

Making the crew

Group exposes urban teens and their parents to racing sport once the reserve of elite schools

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The morning after a late-July storm, a tired bunch of families crouched next to the swollen shores of Bubbly Creek to assess the damage: an overturned dock that once launched the boats of Chicago's only minority crew team.

After hearing the news, Chicago Training Center team members — mostly Hispanic and African-American teens from the city's underserved neighborhoods — reacted with the same discipline learned from four years of rowing, they showed up to help: This time, however, they were joined by their parents.

Crew is the sport of ancient Egyptians, British aristocrats and Ivy Leaguers, and until three years ago it was never heard of on Chicago's Southwest Side. The sport requires full commitment, including out-of-state regattas and practices five days a week. The competing teams have parent boards that know the sport and how it all gets done. But until their children came home from school after hearing a recruiter talk about the team, the Chicago parents had no idea what crew was.

Luis Lara recalls attending his son, Ricardo's, first regatta in May and watching as the athletes raced against one another on the water.

"The other teams had parents who knew each other and were very organized," Lara said. "They were cooking food and cheering on the kids. We were just watching, because we really didn't know anything about the race."

Seeing how committed the other parents were — and how motivated the team was — at the last regatta in July, Lara organized a group of 15 parents to support the rowers and have a cookout by the shore.

The parents have also come to realize how the program can change their children's futures. In its fourth year, athletes from the Chicago Training Center are being recruited by Phillips Exeter Academy and Ivy League colleges. That kind of success has motivated parents to form their own board in support of the team.

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Daniel Izguerra, father of two team members and an active member of the parent board, said it would be easy for parents to keep their kids inside fenced yards in their own neighborhoods, watching from the stoop as the kids take their energy out on soccer balls. But Izguerra, who grew up playing soccer in Mexico City and had never heard of crew, said rowing with the team did more than absorb his kids' energy: It led them to set goals.

Izguerra, who translates team e-mail into Spanish, encourages other parents to get involved even if they can't attend every practice.

In the first year she started rowing, Izguerra's daughter, Genova, became the top student in her class at Hector P. Garcia Charter High School and was awarded an internship at the architecture firm Ghafari Associates.

"This past year has definitely been my best. And it's because of rowing," said Genova, 15. "I think rowing was the trunk to the leaves."

Izguerra initially thought his daughter would get tired of the sport, but she continues to bike the six miles it takes to get to and from practice every day. If Genova needs to raise a grade or improve at home, Izguerra knows he only need mention the chance of her missing a race.

"She knows now what it looks like to fight for something you really want," Izguerra said.

Coach Montana Butsch applauds parents such as Izguerra who motivate their children. He has seen athletes lose steam and knows it's harder for parents unfamiliar with the sport to re-ignite their interest.

A national effort aims to make crew less foreign to urban populations. After 135 years the U.S. Rowing board is trying to diversify the sport and has launched programs in 20 cities nationwide.

The effort targets youth who likely have never heard of crew — or been able to afford the sport.

"Rowing has never been discriminative on purpose," said Richard Butler, inclusion manager of U.S. Rowing. "But the nature of the sport did not provide accessibility."

Butsch, who brought the sport to Chicago's Southwest Side, is able to keep it free. He found funding through After School Matters, the Chicago Park District and corporate donations, and buys used boats for \$3,000 to \$4,000, far less than the \$30,000 cost of an eight-seat boat, standard for rowing.

Giving underprivileged kids the chance to row a boat is not the only goal. Rowing officials are also looking for competitive recruits.

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"They'll be inherently stronger, because they've not had much hand holding" Butsch said.
"They've had to overcome barriers by pushing themselves."

The hard work has paid off for those who stuck with the program.

Senior Argel Herrera has competed in races in England and is being recruited by Ivy League college coaches. For their last year of high school, best friends Charielle McMullan and Abigail Avila will be rowing for Phillips Exeter Academy. And Genova Izguerra, who is entering her junior year, is already breaking the records of her role model and competitor, Abigail.

"I want to be just like her. But I also want to beat her time," said Genova, whose brother Danny, 14, is now old enough to join the team. They ride their bikes to the Gage Park Field House, where the team will practice in the basement until the dock is repaired.

During a recent practice, Danny and other newbies looked up at coach Butsch before taking their first "erg" test on a machine used to simulate a boat and count strokes.

"It's hard, it's persistent, it takes longer than a sprint," Butsch's voice booms. "This is going to be new for you. You should not be comfortable."

A second of silence, then "go!" The roar of 20 erg fans, encouraging teammates screaming "pull!" and the beat of the stereo echo through the field house.

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