

NUMB SCULL

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What happens when a veteran adventure sports writer tries sculling for the first time?

(Hint: He should have packed a change of clothes.)



Calm water. Long, skinny boats. I think I'm almost there. A small armada of rowers shoots past me. The grey stone arches of Buckley Bridge, which extend across the Connecticut River, are visible in the distance. With every stroke, my coach belts out technical queues. "Throw your shoulders back! Perfect. Perfect. There you go!"

With each stroke, I try to recall the litany of details that had been thrown at me in the past hour. Rowing is about 75 percent legs. It's all about leverage. Arms should operate like rubber bands. Flexibility is important. Meanwhile, as my seat slides back and forth, I'm feeling a slight burn in my quadriceps, and there is some tightness in my hamstrings. At times, I appear to find a rhythm. Then I falter; I grunt, roll my eyes, and start from scratch. As a sculling newbie, my goal is a substantial immersion into the sport. But that would involve leaving dry land.

Like most beginner rowers, my instruction starts on a rowing machine. In this case, the ergometer has been set up approximately 40 feet from the Connecticut River. "Rowing is not rocket science," says Brian Wendry, my coach, as I keep the wheel spinning, trying to mask my deep desire to be on the water. "The primary thing is patience. Visualize being in a boat with an oar in each hand," he says.

What I want to tell him is something like this: I know my way around boats. All of these preliminary exercises are unnecessary. If you'd just let me on the water there would be no need to visualize being on the water. But I restrain myself. He's been here before. I haven't. Trusting the teacher, I've discovered while learning how to do everything from jumping out of an airplane to running at altitude, pays dividends.

He breaks down the stroke into three easy components. The first stage: arms only. Stage two: swinging the body. "Keep your back straight, but on an angle," he says. "What you don't want to do is overreach."

Soon after, the legs come up. "Remember, as you go back, it's the opposite sequence," he notes. I suck up the information like a sponge tossed into a bucket of water. I'll be on the river in no time, I think—or maybe not.

"While you're learning all this, you actually want it to feel kind of disjointed," he says. Mission accomplished, I think to myself. Putting all of these motions together in the proper order has me squirming in awkward positions, as if I've suddenly been asked to join an advanced aerobics class where everyone knows the moves but me. In a fit of indecision, I wonder if maybe I'm not quite ready after all. I decide it's best to listen, to just do what I'm told, and not push it—at least, for now.

Let me say this up front. What I knew about sculling prior to this assignment could easily fill the underside of a matchbook. I honestly knew nothing. Nada. Zilch. In fact, in sending out a desperate email to my friends in preparation for first day of instruction, I initially spelled the word “sculling” wrong (with a “k,” as if it were an activity primarily performed with the bony part of one’s head). What I did know, however, was that it is one of the fastest ways to propel one’s self across the water by human power. And that was good enough for me.

As outdoor recreation pursuits go, it is not entirely clear why kayaking, an arguably less efficient craft, appears to dwarf sculling in popularity. The single is faster and lighter. In a kayak, one’s legs remain idle, leaving the extra work to the smaller muscles in the shoulders and arms. A single, on the other hand, puts legs and lats to

work in a full-body motion that is enhanced through the use of a sliding seat. What’s more, the craft’s more narrow profile affords greater speed through less drag. Nevertheless, more mainstream outdoor enthusiasts such as myself have largely ignored such superior hydrodynamics.

Over the years, I’d been in just about every kind of small watercraft imaginable. I have surfed in waves, performed Eskimo rolls, paddled into swamps, sailed on lakes, and kiteboarded in the surf.

I’d owned a canoe, a whitewater raft, a sea kayak, and a whitewater kayak. But sculling, a sport that is typically performed closer to civilization—and would therefore seem more convenient for a suburbanite such as myself—had somehow eluded me.

They didn’t offer rowing at my high school or college. Nor had it been tagged as the sort of boat typically taken into the wilderness (which is my more usual form of rec-

reation as an adult). Nevertheless, the feeling of moving fast, very fast, in one of these long, narrow boats had long seemed appealing.

Plus, having recently moved to Connecticut, I appeared to be surrounded by the sport. Within 30 minutes of my house, no fewer than four high schools, two private schools, and two colleges boasted robust rowing programs. One practice took place less than a mile from my house and a rowing coach happened to live right next door.

I decided to find out what I’d been missing. I wanted to know how easy it was to glide across the gloriously flat water somewhat close to my home in the morning with the ability to get back in time for breakfast. If I liked it, maybe I’d trade in my kayaks. Either way, I knew I’d first need to learn the basics.



A little research led me to Brian Wendry, director of rowing programs with Riverfront Recapture, an organization dedicated to promoting activities on the Connecticut River in and around the city of Hartford. Wendry has been with Riverfront Recapture for 12 years and he was likely hired for his long-standing experience in this arena. He rowed at Ithaca College, coached at Wesleyan University, and then coached in Seattle where he was an assistant to Stan Pocock. He also coached Middletown High School and the Ethel Walker School for Girls in Connecticut. I contacted him because he was part of

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the machine that appears to be making rowing increasingly popular in the area. After a short conversation over the phone, he agreed to give me a lesson.

“Should I bring a bathing suit?” I asked during our initial conversation, only half joking.

“No,” he said, “But you may want to bring a change of clothes just in case.”

Though Wendry had made it clear that I didn’t need to do much of anything to prepare for my first lesson, I didn’t want to come to him completely cold. And so, resisting the urge to simply rent Oxford Blues to see what it might offer in the way of tutelage, I reached out to friends and family, hoping I might find someone who knew a thing or two about this pursuit I later learned is the oldest intercollegiate sport in the United States.

An old friend of mine, a former woman’s rowing captain at the University of Vermont, responded to a status update I posted on Facebook. “What you need in rowing is power, grace, and the ability to pull as hard as you can until you puke,” she wrote. “Oh, and don’t forget to steer.” What did I get myself into? I thought.

A friend who lived down the street and whom I’d recently met (he rowed at Drexel University years back), shot me an email. “Watch out for catching a crab,” he advised. I’ll admit that I read this twice, wondering if he was giving me advice about travel to a Third World country. “When the oar is not extracted cleanly from the water, it can cause the boat to flip.”

I even got a Twitter response. An attempt was made by a newspaper executive friend of mine who rowed at Exeter to neatly sum up everything I needed to know about sculling in 140 characters or less. “Eyes stern, body compressed, legs first, seek swing,” he wrote. This bit of sculling poetry sounded dead on. But I have to admit I had no idea what it meant.



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Days later, I pulled into the parking lot of the Greater Hartford Jaycees Community Boathouse, located at Riverside Park in the city of Hartford, sitting on the wide and seemingly slow-moving Connecticut River. It was time for my lesson. I slid open the great hulking wood-stained door to reveal what resembled an airplane hanger. The massive boat bay was filled with stacks of sleek, shiny fiberglass hulls, stacked one upon the other. I immediately felt a rush; it was as though I'd entered the belly of the beast. Compared to the plastic kayaks I stored on the side of my house, these seemed like Ferraris.

I immediately spotted Wendry at the other side of the boathouse. First he showed me the hydraulic lift used to bring boats down from the top racks. Then he pointed out the high water marks on the boathouse wall—the structure was built in a flood zone back in 2002—and the photographs on the wall from famous regattas. “I bet a lot of parents show up with their kids wanting them to learn to row so they can get into schools like Harvard,” I remarked. He nodded knowingly. “That happens,” he said. “But a kid really has to love it for that to work.”

I asked him more about how people come to sport. I told him about how I'd heard that those with the right build, tall and lanky, are often recruited in high school and college. But as I looked at him, and he looked at me, it became clear that this isn't always the case. Neither of us looked the part. I am 37 years old, just under six feet, and about 180 pounds. Wendry looked to be about the same age and had about the same bodily proportions. He also made it clear that rowing isn't just for kids. “About 250 adults use the center and just 150 kids,” he said, explaining that around 25 members were over the age of 65.

Downstairs, Wendry pulled out the rowing machine. Before getting out on the water, he explained, I needed to learn some technique, a series of motions that scores of people on rowing machines at gyms don't know. It started with just using my arms.

Then Wendry showed me how to use my back, and how not to bend it in the shape of a C. After that, I added the legs, doing my best to employ the proper sequence. It took a few strokes for me to remember to straighten my arms every time before bending my knees, something Wendry said would be important once I was on the water. I did this for about 20 minutes. Then we got closer to the water.

Wendry took the guts of out of a training boat—the seat, oarlocks, and such—placing it on a narrow portion of the dock so that the oars could go into the water. I'd be paddling in the Connecticut River, but I wouldn't be going anywhere. One step closer, I thought. "This is so you can get used to the water," he said. When starting out, Wendry explained, I should just let the blades drag along the surface of the water on the recovery.

My first strokes were sloppy and uneven. He told me to keep my thumbs on the end of the oars, to keep them in place and to not grip too hard or "rev" the handles as if they were throttles on a motorcycle. It felt awkward. As I pulled forward, I forgot to keep my left hand above my right and pinched my hands more than a few times. I also raised the oar blades too high out of the water. And I forgot to rotate the blade to "scoop" the water before I dropped it down into the water.

I began to wonder what I'd gotten myself into. Would Wendry ever let me get out on the

water? He had already mentioned once that that this was usually about as far as a first lesson goes. Then I closed my eyes and concentrated. I focused only on the movement of my oars. The blades glided across the water. I locked on. Then pulled. I moved first with my legs, then with my back, then with my arms. I extended my arms, then angled my back, then bent my legs. I did this over and

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over again. I tried to shut out all else to focus only on this beguiling movement. I was doing it. I was getting it. "OK," said Wendry. "Let's get you in the boat."

I helped him carry a 16-foot trainer down from the boathouse. He fastened the frame I'd been using into the shell and showed me how to get in. Next he pushed

me into the river and told me to paddle upstream and to wait for him, at which point he ran to his motorboat. "I've had to tow a few people back to the dock," he warned. Now that I was in the shell, I tried not to make any sudden moves. Against Wendry's suggestion, I didn't bring along a change of clothes.

Before arriving, I was overly confident. Now all I could do to save myself from a wet ride home was to focus. I seized upon everything I'd learned. I stayed positive, figuring that sheer will could keep me up. I recalled what I'd heard while learning to ski—that if you look one way, you'll go that way. I figured if I focused on saying stable, I wouldn't go in the drink.

I took a series of even strokes with my arms. Then I added the back. Then I added the legs. It felt good. I picked up speed. I wanted that feeling of shooting across the water. "That was a good stroke," said Wendry. "Not too bad," he said. And it was only then that I began get the true experience I was looking for. I had, for the briefest of moments, the feeling of effortless motion. I relished the experience of gliding across the water at a speed that was simply not possible in a kayak.

But this was only a recreational shell. It was not the real thing. It was not the same, in speed or sensation, as the boats I'd seen on TV during the Olympics. Those boats, I knew, were thinner and much longer. It was time to up the ante. I asked Wendry about one of the 26-footers in the boathouse. He looked at me reluctantly.





“How good a swimmer are you?” he asked. I told him I was pretty good—and that I’d run eight miles the previous weekend. Normally, he told me, it would take someone 16 or more lessons before getting into a boat like that. But I pleaded with him, telling him it didn’t matter if I ended up in the water. I simply wanted to know what it felt like.

Minutes later, he lowered the 26-foot blue boat using the lift he’d shown me earlier. I put it on my head and carried it to the dock. “There’s at least a 50-percent chance you’re going in,” said Wendry. “Probably more.”

Before stepping into the boat, Wendry demonstrated at least five times that pushing upwards on the handles, with blades on the surface of the water, provided the greatest

stability. “Remember, these are your training wheels,” he said over and over again. “And don’t let the oar handles get behind you,” he said. “Then you have no control.” He held the boat as I took a few practice strokes with my left paddle. Then he gently let me go from the dock.

I stayed as still as possible. I knew the boat was highly unstable. I took a few strokes using only my arms. Then I wavered. I used my training wheels to balance. Wendry got into the motorboat. He started it up and motored out to join me beside the river. I was feeling good, surprised that I was able to paddle with some semblance of proficiency. Then, for some unknown reason, I lost my balance. A second later, I was in the water, clinging to the capsized boat. “I was just about to tell you how good you were look-

ing!” he shouted. At Wendry’s instruction, I swam about 15 feet to the shore while he towed the boat back to the dock.

Rowing the racing single, in my mind, was the equivalent of getting behind the wheel of an Indy car—and I knew I wasn’t ready for it. But it was enough to pique my interest. I haven’t yet sold my kayak. But getting into a single on a more regular basis is certainly on my to-do list. And if I get a chance to climb into the racing shell again anytime soon, I’ll be sure to listen to my teacher. Dry clothes—and keys that will get me home in time for breakfast—will be waiting on land. ▣

Riverfront Recapture offers beginning sculling lessons (eight classes for \$140 per person) in the summer. Private sculling lessons are also available. For more information, visit www.riverfront.org or call 860-713-3131 (ext. 314).