

Monday, October 12, 2009

6:00 AM, Oakland Estuary

T. Gary Rogers Rowing Center

Home of the University of California, Berkeley Men's Crew

Home of the California Rowing Club:

Today *Better Angel* and I row with the Big Dogs – well, sort of. More like...today we share a boathouse with and row on the same water at the same time as the Big Dogs. Today we are among rowing elite: Cal Crew, a perennial collegiate powerhouse, and California Rowing Club, the west coast contingent of the U.S. men's national rowing team. These people are built like Greek Gods and many if not most of them row that way.



Looking east at the T. Gary Rogers Rowing Center from the dock at the Oakland Estuary. The two-story structure houses the Cal men's crew. The three bays at right are for CRC equipment. Behind them is CRC headquarters, Cal's relocated and historic Ky Ebright Boathouse.

The Oakland Estuary is the long-time home of Cal Crew and the birthplace of old judge's rowing life. I love this place. Here as a Cal freshman in fall of 1966 I set aside my dream of playing basketball for the Golden Bears, grabbed a starboard oar and got started on a course that changed me forever. I didn't know port from starboard when I turned out for crew along with 100+ other freshman. Luckily for me, all but a handful were new to rowing and I had a chance. By plugging away at it, ultimately I became a good oar,

highly strong and well conditioned, to where I was racing and collecting shirts (and losing them, too, mostly to Huskies). Countless hours of training on and off of the water gave me the focus, discipline and commitment to purpose that have enabled me to have a satisfying career and life. Next to my parents, nothing built me as much as Cal Crew and the men I rowed with.

Being here today, then, is a big deal for me. I have not rowed on the Estuary since college. I am excited as I rig the boat in the pre-dawn. I stand aside near the ramp as the California Rowing Club rowers pass by carrying small boats. They launch and head toward the Bay in the darkness with white safety lights on their boat decks and clothing: a squadron of fireflies.

I launch before Cal takes the dock. I paddle in the other direction, toward the Fruitvale Bridge, with one main thought: *don't flip the boat and look like an idiot in front of these young guys who are already wondering what in the hell an old fogey like me is doing down here rowing on the Oakland Estuary in the dark when he should be back at his hotel drinking a tank of coffee and eating eggs Benedict*. Truly, that is my main thought. In the tiny space left beside it in my head are these: (1) As I go under the second bridge, the train bridge: Holy moly! The flood of this incoming tide is strong, very strong indeed, and scary; (2) My gosh, I had forgotten about the tricky eddies this damn flood produces down-tide from this bridge; and (3) What in the world is that huge thing barely discernible in the gloom that I just missed with my port oar? Finally I settle down, make a cool river turn, and head back under the two bridges, past the dock and the Cal men who are there, watching me, a legend in my mind and a question mark in theirs. My wish for them is to someday be rowing five days before their 61st birthdays and having even half the fun I am having today. Such is the gauntlet I silently throw down.

By now I am skimming along the surface like a giant water bug, toward the mouth of the Estuary, under the High Street Bridge, past barges, under the Government Island bridge and behind the island, to about 1000 meters past the end of it, out in the main channel; and there I stop, all sweaty and happy for my effort, and turn around for the trip back. On the return I am working hard and really clicking. I get into that elusive mindful and mindless state where hard work seems like nothing until later when you stop and you realize how pooped you are. The only sounds are quiet catch, quiet release, glide of the slide and deep breathing. Along I go in that way with not a care until now when I approach – do I sense it, yes I am getting closer and now here it is! – I have arrived at that special place known and loved by generations of Cal oarsmen, the place where the world smells of creosote! Lovely, lovely creosote, the best smell in the world because when you smell creosote on the Oakland Estuary *it means you are within minutes of having survived another workout!* And soon things get even better, for within scant few strokes I arrive at a Great Place in History, the place sooo close to the High Street Bridge where almost 40 years ago, Frank Graetch – 6'7" Frank Graetch, my German pal who routinely would sleep in a bivouac on the face of Half Dome in an era when few people did such

things – Big Frank Graetch, sitting behind me in the 6 seat, exclaimed during the calm of a rare blow near the end of a two-hour workout: “my god, an Arctic Tern!” Here we were, faces on our shins, lips parched, tongues hanging out, hands blistered to shreds, eyeballs rolled up into dark spaces in our heads, blood squirting from every pore: and Frank Graetch sights a goddam bird! Not just any bird: *an Arctic Tern*. I love that memory and I love Frank for it; and when I step from the boat a few minutes later and carry the boat up the ramp, I am laughing and exhausted – two states I never achieved simultaneously when I was young.

I wash and dry the boat and oars. I shoot the breeze and make friends with national team guys, their coaches, and the Cal coaches. They are humble and deferential as befits their accomplishments and standing. I hope I am worthy of their respect, for these surely are my people. Showering with the Cal frosh I remember the old judge of long ago. I chuckle over their un-self-conscious braininess and exuberance. They’ll spend the rest of their lives understanding just how special and fortunate they are. I hope they enjoy the ride as much as I do.



Better Angel spends some time at CRC boathouse, T. Gary Rogers Rowing Center.

Before leaving I spend a few moments in tearful silence out front near the street-side Rogers Boathouse sign. Today is six days short of being exactly five years since Sam Johnson and I placed some of his dad’s ashes deep in the ground at the base of the sign supports. The Rogers complex was under construction then and I had to scale a fence to do the deed. Sam’s dad was the late and very great Mike Johnson, three-year Cal Crew

varsity letterman and winner of Cal Crew's highest honor, the Dean Witter Award. Mike died January 23, 2004 following his long and courageous fight with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. He and I rowed together at Cal, and for over 35 years he was my best friend. Did I have Cal's permission to scale the fence to place the ashes under the sign? No. Doesn't matter. The deed is done and Mike is forever enshrined where he belongs.



Ky Ebright boathouse, CRC home and formerly home of Cal Crew. Mike Johnson's ashes are buried beneath the sign.

I am replete. I head into Berkeley for breakfast, followed by my periodic campus pilgrimage. I can't wait to call Karen to let her know about my morning.

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