

## It's all about the tough row



Christina Zhen (left) and coach Chad Tepley (middle) watch as Abigail Avila (right) rows for her team during an indoor match. George Valladares and Jonathan Vega watch in the background.

(Scott Stewart/For Sun-Times Media)

### COMMENTARY

March 25, 2010 BY MIKE CLARK [mclark@suntimes.com](mailto:mclark@suntimes.com)

Four years ago, Abel Duran was a shy freshman soccer player at Little Village High School and the Chicago Training Center was little more than an idea in Montana Butsch's head.

Today, Duran is an outgoing senior rower and the CTC is the kind of feel-good story we need at a time when athletic opportunities for city kids are disappearing like seats on a rush-hour bus.

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Duran remembers the first meeting he went to for the CTC rowing club.



“Right away, when I walked in those doors, there was this red, shiny boat,” he said. “I was like, ‘I want one of those.’”

He soon discovered what else came along with the package.

“My first week, I got a lot of blisters on my hands,” Duran said. “[But] all that hard work, it was fun for me.”

That’s the reaction Butsch was hoping for when he came up with the idea of starting a rowing club for kids at inner-city high schools. A would-be football and basketball player when he arrived at Loyola Academy in the mid-’90s, he soon discovered he wasn’t good enough to make the grade in either sport for the Ramblers.

He gravitated to rowing, a sport in which Loyola had the state’s only interscholastic team at the time. The sport was in his blood — his English grandfather had coached it in the 1940s — and he quickly took to it.

“I was made out for the sport,” he said, a statement borne out by a resume that includes lettering at Pennsylvania and taking part in the sport’s marquee event — the Oxford vs. Cambridge Boat Race — while he was a graduate student at Oxford.

So Butsch had the knowledge of the sport and the enthusiasm to sell it to kids who wouldn’t know a scull from a skull. The question was: Could he find enough of them willing to go through the boot camp-like training needed to become a competitive rower?

Perseverance the key

The answer, it appears, is yes. Butsch started with a group of about 30 kids that first season in January 2007. A third of them have stuck it out, including kids like Duran and Bronzeville seniors Abigail Avila and Charielle McMullan.

Butsch isn’t surprised when kids leave the program.

“There’s a natural attrition because rowing is one of the hardest sports to do,” Butsch said.

Avila won’t argue with that.

“The first practice was really hard,” Avila said. “You have to be mentally prepared for the pain.”

There are other hurdles for the CTC rowers to clear. Butsch’s mission is to bring the sport to kids on the South Side and West Side; his current group of about 60 rowers is roughly



70 percent Hispanic and 30 percent African American, and they're overturning stereotypes about rowing both inside and outside their communities.

"I have to explain it to everybody," Avila said. "Everybody is used to doing the same routine. I'm Hispanic, I'm supposed to play soccer."

"It's not really a sport that everybody would do," said McMullan, who also heard questions about why she was a rower.

Plenty of side benefits

But for those who stuck with it, the rewards have been beyond their wildest dreams.

"I got better with communication," Duran said. "My freshman year, I was very shy. I didn't like talking at all. I met a bunch of new friends [through rowing] and met people who support us."

Avila and McMullan, meanwhile, have scored even bigger prizes: full scholarships to a prep school, Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw the [acceptance] letter," McMullan said. "I didn't want to open it. I was so scared [in case] I didn't get in."

But she and Avila did, and they appreciate the part the CTC played.

"Without rowing, I probably never would have got in," McMullan said.

The story of the Chicago Training Center's rowing program is that of one energetic guy and a bunch of kids who aren't jaded enough to have lost their dreams. It's already got a happy ending, even though it's far from over.

"We made Montana happy," McMullan said. "We're his guinea pigs and we made it through the maze."