saying that the race wasn't a sanctioned regatta and certainly not a national championship without their participation. They then proposed to host a championship regatta in the spring of 1966, with a follow-up regatta in Oakland in 1967.

To bring structure to women's rowing and provide sanctioned regattas, Sachs and Coach Karl Drlica Sr., rowing coach at Oregon State and father of Cal Women's coach, organized a constitutional convention in Corvallis (February, 1966). Ted Nash had been the spokesman for the women at the men's national rowing association, and he prepared many parts of the women's constitution. Racing categories, weight limitations, and regatta sites were among the issues raised. Agreement was readily reached. The group then decided that all officers of the NWRA would be women: the time had come for men to step back.

Karl Drlica and Ilene Wagner (Coaches, 1967-69)

During the mid-1960s, San Francisco Bay was in danger of being filled by real estate development. To call attention to the Bay, Berkeley activists encouraged water activities at or near the waterfront. In the fall of 1965, activists helped Art Sachs tack a boat shed onto the Rod and Gun Club building at Aquatic Park, a narrow, mile-long lagoon adjacent to the I-80 freeway in Berkeley. Drlica designed a small dock that was built next to the shed. In November, 1965 shells were trucked from Lake Merritt to Aquatic Park for exhibition races between Mills College and Cal Women's Crew. The shells were then returned to Oakland where Sachs had to base his operations until a real boathouse could be built at Aquatic Park.



Cal Women's Crew at Aquatic Park (1969)

Bow: Alexis L., 2: unidentified, 3: Kathy D., Stroke: Carol S., Standing: Karl D.



Ilene Wagner (1968)

After two years, Sachs completed school and took an optometry job in Eastern Washington, leaving the coaching to Drlica and Ilene Wagner (they married in 1967 when Ilene graduated from UCB). Berkeley activists, Cal Women's Crew, and former Cal oarsmen raised enough money to establish the

Berkeley Rowing Club. In late 1967, a boathouse and dock were built at Aquatic Park. Cal women began rowing there in 1967.

Carol Simpson (Crew, 1965-69)

The stroke of the Cal crews was Carol Simpson. In 1966 she won a single sculls race in Corvallis, and, along with Ilene Wagner, placed second in the pair without cox category at both the 1966 and 1967 national championship regattas. Simpson, as a recent graduate of Cal, moved to Seattle in 1969 to train with the Lake Washington crew for competition at the European Rowing Championships. This was only the second time that American women competed in that regatta. Simpson recalled, "We came in seventh out of seven eights – the organizers added a lane so we could row with the other six boats in the final. Even though last, we didn't disgrace ourselves: we rowed the race to the end in relatively good form."

In the fall of 1969, Simpson relocated to Long Beach where she joined the Long Beach Rowing Association as one of only a few women actually rowing. The small club was extraordinary: many of the elite, male Olympic scullers were training there, and they had no issue with women rowing. She trained in a wherry (a wide-bodied one-person shell) and taught an eager young kayaker, Melinda Collis, to scull. At the 1970 NWRA nationals on Lake Merritt, they were second in the lightweight double sculls, and her trainee, Karen McCloskey, was third in the novice wherry. At that point Simpson decided that her rowing career was over and moved to San Francisco to work as a computer programmer.

In December of 1971, at Collis' wedding in Long Beach, Simpson reconnected with her teammates and met Joan Lind, who had come in a close second with McCloskey (coached by Tom McKibbon) in the heavy-weight double sculls event at the 1971 National Championships. The two were aiming to win that event at the upcoming 1972 Nationals in Seattle. Collis wanted to return to training and suggested that Simpson quit her job, move back to Long Beach, and train with them to form a quad for the nationals. Simpson returned to her life in San Francisco thinking 'Certainly not'. The three other women were younger and all still students. Simpson had a full-time job and was, she thought, a 'grown-up'; rowing was behind her.



She later recalled, "When I went into work the following Monday, I looked around and the decision made itself. The caption in my mind was 'For this I'm not going to go row?' I gave notice immediately; best impulsive decision I ever made. I piled my paltry possessions in my car and drove south. A former employer of my sister gave me a job at his donut shop, midnight to 6 a.m., which gave me unencumbered training hours. A week or so later I flew back up to San Francisco for some kind of event and made the 500-mile return trip south on my bicycle to inspire myself and mark the adventure."

The four women rowed every day in wherries, singles, and doubles. Tom McKibbin, an Olympic sculler, served as coach. At the national regatta, Simpson stroked the quad to victory and also won the single sculls event; McClosky and Lind won their doubles race. The newest Long Beach recruit, Jane Loomis, won the novice wherry, completing a sweep of the heavyweight sculling events. Collis stepped aside, and Gail Pearson, who had been second in the singles race at the Nationals, filled in at the bow position of the quad. The four scullers then trained for the quadruple sculls event at the Women's European Championships to be held in East Germany at the end of the summer. Their quad won a club event in Hannover prior to the championships in Brandenburg. At the championships, in a field of about eleven entries, the Long Beach crew came in eighth, the best finish for an American women's crew up to that time. Simpson then served on the Women's Rowing Olympic Committee (1972-1976) as the International Olympic Committee added women's rowing to the Games, beginning with Montreal '76. Joan Lind won a silver medal in single sculls at those Games.