



Rowing AND STILL growing

Photos by RICHARD SENNOTT • rsennott@startribune.com

A Twin Cities Youth Rowing boat prepared for a workout at a recent morning practice at Bryant Lake Regional Park in Eden Prairie. TCYR rowers typically practice five days a week, for two hours at each practice.

Twin Cities Youth Rowing attracts diverse, overachieving athletes to the sport.

By DAVID La VAQUE • dlavaque@startribune.com

Eric Schubert grew up cheering for the Pittsburgh Steelers, a football franchise with a record six Super Bowl titles in what many consider the ultimate team sport. ¶ But Schubert, a recent graduate of Southwest Christian High School in Chaska, changed his view of teamwork in sports when he first saw rowing. An admirer of the sport from afar, Schubert earned a new appreciation when he joined Twin Cities Youth Rowing (TCYR). ¶ “I didn’t really realize how intense it was until I started,” he said. “To me, this is the ultimate team sport because if one person is half a second off, the rest of the boat feels it.”

Started in 2008, TCYR is the metro area’s lone youth-only club. About 100 rowers from 30 metro area high schools, junior highs and middle schools train at various times throughout the year and compete in local and regional regattas.

Coach Tina Cho, a former University of Minnesota rower, started the club with a reasonable timetable for success. Now she believes “we’re ahead of schedule. I thought this would take five years to really be competitive. But with the support we’ve received and the caliber of athletes we’re getting, we’ve got a legitimate shot next spring.”

TCYR competed against Midwest teams in the recent Chicago Sprints Regatta and placed second in men’s junior 4+, men’s junior 8+ and men’s novice 8+. The women’s junior 8+ placed third and the women’s junior 4+ finished fifth.

TCYR is the host of the Twin Cities Junior Sweeps Regatta on Aug. 1 at Bryant Lake Regional Park in Eden Prairie, the club’s home location. Cho said a summer regatta just for junior racers is unique and hopes it helps put TCYR on the map.

Cho took other measures to increase her club’s visibility, offering a winter and spring season for the first time this year. Rowers worked on ergometer (rowing) machines inside the club’s Edina boathouse during the winter and competed in May’s Midwest Junior Championships in Cincinnati.

Though more rowers are enjoying increased opportunities, TCYR relies on personal endorsements to grow interest. Word of mouth led Korleki Akiti, an incoming senior at Blake, to discover rowing. She joined the Minnesota Boat Club the summer before eighth grade and later moved to the Minneapolis Rowing Club before following Cho to TCYR.

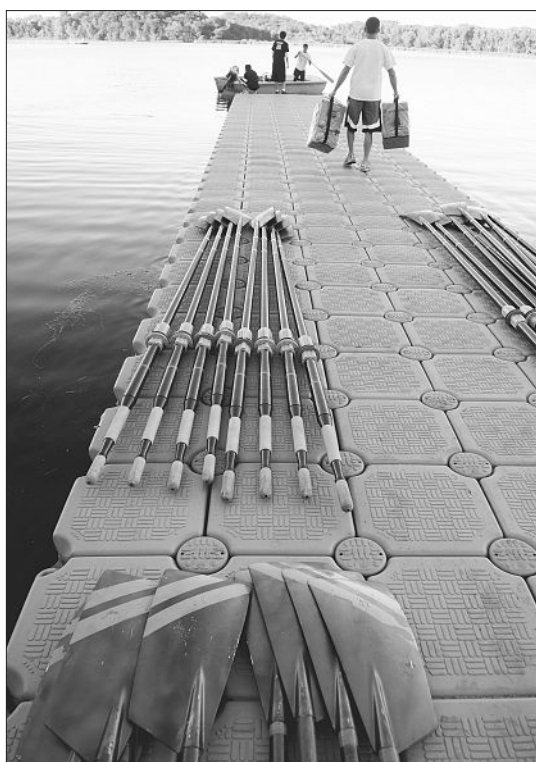
“When I was younger, rowing was something fun to do on the side,” Akiti said. “Now I’m actually thinking of rowing in college because through the years, it’s been the one constant that I’ve always been excited about.”

Akiti attempts to share her passion by handing out fliers at school. When recruiting classmates, Akiti mentions conditioning and competition but stresses camaraderie.

“You don’t have any one person that shines above



Tina Cho, a former University of Minnesota rower and head coach of TCYR, critiqued and exhorted the rowers during practice.



▲ Rowers come to TCYR from schools around the metro area for a variety of reasons. Some like the challenge. Some like the camaraderie. “Rowing attracts a unique breed of athlete and person,” Cho said. “Everyone out here is a Type-A overachiever. We practice an absurd amount, but that’s what’s needed.”

◀ Tools of the trade: Oars lined the dock at practice, ready for the rowers.

the others,” said Akiti, who will captain the Bears’ soccer team this fall. “The team’s success is your success. Everyone works together. You just have to be a dedicated, hard-working athlete and you’ll succeed.”

Rowing team captain Katie McElrath, who will be a senior at Blake this fall and plays lacrosse for the Bears, concurs.

“Although you’re working individually, you’re not going to move without the other people in the boat,” McElrath said.

Anyone can become a rower, club members agree, though a few have learned the hard way. Incoming Chanhassen senior Sarkis Zenobian enjoyed rock climbing and sailing before his mother discovered a TCYR pamphlet at a local coffee shop.

“It was kind of the best accident that ever happened to me,” Zenobian said.

A more painful accident awaited him on the water. “I thought, ‘I’m just going to go and pull,’” he said. “I

showed up, I pulled and I took an oar straight to the chest. It doesn’t take you long to learn rowing, but it takes awhile to get comfortable.”

Rowers come from various high schools such as Blake, Breck, Eden Prairie, Edina, Hopkins, Lakeville South, Minnetonka, Orono and St. Paul Academy. Their athletic backgrounds also vary from first-time team members to kids cut from teams to those who balance another varsity sport with rowing.

TCYR trains and competes through four separate seasons year-round, each one lasting about 10 weeks. Rowers practice five days per week for two hours.

“Rowing attracts a unique breed of athlete and person,” Cho said. “Everyone out here is a Type-A overachiever. We practice an absurd amount, but that’s what’s needed. That’s a big reason why a lot of the power’s programs come from Ivy League schools. You need to be that smart to do something this stupid.”