

Fighting upstream battle

But fledgling program is making strides in bringing sport of crew to inner-city youths

April 20, 2007|By Barry Temkin

Montana Butsch calls it "a huge leap of faith," and it's easy to see why.

In Chicago, where kids are all basketball all the time, Butsch is looking for teenagers willing to join an embryonic inner-city crew program.

This is definitely rowing upstream because crew not only is largely unknown among Chicago teens but also is about as hip as the polka.

Mayra Correa discovered that when she told friends she had taken up rowing.

"They said, 'Is that even a sport?' " the Chicago Military Academy--Bronzeville freshman recalled. " 'Oh, that sounds easy.' "

Added freshman rower Dave Woulard from Phoenix Military Academy: "Most of the time people laugh at me."

No one was chuckling Tuesday at a Southwest Side church, where the Chicago Training Center has set up shop in donated space. Kids were huffing and puffing and occasionally grabbing a cramping muscle as they worked out on ergometers, indoor rowing machines that challenge lung capacity and pain tolerance.

Butsch, CTC's 28-year-old founder, executive director and head coach, pushed eight athletes at a time through a grueling "erg" session like a man on a mission. It's a mission he adopted after he joined the crew team in 1994 at Loyola Academy and decided it would be a great sport to offer disadvantaged, at-risk high school students.

He kept his dream in mind while rowing at Penn and Oxford and finally began to pursue it 18 months ago after returning to Chicago.

"Hopefully this is the start of something big," he said.

Big means growing the free, year-round program from its current 24 participants to more than 200 by 2011. Big also means developing standout rowers while promoting academic

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achievement and the chance to travel and get a college scholarship, all while broadening the base of what has been a niche sport.

"We would love to have our kids wind up in world championships and Olympics, but it's not strictly about the rowing," said Butsch, who dreams of seeing his rowers become CTC coaches. "If we only get camaraderie and team spirit and the intrinsic values sports brings, it will be a huge success."

The pioneers in this effort are 20 freshmen, three 8th-graders and a sophomore from the South and West Sides -- 13 of them boys. They are Asian, black, Hispanic and white and represent a dozen schools, and they survived a screening process that stressed attitude and demanded a commitment to attending two-hour sessions Tuesday through Saturday.

Wednesdays and Fridays, participants focus on homework and tutoring. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays they go through a strength program and battle the ergs.

All that, and these kids won't even hit the water until June. They will, however, make their crew debuts at 5 p.m. on April 27 competing against other local clubs in CTC's inaugural Tiro Cup, an ergometer-based competition at Pulaski Park in Chicago.

No one said this would be easy.

"I told the kids we would hold them to high standards," said Butsch, who runs the not-for-profit corporation with help from assistant coach Vanessa Diaz and a small board of directors.

"They bought what I'm selling. I've tried to scare them away through hard work, but they keep coming back."

Some apparently come back because of, not in spite of, the workload. Azriel Leyva, for instance, was looking for a rigorous sport but said nothing really clicked until he tried crew.

"If you're really into a sport, your mind says 'stop' but your body keeps going if you have that drive," said Leyva, an 8th-grader who plans to attend Mt. Carmel. "That's what I get when I'm on the machine."

CTC has been actively up and running for about two months. Butsch hoped to begin last fall but spent more time than he expected laying the groundwork.

His most crucial partner has been After School Matters, a nonprofit organization that helps expand out-of-school opportunities for Chicago teenagers. It has provided the initial funding for CTC, though Butsch is pursuing additional money to finance his ambitious growth plans.

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Marvelle Manga, After School Matters' director of regional program initiatives, said the organization expects to have a long-term relationship with CTC.

"We're excited about it because it's an opportunity inner-city youth would not normally be afforded because this is an expensive sport," she said. "And we know if they get good at it they will be able to get lots of opportunities at different universities."

Butsch also has found important allies in the Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Park District and the office of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. Representatives of the mayor's office have done everything from help Butsch network to facilitate the push for a permanent rowing site CTC and other groups are seeking for the South Branch of the Chicago River.

"I try to put the program's mission in front of people to try to pull in resources to help it be successful," said Sean Harden, executive assistant to the mayor. "Once you look at the program you can see why it's a good thing for all the obvious reasons.

"It's easy to embrace."