

- FIRST STROKES

The warm-up begins with a jog to the end of the entrance road and back. It is more about focussing the mind for the session rather than the body. It signals the start of serious training and it works. The mood changes noticeably as we set off. Although we still laugh and talk amongst ourselves - a bunch of students with weeks left of the summer holiday - there's an edge present. A focus.

Today's session is steady-state rowing to get back into the swing of things. The Doctor and Loverboy will row a pair, the rest of us in an eight so The Great Dane can cast an eye over more oarsmen. UEC has always been focused on developing its athletes and I'm proud of this tradition. The cream don't go off and do their own thing and wait for the others to magically catch up. We mix the most talented with novices on camps; it's a great way to bring newbies up to speed. Jesse commands us down to the water and stroke side are first to get in while bow side hold.

We place our oars in their gates, step in and push off. Starbuck is stroke, Big bear at seven, then Senzo, then me. It's a good stern four, but I'm eager to see how it goes with the rest of the guys. Mostly I'm just eager to row for another season, what will be my last. Thoughts of leaving my rowing days behind seem distant; absurd. Given my contrasting excitement just to be in a boat, in the middle of our summer break, ready to sweat and hurt and glide between strokes.

Nowhere I'd rather be.

Rowing is truly an art-form in all boat classes. Moving the boat through the water with the leverage of an oar, the crew in perfect unison, people of different sizes and proportions finding each other to move as one. Pure synergy.

Absolute perfection in rowing is unattainable. But it's what keeps us coming back for more: the pursuit of perfection, moments when a boat finally comes together, the tranquil sunrises and sunsets, or a particularly hilarious exchange. We come back to work on a specific technique and achieve a breakthrough, to find more speed with little or no extra effort. We battle for the fine balance of leveraging off of water: not tearing the water past the boat and not loading the blade with enough force. Perfection is a sublime acceleration: a slick carbon fibre blade pressed up against a liquid wall that's one gram of pressure from tearing apart.

The leverage of the oar and the positioning of the rower can be adjusted by infinite measures. The training of the individual in a sport that requires the ideal balance between strength and endurance is an endless pursuit. It's the same stroke, over and over, but each time the oarsman resolves to eliminate the tiniest inefficiencies. The coach casts an eye on the one in the eight and the eight as one.

JESSE

Stern four ready... Row!

We slide forward and place our blades in the water. Although it's a little clumsy it feels exhilarating. The oar bends as I push my legs down and the familiar coordinated stroke feels natural.

I remember.

- WHEN A BOAT CLICKS

We're in together on the first stroke. We're together for the second and by the third we're one being. The boat speed is picking up. We cut straight past the best it's ever been to something better. It's easier to add more power, to work harder. A relaxed confidence. The more we row, the more we relax, the better we move.

There's a moment when a boat 'clicks', finds synergy. The oarsmen feel as though the boat can only sit level, they can work hard each stroke, but will never tire entirely. One being with eight oars catch together, one drive and one release of the stroke. The boat just glides. And glides. This is that moment.

Drops of rain start to speckle the dark surface. Little dimples in the glass. The intensity in the boat shifts through all of us; an ignition of belief. Like a blue flame racing down a stream of thick black oil, we're burning down the Kowie. It's beyond our control. It's the will of the flame - an insatiable hunger for more - burning and burning.

Bubbles trickle and pop on our hull, the shell singing from one stroke to the next. We're flying and although I'm grafting through the drive, my movements are quick, my muscles are begging me to find them more work.

Bee hasn't said a word since we set off. We burn through The Bay, we burn into the final straight. As we row under the Main Street bridge, the sound of rainfall breaks for a moment into silence. We levitate in a vacuum, my body a limb of a greater being, executing its will.

And Bee lets it rip.

BEE

Pangolins, for the win!

It echoes off the flat surfaces surrounding us. A smile breaks through my crinkled focus and we burst back out into the rain.

I don't want it to end. I want to keep going, to burn down past the finish line, around and past the lighthouse and out into the sea. To burn and glide, and never tire.