

Daily Gazette article

Sunday, October 7, 2012

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Mohawk regatta a long tradition for rowers

By Bethany Bump



Aqueduct Rowing Club and Friends of Niskayuna Rowing sponsored Head of the Mohawk Regatta at Aqueduct Park at the Rexford Bridge on Saturday. Eric Hagberg moves his single scull from the waters after competing in the men's open division.

NISKAYUNA — Bud Halsey massaged his right palm. His hands look the way any 65-year-old man's might: speckled with color spots, lined with wrinkles from a life lived outdoors. The dry, recently cracked blisters on his right palm tell a story of triumph.

"You're supposed to keep the same grip," he says, clenching his fingers with visible difficulty.

Halsey's grip just isn't what it used to be. He hasn't rowed any real distance since a stroke affected the limbs on the right side of his body in 2003. Over the years, he's slowly regained motor function and movement. And just a few weeks before Saturday's annual Head of the Mohawk rowing regatta, he knew it was time to try the course once again.

Photo Gallery Head of the Mohawk Regatta



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His right arm has come back enough for Halsey to row the 2.6 miles from Rexford to Glenville, and the 2.6 miles back, without tipping over.

"This is the first year I've been able to row distance and enjoy it," he said. "And it's been very challenging. My hand moves around too much."

It was a sluggish trek. But it was also a wonderful glide along the Mohawk. Although he hadn't rowed in 10 years, he still lived and breathed the sport. After all, he owns and lives at the Boat House in Niskayuna, just off the Rexford Bridge launching site where hundreds of rowers converge each

October for the annual regatta that Halsey founded in 1980 with a friend.

Each year, he and Don Mangine watch the rowers compete along the familiar stretch of river. They mingle with old friends, ask new friends about their boats and watch the youngest rowers cultivate the same passion they feel for the sport.

Mangine is 75 and still rows the waters outside his riverside camp. He founded the regatta with Halsey but has trouble remembering exactly when he first started rowing.

"It was in '57 or '58," he says from under cover of the shed where racers store their shells.

The morning of Saturday's regatta started out beautifully, with clear, crisp weather and a bit of wind, said Head of the Mohawk Chairwoman Julia MacDonald. But by the time rowers were preparing for the last staggered race, "The Return of the Turn," a gray sky let loose a cold, moderate rain that moved the two co-founders into the shed.

They go back a ways — to 1973, when Ned Bigelow got a handful of rowers in the area together and formed the Aqueduct Rowing Club.

"I was rowing by myself in Albany and bought a camp in Latham on the Mohawk River," recalled Mangine. "And I used to just row there by myself until Ned Bigelow showed up there one day and found out I was rowing. I don't know how he found these things out. He could smell us or something, and so he got us all together."

Halsey chuckled at the story as the wind picked up outside the shed and sent water bottles flying off tables nearby. Wetsuit-clad rowers walked by in sync, holding their long boats above their heads with a meaningful stride unhampered by the worsening weather.

Halsey bought the boathouse from a retired General Electric man who would close up shop every day at 6 p.m., stroll outside with a beer and lavish advice on the young rowers. It was the same year Halsey and Mangine started the regatta, which is now the seventh oldest in the nation and is co-sponsored by the Aqueduct Rowing Club and Friends of Niskayuna Rowing.

On Saturday, it drew more than 300 rowers – from high school and college students to a few men in their 70s. But at its peak, the regatta boasted more than 600 participants.

“Maybe more,” said Halsey.

They chalk it up to the boom in female rowers after Title IX forced schools to open up traditionally male sports to females. It wasn’t that rowing was ever all male; schools were attempting to integrate girls on the same team as boys, and the girls would come home with injuries. Rowing was the kind of sport that didn’t pose these problems.

“They just took to it like a duck to water,” recalled Mangine. “It grew all over. It had equal appeal to everybody. And it was really a sport in which the women were just as important to everybody as the men. Title IX was really a shot in the arm for the rowing community.”

The first year of the Head of the Mohawk was not the sight it is now. There weren’t hundreds of lean athletes. In fact, it was a bit of a lone sight – just two young men and their oars.

Halsey and Mangine had invited the Albany club to come, but the group never showed up that day.

“So Don and I raced anyway,” said Halsey. “We were the Head of the Mohawk. That very first year, it was just Don and I.”

On Saturday, neither man competed; rather, they watched over the familiar but always-changing scene, as they do every year. This year, they spotted a remarkable wooden boat in the shape of a violin, highly polished and made in England. They chatted about attaining the perfect stroke, the perfectly coordinated slide and the perfectly crossed oars.

They talked about their families and wondered about old friends like Ned Bigelow.