

Outside the BOX: The boat

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The *Husky Clipper* rocked in the wind-swept swells on the outer lane of the Olympic finals of the eight-man crew near Berlin in 1936. At the oars were eight American boys with scrappy Bobby Moch as the coxswain, all shaped by the forces of the depression and molded by a fierce

determination to overcome the hardships of poverty and want. As the rain blew down on them, to a man, they were in stark contrast to the traditions of rowing — a sport typically reserved for the blue bloods of society.

Yet, in retrospect, they represented



the very character that would ultimately crush the evil unleashed by the little Fuhrer poised atop the viewing stand. The sons of rural towns, the American crew had grown up in blue-collar families and had been immersed into rowing at the University of Washington under the watchful eye of legendary coach Al Ulbrickson, who had demanded more of them than they could have possibly imagined the day some four years earlier when they first took to the oar.

George Pocock, the man who had artfully handcrafted the *Husky Clipper* would describe rowing as “hard work, not much glory, but still popular in every century — there must be some beauty, which ordinary men can’t see, but extraordinary men do.”

Uncommon connections

My introduction to the rowing world came at the ranch home of Bart and Mary Strang near Meeker, Colo., where on the wall of the dining room was attached the massive oar Bart had manned as captain of the Princeton crew following the Korean War. Beneath that oar, we enjoyed enthusiastic discussions about cattle breeding, ranching, history, politics and life. Through the years of friendship and conversation, I came to understand the connection between rowing and ranching.

While seemingly unrelated, rowing and raising cattle share the common threads of demanding devotion and unrelenting effort at levels that discourage most people; working within a system involving people and the forces of nature to develop synchrony, and absolutely pulling one’s own weight. The sport of rowing may be the most demanding of all athletic endeavors, as each crew member must work in concert to propel the shell along a course of some 2 to 4 miles in length. The endurance and strength required of each teammate is extraordinary, and if any member slacks in effort or technique, the boat’s performance is immediately impacted.

Ranching, like rowing, requires the blending of skill, technique and team. To sustain cattle enterprises for the long haul requires the application of muscle, brainpower and spirituality. A great ranch, like a competitive crew, takes on its own identity and is fueled by more than just correct protocols and strategies; its story is shaped by



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teamwork, backbreaking effort, lifelong training, continuous learning and love.

It is said that when an eight-man crew under the command of its coxswain attains a perfectly balanced and harmonious rhythm, the boat seems to fly across the water and that the experience transforms each oarsman, while forging a bond of near mystical proportion. Is there not something to be gleaned from this experience that could be applied to our personal and professional lives?

People pulling in unison, each committed to the others and to the task at hand, results in a higher plane of both performance and fulfillment than those crews who scramble madly without focus and at an erratic pace that drags the craft deeper into the water, slowing its progress while inevitably drifting off course.

Take the sorting alley as a case in point. When the cattle and crew are in harmony, there is a feeling of calm and ease — the flow and pace creates a sense of near perfection and there is beauty in the result. More broadly, the blending of efforts to yield a management system that creates desired outcomes and shared pride of ownership is professionally fulfilling and creates a deep sense of meaning in our lives. Pulling together is difficult, for there can be no sense of entitlement, nor false bravado nor blame nor shortcut if the boat is to be at its best.

On that dreary day on the waters of Nazi Germany, America's sons found Olympic gold, each rowing at a cadence beyond their imagination and perfectly aligned in spirit, body and will. While the following words of George Pocock were his epistle on rowing, they are perfect in description for those who strive for excellence in the cattle business:

“Harmony, balance and rhythm. They're the three things that stay with you your whole life. Without them civilization is out of whack. And that's why an oarsman ... can handle life.”

This column is adapted from Daniel James Brown's work entitled *The Boys in the Boat*. It is a must-read for those in search of inspiration and a connection to the power of the American spirit.



Editor's Note: Tom Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.