

Simsbury Life, Sports Section, November 2010—Rowing Team Makes Improvements in International Competition *Ethel Walker's Michelle Sexton is Part of the Team*

by Alicia B. Smith

When the bell rings and the school day is over, students from throughout Greater Hartford, representing 14 different schools, head into the city to the shores of the Connecticut River.

They haul sculls off of their shelves and place them in the water for practice. With the weather getting cooler and the sun setting sooner, crew team members recently wrapped up their fall season. For many it will be a memorable one. On October 23-24, the Riverfront Recapture rowing club student program, for students who attend schools that do not have a crew team, were part of the Head of the Charles Regatta in Boston. This race is an international event that draws thousands of participants and spectators. It is thought to be the biggest race of its kind.

The Head of the Charles Regatta was begun in 1965, established by the Cambridge Boating Club. "Head" races are typically three miles long. The race has grown to include 8,000 athletes from around the world, competing in 55 different races. Since 1997 it has become a two-day event.

This year the boy's and girl's Riverfront teams had a respectable finish, the boys finishing 11th out of 74 teams and the girls 19th out of 76, all in the four-plus category (four rowers and one coxswain). In 2009 the boys team qualified to participate in this year's event, while girls were part of a lottery selected to go. Among those in the four-person scull were Michelle Sexton, 17, a senior at Ethel Walker School and a Simsbury resident.

Standing outside the boathouse at Riverside Park in Hartford, Michelle's enthusiasm for her sport is obvious. She's been rowing with the club since her freshman year, turned on to the sport by her sister. Michelle attended a summer rowing camp before joining the team. "It's a cool sport," Michelle said. "I wanted to try something new." The sport is great for staying in shape, although it requires one to be tough. "You deal with all kinds of weather," she said.

It requires participants to exercise plenty of discipline while also being attentive to directions. There is plenty of room, however, to have a good time. "In the boat you are listening, but you can goof off, too," Michelle said. She served as captain of the girl's team this year. Her team thought they would do well in this year's competition based on their performance the previous year. By the time the race was over, Michelle and her mates had

the feeling, "oh, that was great," she said. The day had been an up-and-down affair of nervousness, excitement and exhaustion. "You sit in the car, out of the weather, and you feel that was a good day," Michelle said.

"Our goal was to just do well. From last year, we did not expect to do this well, but we figured maybe we could do better. We wanted to feel we did a good race."

Once their race was over Michelle said her team was able to relax, watch some of the other races and do some shopping. As far as the Head of the Charles Regatta, Michelle said it's a race you learn about as a rower, but its not until you are there, out on the Charles River, that you come to realize the scope. "It's an incredible experience," she said. "There are so many people, there is not a second where no one is not rowing."

This year she and her teammates were up early when they made the trek to Boston. They started out groggy, but the excitement built as the race got closer.

Michelle said she is prone to nerves, but is able to control them and once out on the water she is able to calm down. Teams can sit on the water waiting for their race to begin for some time.

"It just goes by," she said of the race. "There's that feeling of pure hype." While the boys and girls were giving it their all, coaches Chris Hayes and Brian Wendry were on the shore, riding their bikes, as their teams rowed on. At that point there was not much they could do but watch and wait.

"You hope for the best, you are excited when they don't crash," Mr. Hayes said. Following last year's results, Mr. Hayes said that he was hopeful for a good finish this year. The boys had finished 22nd last year and the girls were able to jump more than 20 spots. "It's one of the most challenging courses in the country," Mr. Hayes said, adding that there is a mix of high school and college teams, as well as clubs from around the country and the world.

There were teams there this year from Ireland, Great Britain and even Iraq. "The kids were just fantastic," Mr. Wendry said. Rowing is a sport that has been growing in the last 10 years. More schools are adding it to their athletic programs and those with established crew teams are thriving. Mr. Wendry contributes the growing interest in the sport to Title IX, which mandates equal athletic opportunities for female athletes, and the fact that many colleges have teams and it's a sport that is well supported by parents. It is a tough sport. As Mr. Hayes pointed out, there are no time outs and no substitutions. He described it as "a giant time trial."

Michelle's schools offers one waiver for a sport a year and so it is not likely she will be back to row in the spring, although she does plan to come back

and perhaps serve as an alternate because she wants to continue to be a part of the experience. She is hopeful that she will be able to row in college, too.

"I think it's a great experience," she said. "It's a great bonding experience. It's great kids can do crew." Michelle credits her team's success as well as her own personal growth to the attitudes of her coaches, who inspired her and her team to do their best. "They make you want to be competitive without being harsh or mean," she said. "You just want to prove you are a great rower." Her team has enabled her to meet students from other towns and develop some close friendships. "I was very lucky to do it twice," said Michelle of the Charles River race.

As the teams lined up in the late fall sunshine, all their races behind them, they were readying themselves for one last challenge. The next "race" was a row-a-thon in order to raise money to keep the club going. Crew can be an expensive sport and this type of event can help defray the cost. "We row to raise money and it's a nice way to end the season," Michelle said.