



Rowing Home

A woman of a certain age finds her footing (and bloodies her hands) by joining a Delaware River crew team. By Nancy DePalma

I HADN'T CARRIED A GARDEN STATE driver's license for more than 20 years. But with an impending divorce, signs pointed toward a return to the state where I was born. After the move came the inevitable question: How does a newly single, home-based freelancer closing in on her 40th birthday gain footing in a new community? Join a team. In my case, a rowing team with Lambertville's Swan Creek Rowing Club.

Was I too old for this? A few friends cast doubt on my middle-aged competence. A typical reaction: "Aren't you supposed to hang that up and just

cheer on your kids' teams at this point in life?" My mother was concerned about the wisdom of taking on the mighty Delaware. "George Washington had a tough time on that river," she advised, as if she'd personally witnessed his struggles.

I showed up for the first practice feeling a bit like a kid on the first day of school, unsure which table to sit at during lunch. Rowing wasn't new to me, but it had been many years since high school, when I'd last set foot in a boat. I didn't know any of the seven other women in my group, all newcomers to the sport and

to each other. They hailed from Flemington, Stockton and other towns around Hunterdon and Mercer counties and nearby Pennsylvania. Mothers, wives, a scientist, a teacher, a personal trainer, a civil servant and a lawyer, the team brought a wealth of life experience into one skinny boat.

If executed properly, rowing looks simple, but in truth it's a difficult sport requiring laser-focused precision. Teamwork is crucial. Rowers must match each other's movements perfectly; the slightest elevation of an elbow or delayed catch of an oar will throw off the balance of the boat. In the early going, we spent our afternoons on the Delaware learning to anticipate and mimic each other's moves. We began in the spring, with the river barely awakened from its winter chill; continued through the summer, when oar splashes turned refreshing; and finished in the fall, when the trees on the banks of the river erupted in a riot of colors. We rowed past the bald eagles' nest cradled in the arches of the New Hope-Lambertville bridge and cheered when an eaglet popped up its downy, white head.

As we struggled to master the sport and each other, I realized that rowing is a lot like life. It's messy (you get wet) and sometimes rocky (like the Delaware itself). You can get hurt. And sometimes you feel you're rowing against the tide.

A typical practice lasts about two hours. Hands become rough and blistered, abrasions ooze, muscles scream. When it's over and you're too exhausted for more, you have to carry the boat out of the water. But when it's right, and the boat lightly skips across the surface—well, there's nothing quite like it.

Each year, we row for six months, sharing stories and laughter and doing what teammates do best: We have each other's backs. This fall, just for one day, the tables will turn, and my kids will cheer me on at our team's first race. It turns out you're never too old to join a team after all. ■

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