

6

“Eight Hearts Must Beat As One”



THOSE NOT intimately involved in the sport of rowing, if they recognize the name of George Pocock at all, will probably identify him as “the man who built those beautiful shells at the University of Washington.” He did indeed build beautiful racing shells, the most beautiful and functional the world had ever seen, but his influence on rowing in the United States went far deeper than the crafting of boats and oars.

As an athlete, he had devoted much of his life to refining the simple premise that superior rowing is the art of making a boat slide through the water at maximum speed with minimum effort. The stroke which swept University of Washington crews to national and international fame in the 1920s and 1930s was, in truth, the Pocock stroke. George was far too modest to claim much credit at the time, but in his memoirs he did admit that he “had quite a bit to do with it.” As Washington crews began to produce rowing coaches for major colleges across the nation, the techniques he had a major share in developing spread throughout collegiate rowing in America. In 1972, he put a description of his stroke in writing:

Before going any further, I think I should describe the stroke Washington was using, as I had quite a bit to do with it. The ex-Washington oarsmen, through the *Seattle Times*, were asked in the 1920s, to select a name for the then famous Washington stroke. As the Conibear-coached alumni were then in the great majority, the name “Conibear Stroke” came into being. Although, in Rusty Callow’s words, “Connie never taught the same stroke two years running,” nobody should begrudge Connie the name,



George Pocock, sculling at Seattle in 1925

for he certainly got rowing off to a grand start at Washington despite the fact he never did learn to row very well himself.

It is very difficult for me to say this, but after all, I had had years of experience rowing and sculling under old-time professionals on the Thames in England. I had never given it up and, in 1923 at the age of 32, I was in pretty good shape. Rusty Callow would get me to row by the crew in my single and tell them to watch the

action of squeezing out the finish; coming to an upright position via leverage from the oar blades and *not* pulling via the feet, but having them loose. A smooth turn of the wrists, and the hands away smoothly and quickly. When the arms are straight, the slide moves slowly forward, not slowing the run of the boat. When at full reach, ready for the next stroke, an almost imperceptible hesitancy.

Now here is the point in the stroke that can make or break the run. If you drive the legs too soon, you break the run. If you try to catch the water without moving the slide, you either have to bend the elbows down, or swing the back without moving the slide, which can cause a double stroke. So many crews develop a double stroke; a catch and a finish, which results in drifting over dead center with no pull of the oars. The stroke as described is one which eliminates that costly loss of forward speed, and can be executed in a smooth, one-piece drive.

A good sculler of Thames fame will make these moves simultaneously. He will catch and drive with the legs at the same time, keeping his back in the same position and his arms straight. When the initial drive is at midpoint, he bends his elbows to come faster over dead center, his back slowly comes over to about a thirty-degree layback, his hands squeeze, providing the force to keep the run on as long as possible before taking the next stroke.

These movements are almost impossible to put on paper or explain by word of mouth; they have to be demonstrated with constant practice until the oarsman gets the true "feel" of the boat. It has to literally become a part of him. It is a living thing, and like a spirited horse, it will work well for him if it is handled right. Just as a skilled rider is said to become like part of his horse, the skilled oarsman must become a part of his boat.

George was a firm believer in the adage that "if it's working you shouldn't try to fix it." In his later years he expressed his opinion of new-fangled rowing techniques and shell designs:

One of the curses of present day rowing and equipment from abroad is the belief that change necessarily implies progress. I am, by birth, nature, and inclination, a traditionalist. I utterly dislike departing from the fundamentals proven over hundreds of years, mainly by professionals who made their living rowing, until I have satisfied myself that the new style offers equally good results. So far I have not been impressed with any of the new departures. I suppose in modern parlance I am a reactionary, but I am only opposed to change if it appears to be change for the worse. When this is the case, I would like to change 'em back again quickly. This applies to a great majority of rowing in America today.

Convinced that a well-rowed racing eight is a thing of beauty and a joy forever, a symphony of coordinated motion, George's heart and soul rebelled at the sight of a clumsy, unskilled crew punishing the graceful craft they were mishandling: