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A BEGINNER SWEEP ROWING class heads back toward Hartford as part of Riverfront Recapture's summer rowing program on the Connecticut River. Coxswain Rob May, foreground, guides the rowers, who each work one oar.



JULIE KRUG HAWTHORNE of Hartford tries to balance two oars on the dock at the conclusion of the rowing class on the Connecticut River. Riverfront Recapture offers the program in four-week sessions for all levels of rowers.

BODY & SOUL

THE PULL OF THE RIVER

By **VALERIE FINHOLM** | Special to the Courant

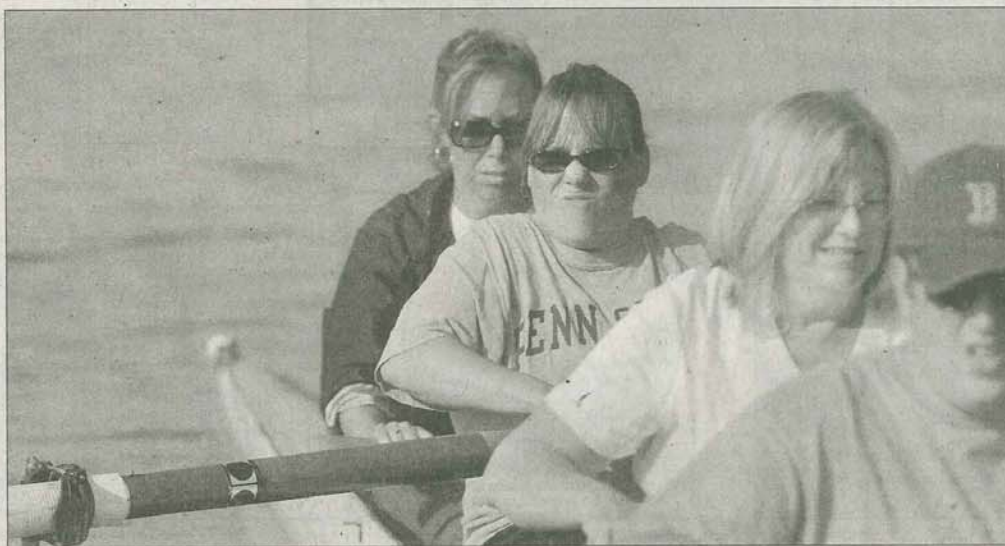
It is 6:30 a.m., and I am sitting in a 60-foot rowing shell on the Connecticut River with seven other beginners taking Riverfront Recapture's sweep rowing class.

Each of us is trying to maneuver a 12-foot oar through the water without hitting the person in front or back of us, and without wobbling the slender, lightweight boat.

Trying to keep us in sync is instructor Sarah Griffin, who is seated in the stern of the boat yelling (nicely): "Legs, body, arms. Arms, body, legs." I'm learning that rowing involves not just the arms but also the legs and core of the body, which pull the oar through the water.

It's harder than it looks from shore. Just when I think I'm getting it, my oar slips out of my hands. As I grab it, the boat gets tippy, reminding me of Griffin's remark before we got into the boat that in the "highly,

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LAURA BRYSON of Farmington grimaces as she pulls on her oar during Riverfront Recapture's beginner sweep rowing class. Also in her boat are, from left, Julie Krug Hawthorne of Hartford, Cindy Schafer of West Hartford and Steve Army of Enfield.

Rowing

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highly unlikely" event that it flips, we should stay with the boat and oars, because they float. (I didn't ask what would happen after that.)

Rowing — also known as crew — used to be the province of Ivy League colleges and universities. But in the past decade, it has become popular as a community sport for people of all ages. At Riverfront Recapture in Hartford, rowing programs director Brian Wendry estimates the number of people taking lessons has increased 30 percent in the past two years.

"Anybody can do it," says Wendry, who notes that Riverfront Recapture also offers adaptive rowing for people with physical disabilities (run in partnership with Mt. Sinai Rehabilitation Hospital). The nonprofit organization's mission is to reconnect the community to the Connecticut River through special events and sports programs.

Over the past few years, Wendry says, he has noticed an increase in the number of baby-boomers taking up rowing, especially women.

Wendry has taught many people in their 50s, 60s and even 70s in his intermediate and

advanced rowing classes. Last year, there were two rowers in their 80s, he says.

"It's a sport you can come to later in life," says Chip Davis, publisher of Rowing News magazine, based in New Hampshire. "You don't have to have experience."

I'm told that you also don't have to be in good shape to start, but that it will get you in shape if you stick with it. While aerobic, rowing is also "low impact," which makes it popular with people who have injured themselves in more high-impact sports such as running.

Gently Up The Stream

Riverfront Recapture offers rowing lessons in sweep boats that seat four or eight people. For people who want to row alone, or in groups of two, there is sculling, where each person has two oars.

Wendry says that once people try rowing, they're often hooked.

"I've had people tell me: 'I never found a sport I liked until rowing,'" he says. "It becomes life-transforming."

The sport also offers beautiful scenery and camaraderie.

That's one of the reasons 26-year-old Noah Ratan, a Hartford teacher, is taking the beginner sweep class.

"In the gym, every person is in their own zone," he says.

At this early hour, all would be quiet if not for the drone of cars and trucks along the

I-84 and I-91 highways that skirt the river. With leafy trees blotting out the freeways, however, the view is magnificent — a tableau of mottled green and dark water spanned by the graceful arches of the Buckley Bridge.

The four-week beginner rowing classes — which meet two mornings or evenings a week at the Greater Hartford Jaycees Community Boathouse just off I-91 in Hartford — start on land, with practice on rowing machines. Students graduate to a training "barge" and finally to a rowing shell.

Griffin, who is on a women's racing team at Riverfront Recapture, likes to see her classes bond as they learn to row.

"You really get to see these people come together," she says. "They might know one person when they start, but by the end of the session, they're all saying, 'we should get a boat together and go out rowing.' If you're looking for a community aspect, it's a really great sport."

The next session for sweep rowing classes at Riverfront Recapture runs July 27 to Aug. 20. The cost for the four-week session is \$150. Classes meet Mondays and Wednesdays from 6:15 to 7:30 a.m. or 5:30 to 7 p.m. For more information, visit www.riverfront.org. Classes are open to anyone 16 or older who can swim.