

Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily,

Life is but a Dream

Devyani Aggarwal

Tuesdays at Tank B are tense and exciting. Yale's heavyweight crew team spends many hours here, tucked away in a special corner of the basement of Payne Whitney Gymnasium. As a distant observer, I was always intrigued by athletics, which seemed to be a world of its own. I would soon find out that it really is that—a world of its own, albeit an exciting, challenging, life-altering and curiously inviting one. Today is a Tuesday and I have simply no idea about what I am going to witness. The loud and upbeat pop tunes give the training room a festive energy.

The room was lined with rows of bikes and "ergs" (the colloquial name for rowing machines, I would soon learn. Rowers pace in and out of the room wearing body-hugging trousers and curious expressions. A notebook-bearing, reporter-type girl was the last thing they needed on a *Tuesday*.

'You're in the right place! Steve should be here soon.' The assistant coach, Sam Baum, put me at ease as I anxiously looked around like a lost puppy. 'Hi! How are you? I saw coach heading over on my way. He should be here soon.' Tommy Fant, one of the coxswains, greeted me with this comforting news. Five minutes later, Steven Gladstone, the Craig W. Johnson '68 Head Coach of Yale's Heavyweight Crew entered carrying an umbrella in one hand and a steaming cup of coffee in the other. His sophisticated formal attire was a welcome vision and made me feel slightly less awkward as the only person

not in spandex or polyester. A long tweed trench coat and fedora hat completed the look, adding panache to Coach's impeccably timeless look. Not a single person was visibly or invisibly unaware of his arrival.

We seated ourselves facing the workout area and he gave me a quick 101 on the structure of practices. Rowing is a year-round sport and spring is the most important season. When the weather is warmer, the boys practice on the water at Yale's historic, state-of-the-art Gilder Boathouse. These days, they use the warmer harbors of Payne Whitney's Rowing Tank B. Workouts are designed to train rowers not just physically, but also mentally. The idea, Coach says is to "recreate race circumstances." They perform a series of different workouts throughout the week in preparation for the approximately 5-minute races they eventually compete at.

The pressure could be enormous on a typical race day, out in the water. But for now, there is no race day; there is only Tuesday. Coach enlightens me on what I should expect to see. Every Tuesday, rowers are ranked on their speed and performance for the scheduled workout. At the end of the day, there will be a hierarchy. Today, I will see a 3k-cardiovascular practice—rowers perform three 3-kilometer rounds on the erg, breaking them up with ten-minute intermissions. They will be evaluated and ranked based on speed and performance. 'Excuse me,' he rises and swiftly walks over to the opposite corner of the room. The commotion halts, the music stops, and all eyes and ears turn to that corner.

Coach Gladstone sets the agenda for the day crystal clear:

‘Your objective is to produce the best cumulative score and put yourself in the best position. The physiological component is inseparable from mental strength. Such contest workouts prepare you well. The group energy is very important but this preparation brings out the best in each one of you, physically and mentally.’

The boys listen with rapt attention as their coach goes on, ‘Race day in reality is just another day in the office. If you are well prepared, you will do what this training is meant to make you do — reduce time over distance.’

For Steve Gladstone, ‘time over distance’ does not merely exist in theory: it is a quantifiable goal. His speech today echoed what he had expressed to me in another interview. ‘You don’t grow on the beach. You grow when you have a gripping passion and you’re pursuing it. It is during those times that you encounter yourself and there is nothing more important than that. Here’s where crew is life-changing. It’s tight work. You can’t escape that.’ Coach’s mantra, I realized, defined the great athletic pursuit in more ways than one. He seemed to agree. ‘The tremendous appeal of the world of athletics is that you repeatedly witness courage and shakiness, but at the end of the day, there is first, second, third, so on and so forth. We do not have sport because it’s recreational. It’s more profound than that; it’s the sense that lessons can be learnt only in the context of passion and group endeavors.’

Rowers disperse to warm up for today's "contest practice." The coxswains bring out their gadgets and prepare to record each rower's individual score. One of them counts down to the beginning of the workout. "Two minutes...one minute and thirty seconds...!" An extraordinary blend of positive energy and nervous vibes fills the air. Music blasts at maximum volume—I am physically startled and the rowers are ready for their first round. An infectious rhythm and intensity take over the entire space.

Walking around the room, I marveled at my own understanding of rowing. It turned out that I could relate to the sport much more than I thought. Maybe (certainly) not in a physical capacity. The idea of preparing for a shared, foreseeable future, however, seemed familiar. And I imagined it would to many more like me, who felt somewhat detached from the world of sports.

I catch hold of Tommy on the side and wonder whether graded and time-bound practices on adjacent machines could affect the group dynamic. 'Yeah,' replied Tommy, 'but Gladstone made it a point not to have a divided team. They are all friends out of the tank. He clearly told them, "If you're a part of Yale Crew, you're a part of Yale Crew. There is only 100%." For him, being on such a team is about constantly raising your game.' During the ten-minute break, I see rowers glance at each other, telepathically communicating mutual exhaustion. Tommy's words confirmed what Coach had related to me: 'they are not competing against one another; they are competing *with* one another. The objective is not to put the other person's head down. The objective is to distend yourself and develop your own capacity to a higher level, which in turn stimulates the other. Stimulation and growth—that's what it's about.'

The concepts he mentioned—stimulation, growth, teamwork—would not be unfamiliar to most of us. Seeing this put into practice today though, I was finally realizing the true meaning behind the “character building” potential of sports. The program I witnessed was one of the effortless embodiments of Yale’s educational model: diverse people coming together through their common passion to be a part of something bigger than themselves. ‘They come from different rowing environments: from clubs, high school programs et cetera. It’s a lot of fun to watch them interact. The common threads of human nature become immediately apparent. In this day and age, when everybody is looking to separate, they are bonded by their passion for rowing. You’re not sitting around and having coffee at—what’s it called—Blue State? It’s very different than talking theory at Blue State. You’re actually in motion, in action. You’re doing something that’s emotionally and physically demanding. In a boat, you’re racing toward a common goal: each one is raising the standard and thus raising each other.’

Round two begins and instrumental jazzy music balms the exasperation and physical strain of perspiring rowers. The room becomes increasingly hotter and noisier. Seeing the rowers tackle each round with nonchalant valor, I am tempted to ask Coach Gladstone how the mighty deal with fear: ‘When you’re climbing a mountain, there will be phases that generate fear but ultimately, it is a process. And no process is linear or upward; it could be windy or you could face a boulder. But despite that, there is no real failure. The only failure ultimately is to give up on yourself. It all comes back to the value of all of this; you just have to put it together, learn to deal with acceleration and deceleration and at the end you will manage it all. Keep it passionate but keep it in perspective.’

The second round closes with tired faces—some evidently satisfied with their performances and some engrossed in strategizing for the next round. Coach moves around the room constantly as the boys go for it one last time. He often stops to nudge them on.

As their coach, he is attuned to the team's physical and psychological beings. He senses the flow of their days, months, weeks and years. He is there to feel their every pulse and to help them in trying times. He is there to speak with them about their problems and to schedule one-on-one training sessions in the tank. What he is not very clearly, however, is their “friend”— though according to him, that “changes radically after graduation.”

For now, however, the essence of his role is visibly well defined. ‘You want the absolute best for them. You want this process to mark them. I attach a lot of expectation with this process because I know how important succeeding is to them. There is no time more uncomfortable than after you watch your crew kick off at the starting line. After the race, you want them to have the satisfaction of a great race. In this four-year window, I want them to experience that sense of completion after winning the race, that feeling of “YES!”’

I am able to notice, on a micro level, the impact and intensity of the Gladstone “YES!” As the third and final round draws to a close, glistening smiles outshine the sweat dripping from their faces and bodies. The musical genius of Calvin Harris and John Newman ends this competitive workout with the song “Blame” playing in the background. A collective sense of relief and accomplishment takes over as the teammates

applaud each other and break into conversation. Even though each rower was pitched against the other this Tuesday, it felt like the entire team had just won a race.

Haci, a sophomore and recent walk-on, said, “being coached by Gladstone is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He’s a true legend.” Rob, the captain, walks past us inquiring what “pizza boy” was up to. ‘You see that? That’s what I am talking about. The captain treats a walk-on like a friend. The camaraderie and community are great.’

Alex, an English sophomore compares his experience with Yale Crew to his high school rowing days at Eton, where he said the quality of facilities was at par. What sets Yale apart for him though is the depth and diversity of talent and a conscious focus on training techniques. Alex also speaks of his positive experience with the sport in becoming more academically inclined. He notices a similar trend among his teammates here at Yale. This observation reiterated his coach’s thoughts on the same: ‘the qualities that would make somebody excel in rowing are precisely the same qualities that make one excel in the arts, in academics, anywhere. There has to be a passion for what you do; there has to be discipline to go through some tough times together and most importantly, a commitment to a defined, common goal.’ The equipment begins to be put away and the boys are summoned for a final address. ‘When Gladstone speaks, not listening is not an option,’ Alex leaves me to join the group as they stretch together and turn their attention once again to their coach.

‘The work is good,’ he approves, ‘I see progress and development.’ Some practical advice follows, ‘If you find yourself stuck or plateaued, there is a high likelihood that it is

a byproduct of not enough sleep and overt physical exhaustion.’ He is quick to add though that ‘this is not an ethical issue; it’s just physical.’ He continues, expressing cognizance of their current schedules, ‘I know you have lots of demands– academics, so on and so forth. That said, you make a big statement when you make it through this door. If you are engaged in this process, it has to be backed by action.’ Once again emphasizing the need to “sleep, rest and refuel,” he leaves them with some brief final comments: ‘Nice work. Thank you all.’

When I had a last word with Coach, he encapsulated the essence of my Tuesday musings in a final lesson:

‘A sense of well-being is always accompanied by a real giving of oneself. People who inspire are those who jump into the pot, don’t find reasons to jump out of the pot and endeavor to move forward and create lives that enrich the whole. Go for it, understanding that it will not be easy day by day because of all the vagaries life throws at you. We all want to look cool; we all want to be immediately good at things. But there are times when you lose, when there will be a dark cloud. Ask yourself then, is there anything better than other human beings that could take you out of yourself and away from yourself? The giving is what gets you quickly out of the fear and the self-concern.’

Enlightened is how I felt after a Tuesday at Tank B. I walked out the door certainly as a more informed spectator of athletics. Unexpectedly, though, I also left as a more conscious learner and member of a community. The logic of sports, in a few words, answered many dilemmas of life I would usually try to solve through more

unadventurous (and definitely less electrifying) sources. An immersive, albeit brief, encounter with a sport I knew nothing about gave me some precious lessons to ponder over. The “willingness to engage” was taking on a whole new meaning. Experiential illiteracy in modern times makes us blind to the deeper philosophy and purpose of each sphere we interact with. Accomplishment can be worthwhile only when accompanied by the kind of resolve I witnessed through the eyes of a coach and his team. The accomplishment in any collective pursuit lies not in the cup at the end of the race, but in the sense of knowing where it came from, in the sound of “YES!” that Coach Gladstone’s boys are accustomed to screaming out.