

Cooper: North Jersey rowers merrily living their dream



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By **DARREN COOPER**
RECORD COLUMNIST
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RIDGEFIELD — Nestled on a swervy road behind a row of drab industrial buildings is a small lot with more rocks than grass, a trailer and a port-a-potty. It's noisy. It's hot.

It's paradise for a group of North Jersey athletes.

That has a lot to do with what else is on this piece of land: boats. Long, sleek and fast. There are no signs or banners, but this is where members of New York Rowing launch their crafts into Overpeck Creek.

"I was trying to get to [Overpeck County Park] for five to six years, but this guy got indicted, this guy got indicted, so I just found a piece of property and the company donated it to us," said Tom Curry, executive director of youth rowing for NYR. "They get a tax write-off. We cleaned it up. It's not pretty, but all that matters to us is the pretty water."

The sport of rowing isn't officially recognized by the NJSIAA, and there are only a handful of high school teams in North Jersey, most of them started by Curry.

But in college, crew is a big deal. With schools looking to meet Title IX guidelines, many offer the sport and award scholarships.

One look at the group assembled Friday for practice is proof: Caitlin Begg of [Glen Rock](#) will row at Harvard, Mia Del Duca of [Wyckoff](#) at Bucknell, Lucie Kloak of [Ridgewood](#) at North Carolina, Colleen Hynes of [Maywood](#) at Holy Cross, Nicki Musick of [Parsippany](#) at Rhode Island and Maggie McKee of [Oradell](#) will be the coxswain at Notre Dame.

And while girls get the bulk of the money, boys train as well. Bergen Catholic graduate Evan Ortiz will row at Wesleyan.



ELIZABETH LARA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
New York Rowing members Colleen Hynes of Maywood, left, and Bryn Kenny of Glen Rock training on Overpeck Creek.

A lot of them first competed in other sports. All of them tell a different story about how they got into the sport; maybe it was a friend, a random meeting, a parent suggesting they try something new.

“You really don’t have to be a phenomenal athlete; you just have to have a really good work ethic,” Curry said. “You are going to get better.”

Kloak stepped into a boat for the first time and promptly fell down. But after that first misstep, she improved quickly and has thrived under NYR guidance.

“We started last year in [Elmwood Park](#) and that was basically a dock with sewage everywhere, so this is definitely an upgrade here,” Kloak said. “The water is a lot smoother and it’s a lot more open, so we can see our coaches. It’s awesome.”

What the rowers have found is that the sport combines hard work with individual contributions to a team goal.

“I liked the idea that I could be directly involved in everything that was happening,” Del Duca said, “and I could make the boat go faster for my whole team.”

“You can’t stop short in the middle of a piece,” Ortiz said. “You have everyone else rowing with you and you can’t cut them short. You have to transfer everything you do toward making the boat faster.”

Begg is an accomplished triathlete who pretty much was recruited to row before she ever put an oar in the water. She had offers from Stanford, Princeton and Georgetown before deciding on Harvard. Rowing is her sport now.

“It’s very, very, very difficult; more difficult than anything I’ve ever done,” Begg said. “I have done a marathon. I have done three half-Ironmans, and I can say without a doubt that rowing a 2K is harder than any of that. You feel like you’re going to die and you keep going. It’s terrible, but I love it.”

There’s sort of a romantic beauty to a team of eight or four working in unison on the water. And it’s not just the bald eagle’s nest that they stroke past.

“Some days are hard and practices are always difficult,” Hynes said. “But when you’re with your crew and on the water and it’s just right: The cox is on cue, the blades hit at the same time, you get that whoosh and you hear it in the bow, and everything is perfect. Those moments are few, but when you get it, it’s like a runner’s high. Except it’s a rower’s high, and you feel it in your whole body.”