

Ursus arctos californicus

Old Judge was raised in Sonoma by Cal parents who made sure he learned the legend of the California Golden Bear. William Todd, nephew of Mary Todd Lincoln, emblazoned the Bear on the historic California Bear Flag that was raised in the Sonoma Plaza on June 14, 1846. As the flag made its way up a 70-foot pole to a rousing speech by William B. Ide, “Native Californians looking up at it were heard to say ‘Coche’, the common name among them for pig or shoat.” Chronicle of John Bidwell (1890), quoted at Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco. www.sfmuseum.org/hist6/toddfalg.html.



The Todd Bear Flag. A huge rock in the Sonoma Plaza that commemorates it is encircled by a sidewalk with three perfect lanes that once served as venue for bicycle races at terrifying speeds staged by local kids. This seminal extreme sport is now outlawed.

What appeared to be swine flew off from later versions. The current California state flag...



...clearly depicts our sturdy Golden Bear. The California Rowing Club in its logo...



...and the athletic teams of the University of California, Berkeley in theirs...



...do so as well.

Everyone reveres this magnificent animal, right? Not so, as Cal students can attest. Our neighbors at The Leland Stanford Junior University delight in disparaging the Golden Bear. In the same vein, but far worse, was Stanford's historical deployment of their caricatured "Indian" mascot, "Chief Lightfoot", to dance and whoop randomly about the gridiron much like today's alleged Stanford band. Cal students were rightfully concerned about these unfortunate traditions and composed songs urging rapprochement with the Golden Bear and the adoption of a dignified mascot. "Cardinals Be Damned" offers Stanford a bird and, what's more, encourages a "Stanford son of a *****" to kiss our Golden Bear on a part of its anatomy other than its mouth. In the mid-1970's Stanford finally heeded our advice, in part, by trading its "Indian" for "Cardinal". They claim it is a color and not the bird we gave them. What does their "Cardinal" mascot look like? A tree. Go figure.

Tuesday, October 13, 2009, 6:45 AM

Oakland Estuary

T. Gary Rogers Rowing Center

I spent a second night in Orinda with my friends Mike and Julie Fletcher. *Better Angel* was housed at the Rowing Center, which is fortunate because as I emerge from the west end of the Caldecott Tunnel, my car is belted by 65 mph winds and rain so heavy my wipers can't keep up. Nervous tapping of vehicle brakes ahead provides red beacons that prove to be my only means of navigating the dark and dangerous maelstrom. I arrive at the boathouse to learn that no one is going out on the water. I am glad to know modern

Greek Gods are allowed shelter from the storm. In the late 60's we would have rowed in this stuff. But our coach was a Navy S.E.A.L. and the erg didn't exist then.

The erg (properly, the Concept II Indoor Rowing Machine) is an ingenious contrivance developed by the Dreissigacker brothers. It permits rowers on land to simulate rowing on water. Often-maligned and never loved, it is nonetheless an accepted and indispensable training tool. The erg features variable tension (drag) and computer monitor read-outs of distance, elapsed time, split (time to travel 500 imaginary meters), and other helpful data. Rowers around the world chart their individual progress and keep tabs on one another by posting scores to a website, www.concept2.com. Erging has a high benefit-to-time ratio. I erg some 150,000 meters per month, mostly alone in my basement.



Inspirational symbols and ergs grace the T. Gary Rogers Rowing Center. Rowers develop acute peripheral vision, enabling them to glimpse neighboring monitors on-the-sly.

The Rowing Center boasts at least three dozen ergs neatly aligned in rows facing a wall of mirrors. I plop my butt pad onto a machine in the middle of the back row, climb aboard and set the drag at 116. After a five-minute warm-up, I start today's workout: 4 x 11/4. This means 11 minutes of half+-power at stroke rates of 18 – 24 spm increased or decreased by 2 spm increments each 3 or 4 minutes, followed by four minutes of paddling and technique drills, and a sip of water; and then three more sets of the same.

As I begin my first set, fifteen national team rowers are rowing on ergs arrayed in front and to the left of me. Their combined exertion produces a tremendous, synchronous

whoosh! whoosh! whoosh! – like thrusts from a jet engine. Judging from the sound, their splits are in the 1:30's and it seems they could go on like this, generating wattage enough to electrify a hundred homes, on and on, and into the night. After a time, Coach McLaren calls them off the ergs for instruction. As they circle near him, their relaxed body language and solemn attention say, "We respect you, coach". The howling storm outside makes it hard for me to hear what McLaren is saying and, hopefully, obscures from their hearing the wheezing and not whooshing noises produced by my erg.

After a few minutes they are back on for "22 at 22", rowing even more intensely than before. They bathe the room in wave upon wave of massive force field. From stage right come now the Cal frosh, like moths drawn to light. These are not the scrawny kids my pals and I were in autumn of 1966. These are almost fully-formed men – 17-18 year-old guys who have lifted weights, rowed and raced, world-class athletes-in-the-making – and I can see as they start their erg warm-ups they will push as well as be pushed by the nationals. Soon all but a couple of ergs are occupied, national team to one side of the room and heirs-apparent to the other, and the one old guy chugging away in the middle of the back row; and here we go: each of us squeezing off stroke after stroke, staring ahead into the mirror at our crewmates, sounds of ergs and grunts and loud thumping music; and the energy rises and roars: drive legs down *hard*, knees firm for the turn, exhale, hands and chest (hinged hips) and arms pop out and away, seat follows, back supported, strong and tall, glide, glide, relax, ready, focus, glide, inhale *and bam!* legs, back, arms, knees, hands, chest, etc., etc.; repeat, repeat, repeat; relentless passion, desire, *cohesive competition*; see young men glaring out the mirror at each other; see them glare at, *at me*; glare at those who would replace me, take *my seat* in the boat; this is a real boat race now; stay with it, *breathe* and *relax*; focus, *keep the rhythm*; focus and breathe and forget the pain *it's only in my head*. Whoosh! whoosh! whoosh! whoosh! On we go: syncopated sweat and snot and glory. And...and...glory be, Old Judge, are you at 1:58, 2:01, 2:00?. Hold that 2:00, hold, hold, hold it, hold on to it! *Do not let these boys down*. I do not let them down. And now finished so soon with my fourth set, I paddle down, funny old guy in the mirror, male-pattern baldness noggin all pink and wet, eyeglasses splattered, panting like an Irish wolfhound in the desert, and now finally I get it, just what happened now. These guys pulled me along; they had me so jacked up *my splits in the last two sets were 6 – 7 seconds faster than usual*. Ha! Wow! Am I pumped? I am pumped, pumped like Fogarty: "Put me in coach, I'm ready to play!"

I cool down for a few more minutes and climb off to make way for someone else. I stand in the back of the room, still sweaty and now really feeling it in my legs. Filled with awe and appreciation, taking in the sights and the sounds, enjoying the storm outside and the storm within this shrine to rowing, I give thanks to these kids who have no idea what they did for me today. Maybe I did something for them, too. After all, I'm older than their dads and some grandpas, too.

Wednesday, October 14, 2009, 6:30 AM

Oakland Estuary

T. Gary Rogers Rowing Center

I stayed last night at the Hotel Durant, one block from the Berkeley campus. This is where we stayed in 1966 as high school basketball players on Sonoma High School's one and only trip to Northern California's Tournament of Champions at Cal's Harmon Gym. Only three of us on the team had been to Berkeley before. Most of the guys were terrified, thanks to their parents' warnings to beware of the free-thinkers at Berkeley. Help! Thinkers!

Yesterday afternoon and evening the hotel and much of the East Bay were without electricity for five hours due to the storm. I was disconcerted to hear two businessmen turn the power outage into a power outrage, shouting at the young front desk staff over the inconvenience. I thought they might want to lay off these youngsters and go outside to join the students who walked around in the wind and rain in shorts and t-shirts as if everything was just fine; and I verbalized the aforementioned thought. I drove up to north campus, had a good Thai meal and after returning, hit the hay early, unbothered by TV.

I arrive at the Estuary once again in the darkness. The CRC national team rowers are launching small boats. I count seven singles and a double; a few guys with injuries are pedaling indoors on stationary bicycles. The rowers have no more than a polite "hello" for me as they pass intently toward the dock, carefully balancing their sculls on head or shoulder. They place their boats alongside the dock and into the jet-black tidal flood rushing in from the SF Bay, and form an orderly line of racing shells stretching from one end of the dock to the other. White safety lights affixed to the athletes and their boats betray the clandestine ritual of rowers-at-launch-in-darkness, and create a mysterious and luminescent conga line as each in turn shoves off and paddles toward the Bay.

It is early dawn now and I launch. This is my fifth time in the *Better Angel* and I am fully at ease in my new boat. I trust the boat and really enjoy rowing it. This boat has clogs and not shoes, just like all boats in the olden days. This boat helps me burnish my reputation as an anachronism. I warm up with feet on the leathers, paddling my usual sets of 20-stroke increments – arms and back only, add $\frac{1}{4}$ slide, then $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, then full slide – and settle into an easy rhythm as I pass under the High Street Bridge. There is no wind and the water is flat. Moving past the barges I stop and tie in, and turn for a long look, wondering if I'll see the CRC folks. They are long gone. I pick it up at half power at 20 to 24 beats, relishing the quiet catches and good rhythm that seem to come easy today and permit me to focus my concentration on my bane: my release. Blades are coming out clean now and the boat is pushing forward easily at the turn-around, and I smile. I go on like this for 75 more and stop to get my bearings. As I do, 10 meters off to starboard I see the round black head of a harbor seal bobbing up and down. Mr. Seal looks at me and says, "Don, the secret of Roan Inish is...hands quickly down and away at the release!"

Now I am treated to a fantastic five-minute rain shower. Fat raindrops drum the Dacron deck and a perfect rainbow rises up in the East Bay hills to accentuate the beauty – Zen moments I’ve earned and will savor. I continue under the bridge and behind the island, then into the main channel, and keep going until the end of a 300-stroke piece. I do five sets of 20/20 and turn around. Going back behind the island I am aware of boaters readying their motor craft off to port. One guy hollers at me and I ignore him: sculling helps preserve focus in many aspects, don’t you think? Out past the south end of the island and the bridge, I get into the main channel in time to see the armada of national team small boats bearing down on me 200 meters to stern. The race is on! I take off fast as I can, up from my usual low 20’s to 28 or 30 spm. It feels pretty darn fast, so why are they now only 100 meters away? 75? 50? I pull off to the starboard to give them their lanes, and soon they are abreast of me. This looks like the end point of a series of 1000-meter pieces. They stop to turn around and as they do, Wes Piermarini shouts something at me. All I can think of is that he is asking if I am OK. Back at the boathouse he tells me he was inviting me to join them for the next piece. Next time, Wes!

Photo Op

Someone said I have failed to include a photo of myself. Here you go:



Old Judge and *Better Angel* backing water with Pocock wooden sculls.

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