

Members of the Spokane River Rowing Association are seen training during a Thursday evening practice session along Upriver Drive.

photo by Chad A. Nelson

ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT

by Blythe Thimsen

On the water with Spokane River Rowing Association

SOMETIMES IT TAKES ALL OF HIS willpower for Joe Gasperi to hold his tongue when he is at the gym and sees people on the rowing machine, using the wrong form. Gasperi isn't a personal trainer (he's a geologist working for the USDA, helping farmers with land conservation needs), but

he knows a thing or two about rowing, thanks to his involvement with Spokane River Rowing Association (SRRA), both as a member and as club president. "I am so excited about rowing, I always want to share my knowledge with others, everywhere I go, and get them introduced to the SRRA," he says.

Established in 2002, SRRA is giving the people of Spokane a whole new reason to love the Spokane River. Saturdays and two mornings per week, during the months of May through October, while the rest of

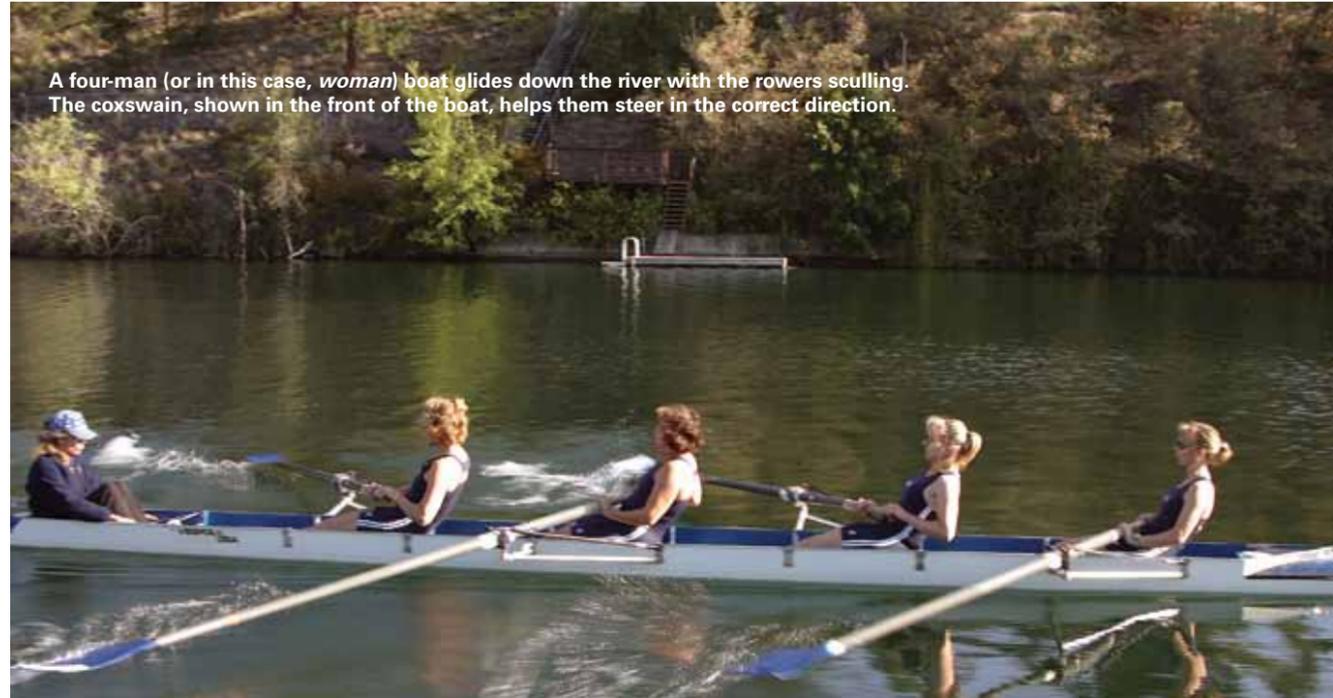
Spokane is sleeping, a dedicated group of local rowers are getting themselves out of bed early in the morning, whether the temperature is warm or chilly, and heading for the river.

For members of SRRA, the lure of the water is addictive. As the boat silently glides across the river, and the oars cut effortlessly through the still water, pulling the boat forward, all the worries of the world are replaced with the steady and calming motion of rowing. The boat glides down the river, and stress seems to fall away, dipping into the water with each submersion of the oar, never to surface again.

This great escape is relatively unknown in the Spokane community, with roughly 35 people currently registered as members of SRRA, and around 14 showing up for each practice. While it is a small, yet dedicated group, the people who are involved believe it is one of the best-kept secrets in Spokane. SRRA would like to see more people get involved with the organization and learn to row. Their message is clear: if you are interested in rowing, they want you—no skill or experience needed.

"I would always drive by the river and see them practicing, and I told my husband about a thousand times 'I want to do that!'" says Audrey Minton, who became involved with SRRA last summer. When she saw an advertisement for a Learn to Row program, she took the plunge and stepped out of her comfort zone, signing up for the class in August of 2010. "I was a competitive athlete growing up, so this was my way of getting back into something where you can compete."

Joel Hernandez is another who was captivated by the impressive sight of rowers on the water. "I came across a picture of an oarsman sculling a long and slim boat on flat water with a beautiful sunrise as a backdrop. I got fascinated by it," he



A four-man (or in this case, woman) boat glides down the river with the rowers sculling. The coxswain, shown in the front of the boat, helps them steer in the correct direction.



Teamwork is essential in all parts of rowing - from putting the boat into the water, to rowing in unison. (These rowers are sweeping, rather than sculling.)

photos by Joseph Sharnetsky

says. "It was just picture perfect for a serene and relaxing moment. I told myself, someday I want to be on that boat. I read up on the subject and the sport, did my research on rowing clubs in Washington and Coeur d'Alene, and found SSRA."

Like Minton, Hernandez signed up for an SRRA Learn to Row class, which lasted six weeks, meeting two times a week for one-and-a-half hours.

Of all the people enrolled in her class, Minton was the only one to complete the entire course and continue to participate in rowing with the club. Taking the August class, she was able to be out on the water until October. Having to take a hiatus during the past winter was excruciating. During February, when the winds were blowing and the rain was falling, she admits that if the boats were out there, she would be, too. "I would! I would totally be out there now," she says.

LEARN TO ROW

The Learn to Row class costs \$120, with the first two classes held in the boathouse, where students are taught the safety, language and technique of rowing. They learn the difference between sculling (rowing with two oars, one on each side of the boat, usually in a single or double boat) and sweeping (rowing with one oar, on one side only, often in an 8-man boat). After the boathouse lessons, it is into the boats and onto the water!

Gasperi says there has been a shift in coaching philosophy this last year, with people learning to scull before they sweep. "We discovered people who went through the Learn to Row program on smaller boats had an easier time transition-

ing to the larger boats," says Gasperi. He learned in a larger boat first, and just learned to scull in 2009, which was challenging.

Large or small, learning to maneuver the boats can initially be a challenge. When you row, you are facing backward, so you don't get to see where you are going. "You have to match the others' pace. It is a team sport, but very individual, too," says Gasperi.

"It was definitely fun," says Minton of her first few times out in the boat. Minton is normally in either a single or double boat. "The doubles are more secure," she says, "but in the singles you learn a lot more about your ability, although it goes slower and you tend to lag behind."

Though going from small to larger boats is easier, "it's a learning curve," says Minton of the skill it takes to advance from singles or doubles to an 8-man boat. "Our coach, Mark, wants us to learn sculling before moving to the big boat." That 8-man boat holds interest for Minton, but she isn't in a rush to get there. "This year I'd like to focus on being a better rower, technically. Making sure I have my posture and positions correct."

Because SRRA is a 501(c) 3 organization, its resources are limited. Thankfully, the group has a great relationship with Gonzaga University. "Gonzaga University is our benefactor," explains Gasperi. "Without the university's commitment to community rowing, we wouldn't exist." The club is allowed to use Gonzaga's equipment and their boathouse as long as they insure the equipment and have a Gonzaga employee with them at all times. That Gonzaga employee is Mark Voorhees, who in

addition to coaching SRRA, is the rowing coach for Gonzaga University.

"The way he communicates with adults is great," says Gasperi of Voorhees. While he is able to have a competitive college team approach for his Gonzaga team, Gasperi sees that Voorhees is able to take a softer approach with the SRRA members. "He talks to you as a person and he talks to you directly. He gives very specific feedback to you and he is very patient and knows this is a new technical sport you are working with."

"I really have to give a shout out to Mark because he has infinite patience, advice and encouragement," says Minton, echoing Gasperi's praise of their great coach.

"In the last two seasons we have been so fortunate to have Mark Voorhees pick up the coaching role," says longtime member, Lisa Galow. "He has done a great job and we hope for him to coach future seasons."

REGATTAS

Under Voorhees' coaching, SRRA partook in several regattas last season, including Spokane Sprints, which consists of 500-meter races with clubs from Pullman and Coeur d'Alene. They also took part in Head of the Spokane, the third weekend in October. "It just happens to be when the first frost hits and you are freezing as you're walking down from the boathouse," says Gasperi. "You are freezing, but it is beautiful with all of the colored trees."

"It was really kind of nerve-wracking, but it was awesome," says Minton of participating in her first regatta. "I was so exhausted by the end, but I couldn't stop, I told myself to keep going," she says of how she felt halfway through that first race. Crossing the finish line in the end was a sweet victory. "I felt like I was a runner, crossing the finish line with my arms up. It was cool because my husband and step-kids were there, filming it and cheer-

ing.”

At *Head of the Lake*, a regatta held on Lake Union in Seattle, SRRA's mixed-masters (co-ed) came in second, with a group from Cambridge, Massachusetts, taking first place. “It was amazing,” says Gasperi. “You see hundreds and hundreds of boats. We rowed from Lake Union out to the cut to Lake Washington. People are standing on the cut and cheering you on. The adrenaline is going and it is so exciting!”

Last season may have been full of regatta victories, but Gasperi and his fellow SRRA board members are looking forward to even better times ahead. “We are really excited about this season,” says Gasperi. “We’re in better shape than we have been in a long time. We’re looking to add new people who just have the desire to try. That’s all we’re looking for.”

Those new people can come from many places. Some have no experience at all, but would really like to learn to row. Others may want to set a fitness goal, or challenge themselves to improve, and some, like Gasperi, may be looking for a new form of exercise.

“I had been a runner and had tears in my patella in both knees and a stress fracture,” says Gasperi of how he got into rowing. “I was looking for a sport that was low-impact, and I saw an ad for the Learn to Row program and thought that would be a chance to recover and heal from my injuries from running. It turned out to be a great aerobic sport.”

Because rowing uses strength from the quads to drive the boat, it offered a workout that didn’t put more pressure on Gasperi’s injured knees, but it allowed him to utilize the strength in his legs that was developed during his years as a runner.

“Rowing, the boat is so long and narrow, that you use your core to steady it,” says Gasperi. “You really have to work on

your core strength to stay stable in small boats.”

“It’s all in the legs, not the arms” says Minton of the strength required to row. “It’s kind of a ripple effect. The movement starts in your legs and moves through your core, up into your arms, and back.”

Gasperi was hooked after his first summer, but he would have to endure a long absence from the sport, thanks to the weather in the Inland Northwest. The summers of 2008 and 2009 the program suffered, as the extreme winter weather translated into high waters that kept the club from being able to get out on the water. After two years of inactivity, the 2010 season brought not only great weather, but also some new people who helped SRRA gain momentum. “We were really lucky that we had some people who were new to the area,” says Gasperi. “It

“We’re in better shape than we have been in a long time. We’re looking to add new people who just have the desire to try. That’s all we’re looking for.” ~ Joe Gasperi, SRRA president

was neat because we got this new core of about 15 to 20 people. Everyone felt like it was a new organization. It was just tremendous. We ended up with a group of about 35.”

SRRA wants to share the joy of rowing with the people of Spokane, and welcomes the prospect of new members. “We are accessible to all skill levels, all ages and both genders,” says Gasperi. “Rowing is for people who don’t have experience, but want to try it. That is our goal, to have people try.” There are only two requirements: that you be at least 18 years of age and can tread water for at least 10 minutes.

If you think you’d like to try it, but have little to no experience, consider the story of Jamie Redman, who started rowing with SRRA at age 18 and recently won a gold medal for Team USA at the 2010

World Championships in rowing. “I really found my athletic niche when I rowed for Yale; rowing was a sport that fit my physical stature and my work ethic,” says the 24 year old former Lewis and Clark High School graduate, who spent many hours rowing with the SRRA. “I spent two summers racing with the US Under-23 National Team, so by the time I graduated, I was able to get my foot in the door with the US Senior Team. I trained hard, avoided injury and earned my first Senior Team berth in 2009 (in the Women’s Four). This year, I earned a spot in the Women’s Eight, and we raced to victory at the 2010 World Champs in New Zealand. I’d love to race at the 2012 Olympics in London, but I’m taking each day at a time. My current goal: stay uninjured, get faster and win a seat in the boat for the 2011 World Champs in Slovenia.”

Not everyone who wants to row has to be so ambitious or have such skill, but don’t stay away out of fear you won’t be any good.

Gasperi understands the hesitation people may feel in joining the group. “You think everyone else is going to be in shape, skilled and great at this,” he says. “You are standing at the boathouse thinking what am I doing here? It’s not like I am going to the Olympics, so what do I want to get out of it?” Gasperi has answered that himself with socialization, recreation, physical fitness and relaxation. “It’s a great way to get to know people,” he says.

Hernandez understands the apprehension as well, considering he had many similar thoughts when he decided to get involved. I thought, “Will I be able to do it? Is it difficult to learn? Would I have the time? Am I too old for the sport?” he says. Overcoming those fears and seizing the opportunity to row with such a great club as SRRA has been a great gift for Hernandez and others.

“Rowing is a fabulous sport: it incorporates the entire spectrum of athletes!”

says Redman. “Elites and novices, men and women, old and young, we all can row together in the same boat. It incorporates both physical and technical elements, and is relatively low-impact, making it a great skill for athletes of any age to learn.”

FLIPPING AND TIPPING

The first time out on the water is an exhilarating experience, but there is one fear that lurks in the back of the minds of many new rowers: flipping and tipping. For many, the thought of flipping in the river is terrifying, taking into consideration the strong undercurrent. “I didn’t think about that,” says Minton of her first experience tipping. “I didn’t think about the danger, just about getting back in the boat.” The hard part when you have two oars is getting back in.

“I still get nervous,” says Minton of going out on the water. “I think the hardest part is learning to relax even though you know you can tip. I tipped in October when it was freezing cold. It is pretty common though; more people than you would think, tip.”

“In 2009, when I learned to scull, I flipped four times,” says Gasperi. “I hold the record for flipping, and those four times were with three different people, so I know it is me, not them. You really know you’re alive when you flip, though, because when you hit that water, it’s so cold!”

While the flipping has been frustrating, Gasperi focuses on the great benefits of being a part of SRRA “I think it is really the sense of community that develops,” says Gasperi of what keeps him so interested in SRRA. “You spend a lot of time working together as a unit and supporting one another.”

That chance to work together and develop community was part of the draw for Eric Bandholz, club secretary. After his wife got a job in Spokane, they moved from back east, and rowing served as a way for

Bandholz to connect with the community. He had previous rowing experience from college, but it had been a while since he was on the water. Being a part of this group made his transition back onto the water, and into this town, an enjoyable experience.

“Camaraderie and team spirit,” says Hernandez of what he has gotten out of being in the group. “I discovered that it is not so much about strength and power but about being in sync with your fellow oarsmen in moving the boat. No individual is more important than the team regardless of experience and talent.”

The importance of teamwork is echoed by everyone in the club. “I enjoy the physical challenge, cognitive challenge, team work, which is a must that has to happen for the boat to be successful; the great people you meet and friendships that are made,” says Galow. Because she and Redman are the only original members that remain, she’s had the opportunity to reap the rewards of being a part of the SRRA team over the years.

In addition to all of the benefits that come with rowing, many members enjoy the serenity and relaxation that are experienced on the water. “It’s kind of meditative,” says Gasperi. “You concentrate on one stroke and then the next stroke. You have to be so concentrated, you block out all else that is going on in your life at that time. It is a tremendous break and you feel so refreshed.”

“Being on the water is hard work, but it is serene,” adds Minton. “With the motion, your mind can wander and think.”

“It is actually my ‘escape’ from work,” says Hernandez who clocks long hours as a pediatric nephrologist. “For one hour,

I turn off my pager and phone and just focus my attention on rowing. Nothing else is on my mind other than the water and the boat. It refreshes my mind and provides me a healthy way of relieving stress. I try as much as possible to block an hour to row.”

It is not hard to imagine how relaxing it is to row down the beautiful and dynamic Spokane River on an early morning. The river and surrounding beauty is one of the greatest things SRRA has going for it.

“Spokane has incredible potential to become a rowing mecca,” says Redman. “First, we have great bodies of water for rowing. The Argonne Bridge stretch of the Spokane River is one of the most beautiful stretches of river I’ve ever rowed, and believe me, I’ve seen my share of rowing courses! The numerous lakes and rivers around Spokane make it a natural location for a rowing community.”

Spokane’s rowing community has been relatively small up to this point, but it is populated by a group of dedicated individuals who are willing to try something new while enjoying the beautiful nature our city is blessed to be surrounded by. “It is a wonderful organization which is committed in promoting the sport of rowing for everybody,” says Hernandez. “I think we are lucky that Spokane has a rowing club. The members are friendly. The club offers opportunities for both competitive and recreational rowing. I encourage everybody to join. No experience necessary other than the desire to learn and have fun.” ■

To learn more about Spokane River Rowing Association, and Learn to Row classes, visit www.spokanerowing.org

