

Chapter 1: Pre 1967 - 1980

"In reality, there are two things that most of our competitors have that we lack. First, funding; second, a history. While the UW boathouse has photos of their crews from the 1930's, our own history has just begun."

- Kelli Congelli, 1996 Oregon Rowing Scrapbook¹

1967-1980

Before 1967 the University of Oregon made one modest attempt to field a crew team. The 1961 Oregana yearbook notes The Rowing Club at Fern Ridge as, "one of the newest interest groups on campus," with plans to, "row against



*Oregon's First Crew at Fern Ridge,
1961 Oregana*

similar organizations from other West Coast Schools."² The original group boasted 20 members, three rowing shells, and a small tract of land to build a facility at Fern Ridge. This team had started independently in the winter of 1959 and was functioning on its own by 1960, workout out with Oregon State on Saturdays, and raising money to buy a crew shell.³ Unfortunately, it shut down in 1963.⁴



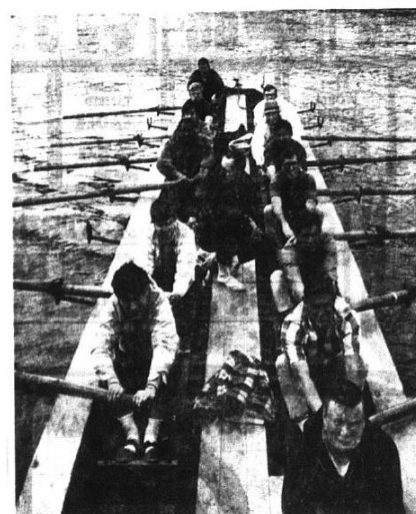
*"Rowing Club" Feature,
1962 Oregana*

Although there was some effort to host the 1965

WIRA (Western Intercollegiate Rowing Association) Rowing Championships in

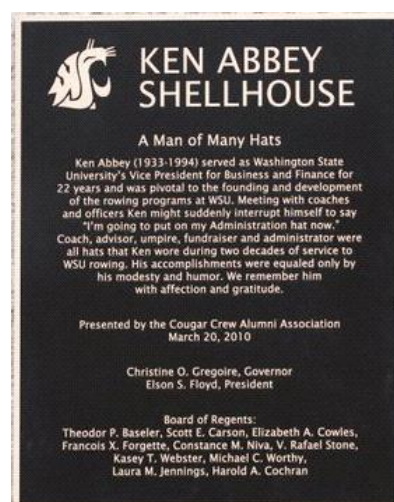
Eugene,⁵ the project of building a competitive program at the UO would not successfully begin again until 1967. It is not a coincidence that Oregon State officially reclassified its club rowing program as a varsity sport in the spring of 1967, just before the Ducks began training in the fall of the same year,⁶ but the majority of the credit for the program's birth goes to the early coaches Don McCarty and Ken Abbey.

Don McCarty was a director for the University Career Planning and Placement Services in the 1960s.⁷ McCarty had rowed at Stanford for famed coach Conn Findlay until 1958.⁸ When asked about his motivation for creating the team and building the original boathouse he said, "all the other Pacific-8 schools had crew programs at the time except for Washington State and us. I thought the Ducks should be on the water."⁹



Don McCarty (Center) with Original 1967 Crew

Ken Abbey, who was previously a rower for the University of Washington, helped to get the Oregon program off the ground before moving back to Washington one year later.^{10 11} Abbey went to work with Washington State University as the School's Vice President for Business and Finance. In tandem with a student named Rich Stager he then used his experience at Oregon to get the WSU rowing program started in



WSU Team Dedication, 2010

1969. In 1970, their first shell house was built and for the next 22 years Ken Abbey would serve as, “Coach, advisor, umpire, fundraiser, and administrator” at WSU, or ‘A Man of Many Hats’ as the plaque on the outside of their boathouse indicates.¹²

Back to Oregon, before building a boathouse for the team, McCarty took a number of steps to procure a small fleet of boats in 1967. If there had been a suitable body of water located close to the university this may not have been such a difficult task, but the closest spots were Fern Ridge (15.4 miles from campus) and Dexter Reservoir (17.6 miles from campus). McCarty chose Dexter, perhaps for its calmer and deeper waters or idyllic scenery, and for nearly half a century UO rowers have been making the 30 minute trek to the lake every day.

Other supporters came forward to help the first twenty-two rowers on the original Oregon Crew.¹³ Karl Drlica the Oregon State coach of 26 years offered support to the program with a loan of two rowing shells¹⁴ and McCarty rented a number of shells from his old Stanford coach, Conn Findlay, at cost of \$1500 per year.¹⁵ In addition to this, McCarty put out a small ad in the Register Guard on May 23, 1967 soliciting funds to build a training barge and buy a new eight-man shell,¹⁶ a goal that was never realized. The team was able to use the dock of the concessionaire at the lake to launch their boats and a coaching launch was donated by Dr. J. A. Shotwell, the director of the Museum of Natural History, and David Cole, curator of Anthropology.¹⁷

McCarty and the rowers then set to work building a boathouse. "The U.S. Corp of Engineers and Lane County were willing to lease a site for such a facility and dock at a nominal cost," according to a record of the story, "During 1967-1968, the crew team

estimated the cost of putting up such a facility would [be] approximately \$3,260 and the team felt that they could easily raise that amount in cash, materials and donated labor."¹⁸

In the first season Oregon's results on the water were mixed. On a high note, during an early scrimmage against the Beavers in February the Ducks pulled off a surprising victory. At a

meeting after the race

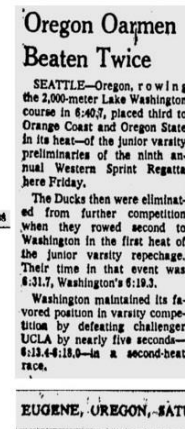
McCarty reported, "They

didn't want to get it in the newspapers, but we took our varsity Saturday up to Corvallis for a practice race with Oregon State. We beat their varsity by one length and their junior varsity by several lengths."¹⁹ His news was met with applause, but for the

remainder of the first season UO rowers only entered 'Novice' or 'Junior Varsity' categories in competitive regattas and found themselves in the middle or near the

bottom of the pack. After one race *The Register Guard* reported, "Oregon, rowing the 2,000 meter Lake Washington course in 6:40.7, placed third to Orange Coast and

Oregon State in its heat - of the junior varsity preliminaries of the ninth annual Western Sprint Regatta here Friday."²⁰



*Eugene Register-Guard Articles,
Early 1968*

By 1969 the Oregon Rowers felt confident enough to enter varsity races, and the University felt confident enough to elevate the startup program to intercollegiate status on a trial run. The *Register-Guard* ran two articles in early



*Oregon Men's 8+,
1969 Oregana*

spring of 1969 regarding the crew team, “Webfoot Varsity Sets Crew Debut” appeared on April 2nd, and on the next day “Oregon Adds Crew to List” followed.^{21 22} Although the first article noted that “Duck [rower] Brian Cole, who came within one victory of making the United States Olympic crew last year, has dropped out of school and will not compete,” McCarty seemed optimistic about the upcoming season reporting, “I think we’re coming along real well, our times have been coming down.”²³ The second article explained that The University of Oregon had officially elevated crew to varsity status on a one-year provisional basis making it the 10th intercollegiate sport at the school.²⁴

Oregon Rowing continued to be tentatively recognized as a varsity sport and a club sport for the next seven years²⁵ although the team was always funded and managed as a club sport. At least 70 Rowers earned varsity letters rowing for Oregon between 1969 and 1976, along with membership into the Order of the O, an alumni group for Oregon Athletes, because of this situation.²⁶

Oregon Adds Crew to List

The University of Oregon officially added its 10th intercollegiate sport this week — elevating crew from club status.

Oregon Athletic Director Len Casanova announced that crew has been added to the intercollegiate program on a one-year provisional basis.

All of Oregon's home crew races — including this Saturday's opener — will be held at Dexter Lake. Saturday the Webfoots host Cal State Long Beach, Pacific Lutheran, and Seattle University in freshmen, junior varsity and varsity competition. This is the first season for varsity competition for the Ducks, and the second year in the sport.

Don McCarty, a 1958 graduate of California, will coach the rowing team.

The freshmen race over the 2,000-meter course begins at 9:30 a.m., followed by the junior varsity at 10:15 a.m., and the varsity all 11 a.m.

Initially, Oregon Rowing was an all men's group, and up until 1972 this was fairly common across the country.²⁷ When Title IX was passed requiring equal funding for women's sports teams, collegiate rowing was changed dramatically. Oregon's mixed status as club and varsity left it outside of the regulations of Title IX in 1972, but within two years



*Don McCarty with Crew,
1969 Oregon*

the Ducks would have a women's crew and also a remarkably important role in changing the structure of men's competitive rowing all over America.

In the recently published bestselling book about the University of Washington's path to Olympic Gold in 1936 titled, *Boys in the Boat*, the author spends a considerable amount of time explaining the structure of rowing. In one passage he writes:

Rowing is, in a number of ways, a sport of fundamental paradoxes. For one thing, an eight-oared racing shell – powered by unusually large and physically powerful men or women – is commanded, controlled, and directed by the smallest and least powerful person in the boat. The coxswain (nowadays often a female even in an otherwise male crew) must have the force of character to look men or women twice his or her size in the face, bark orders at them, and be

confident that the leviathans will respond instantly and unquestioningly to those orders. It is perhaps the most incongruous relationship in sports.²⁸

The point that coxswains are, “often females even in an otherwise male crew,” is something new in men’s rowing, and the first female coxswain to compete in a collegiate men’s shell was a girl named Vicky Brown, a 1972 freshman at the University of Oregon.

By the fall season of 1971, Don McCarty had moved on from coaching the Ducks, and Don Costello, a 23 year old who had rowed for Cal Berkeley from 1966 through 1969,²⁹ stepped up to become Oregon’s second head coach. This change marked the first in a strikingly long list of coaching changes for Oregon lasting to this day.³⁰



Don Costello and Vicky Brown with 1972 Crew

Oregon’s crew put up one win and eight losses in 1970-1971³¹ and Costello’s aim coming into the 1971-1972 season had been to turn that record around with his early prediction that, “we’re going to win some races this year and that’s the kind of publicity that I want.”³² To his credit, Costello’s Ducks would win the season opener against Seattle, a competitor who had thrashed them the year before, but the greatest publicity would come from Oregon’s Coxswain, Vicky Brown.

One morning in the spring, Vicky had been asked by her boyfriend Bruce Paul to tell the other rowers on the team bus to wait for him. The rowers told her, “Forget Bruce. Come aboard.” She joined them and she explained, “At first it was a novelty, I had fun just watching, but the guys said try out as a coxswain and Don Costello gave me a chance to learn.”³³ Costello then checked with Oregon State coach Karl Drlica to see if Vicky was eligible to cox for Oregon. Drlica, president of the Western Intercollegiate Crew Coaches Association, came back and said that Vicky would not be eligible to race.³⁴



Vicky Brown, Coxswain 1972

In response, Costello got into contact with an Oregon Law professor to research the matter further. The professor discovered that, “the WICCA rule barring women was based on a supposed NCAA ban. Since no such NCAA rule could be found, [he] declared Vicky eligible,”³⁵ and conflict ensued. Seattle’s coach, Jorge Calderon was the first person to publicly stand up for Vicky and the Ducks declaring, “If she’s a good



cox, put here in there,” but other coaches were hesitant or even hostile.^{36 37} Karl Drlica at Oregon State stood by his assertion that she was ineligible and Dick Erickson, the Washington Coach declared that if they were going to race against Washington they would have to do it without Vicky.³⁸ Stories of the conflict spread all over the country through national news syndicates ending up in newspapers in California and Wisconsin among others, as well as in a featured article of Sports Illustrated, “Case of the Ineligible Bachelorette.”^{39 40 41 42}

In the end, Vicky coxed Oregon’s season opener against Seattle, an exciting victory, but Sports Illustrated declared that the Ducks “had won the race but not the war.”⁴³ Oregon was forced to put in a substitute coxswain against Oregon State and Stanford shortly thereafter, before voting as a team to withdraw entirely from a race against Washington.⁴⁴ When “asked if he would oppose a girl in a shell even if she

showed she was the best on the squad, [Washington Coach] Erickson said, ‘You bet I would.’⁴⁵

Despite the resistance, history has proved that the Ducks, indeed, won the war. Two years later, in 1974, an Oregon coach would exclaim, “last year we raced a lot of men’s crews with female coxswains that wouldn’t have been there except for [Vicky].”⁴⁶ Today female coxswains are common in all coxed rowing boats. Vicky, for her part, explained, “I feel silly about this, but I’m not on a crusade. If we had a women’s team I’d be rowing on that. But we don’t, so I’m here.”⁴⁷

Don Costello left the Ducks after the 1972 season for law school at Lewis and Clark College. Recognizing the great opportunity for rowing on a nearby stretch of the Willamette River in Portland, as well as the lack of functioning rowing clubs, he proceeded to find a number of partners and begin a collegiate rowing club at Lewis and Clark in 1972, as well as the Station L Masters Rowing Club in 1972.⁴⁸

Both are thriving now. Costello and his partners are largely responsible for the Portland rowing renaissance that has picked up speed over the last few years, and Costello is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in Oregon Rowing History.



Spring Regatta, 1973

1973 marked another exciting and important year for the UO Crew because it was the first year that the University sponsored a women's rowing program. Jeanne Arnold, an incoming Duck Freshman signed up for a rowing class looking for some P.E. credit. She had not realized that the class was the all-male rowing team. "When I found out that it was a crew course for men, it surprised me . . . but it was one of the only courses left open," explained Arnold, "I thought it was rowing row boats." Undaunted, Jeanne and a friend, "put an announcement in the student newspaper, and 40 girls tried out for Oregon's first girls' crew."⁴⁹ At this point, Don Costello had been replaced by coaches Ralph Neils; a rower from Pacific Lutheran University, Marti Abts; a rower from Mills College, Bill Lioio; a local police officer, and Mike Napier; a former UO coxswain.^{50 51}

In the first year, the women's crew received \$350 of the \$4200 which was allocated for the team (\$1500 went to boat rentals). "The \$350 spent on Oregon's first women's crew this year was apparently well spent. The U of O lightweights finished second to Washington in the recent Northwest championships in Seattle. And so did a heavyweight pair, Zanne Pratt and Debbie Strechoar," recounts the *Register Guard*, "Ahead is the Women's National Championships June 14-16 on Oakland's Lake Merritt."

The girls take to the water
They're rowing on a \$350 budget and living on oranges

By DAVE KAYNES
of the Register-Guard

The crunch of gravel under the tires of a brown van broke the silence on the eastern shore of Denton Reservoir in late afternoon.

A dozen young ladies, clad in green sweaters and shorts, clambered out of the van and into a brown shack known presumptuously as the crewhouse.

One girl, the smallest, yelled instructions as the boat came out of its rack. A few grunts later and the sleek craft was at arms length over the heads of the eight girls, the University of Oregon women's crew headed for the water.

The girls must have laughed about the recent squabble over the U of O failing to keep within its \$1.9 million athletic budget.

WHAT FUNDS they do get come from the club sports program. In all, crew at Oregon is budgeted \$4,200 while a similar program for women and men at Washington is allotted more than \$100,000. California budgets \$70,000 just for its men's program.

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And so did a heavyweight pair, Zanne Pratt and Debbie Strechoar, all that remain of the Duck heavyweight crew which was decimated by three injuries on the port side.

Ahead is the women's national collegiate championships June 14-16 on Oakland's Lake Merritt.

If the past is any indicator, it will be a spartan trip.

"Our lone treat on the trips to Seattle and Corvallis was a pizza afterwards," said Marti Abts, the volunteer, part-time coach.

VIEW PEOPLE realize how dedicated these girls are," she continued. "Despite all the obstacles (financial and physical), they have worked their way into being a pretty good crew. Under the same circumstances, I might not have stuck it out."

But Marti remembers the days when

Please turn to Page 3D, Col. 4

Talented tandem: Zanne Pratt (left), Debbie Strechoar give UO hope in heavyweight pairs

*Eugene Register-Guard Article,
June 10, 1974*

Merritt.”⁵² Unfortunately the women would not make the Grand Finals at the National Championships but the UO women’s crew is thriving today because of their early efforts.

In addition to the women’s successes in 1974, the Ducks fielded both men’s heavyweight and men’s lightweight crews. Ralph Neils, the 1974 head coach, had been watching the Ducks since his time as a collegiate rower, and he speculated that both men’s boats were the best ever for the program.⁵³ The spring schedule for 1974 included six regattas, a heavyweight race against



*Eugene Register-Guard Article,
April 10, 1974*

Stanford at Dexter Lake (April 13th), the Corvallis Regatta (April 19-21st), the Portland Regatta (April 27th), the Northwest Sprints at Seattle (May 11th), and the West Coast Championships at Vancouver, B.C. (May 17-18th) with the addition of the Women’s National Championships (June 14-16th) later in the season.^{54 55}

A 1975 article written by Oregon rower Ray Hopfer stands as the only written record for the spring 1975 season.⁵⁶ The *Oregon Daily Emerald* article titled, “Oarsmen falter” discusses a spring season



Crew Club, 1975 Oregon

loss by 13-seconds to Oregon State and mentions new coach Reed Adler, brother of the Long-Beach State Coach, who would be replaced in the fall 1975 by Coach Chuck Knoll, a former UW Rower and 4-time National Champion.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, Brian Cole took over in 1975 as the coach for the Oregon women. Brian Cole had been Oregon's first stroke seat on the original crew, and he had dropped out after his first season.⁵⁸



*Brian Cole Feature, Eugene Register-Guard,
June 1968*

Amazingly, before dropping out, he

very nearly made the 1968 Mexico City Olympics as a novice rower. After some early encouragement from Oregon and Washington Coaches, Cole raced in the 1968 Long Beach Rowing Trials, earning a bronze medal and almost pulling off what Oregon Coach Ken Abbey called a 100-1 longshot.^{59 60}

Cole's first women's team was made up of 18 novice women with no returning rowers from the original women's crew in 1973-1974.⁶¹ Still, they showed some success as the *Oregon Daily Emerald* reported, "after only two weeks of practice with five members who had never rowed before, the Oregon [crew] took third place at last Saturday's Invitational Regatta in Corvallis."⁶² Two men from the Oregon team would make an attempt at the Olympics under the direction of Knoll and Cole in 1976.⁶³ Cole also remarked that Freshman Melinda Campbell on the Women's team "may very well be seen in the Olympics [in 1980]."⁶⁴ But, the Duck hopes would be overshadowed by

Oregon State's own first Rowing Olympian Robert Zagunis who went on to finish 11th in the Coxed Fours event at the Montreal Games.⁶⁵

For Oregon, the 1976-1977 season saw another coaching change as Mike Johnson took over for the men and Jim Medlock took over for the women.^{66 67} Johnson was a collegiate rower at Cal Berkeley from 1967-1970, and he would go on to coach the Oregon men for the next three years.⁶⁸



*Mike Johnson with Oregon Men's Crew,
Late 1970's*

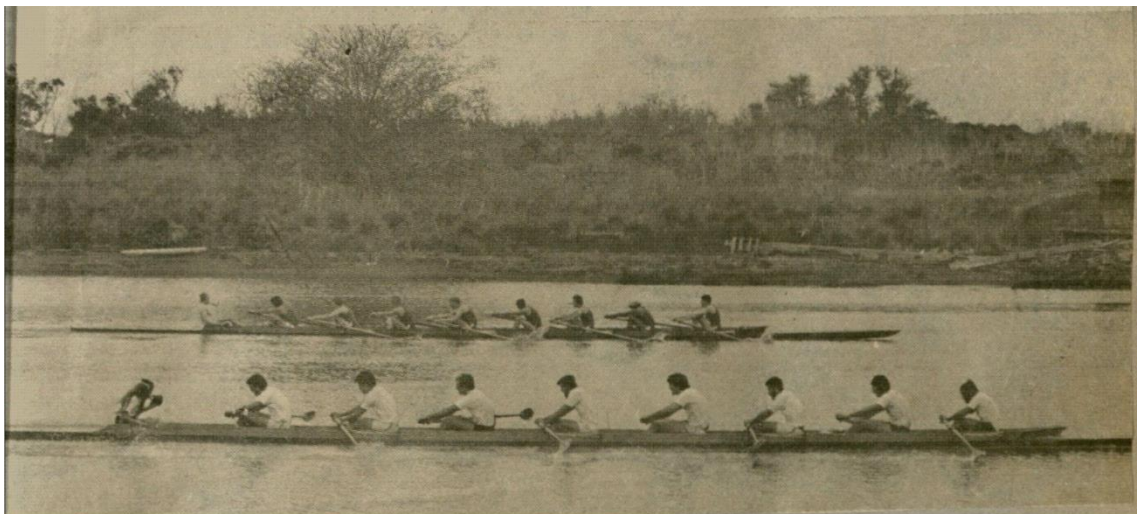
Medlock, a former Washington rower and a member of the National Team, coached a team of 13 women in 1977 before leaving to be replaced by Paul Schultz for the next two seasons.⁶⁹ The *Oregon Daily Emerald* noted a strong performance against the Beavers in the spring of 1977:

The University of Oregon varsity crew came up with two surges to hand Oregon State University a defeat . . . on Dexter Lake Saturday. The Ducks, with four lightweight crew members in the boat, put on surge to pull into a half-shell lead at the 750-meter mark, then got an open water lead over the Beavers with another surge at the 1,200-meter stage in the race.

With Lance Baughman at stroke and Russ Ward at coxswain, the Ducks held the Beaver eight, composed entirely of heavyweights (160 pounds and up) at bay

over the remainder of the estimated 2,200-meter course, crossing the finish line in 7 minutes flat to 7:05 for OSU.⁷⁰

Near the end of his coaching term, Mike Johnson reflected on some of the successes and challenges of the team. “The thing about [Oregon Crew] is public non-awareness. To watch the sport is to love the sport. [But], it is a club, and fan support doesn’t have anything to do with it; it is for the participants themselves . . . We had two to three good years, but there are always limitations at the beginning of the year,” Johnson explained.⁷¹ The *Oregon Daily Emerald* article, aptly named “Crew Team Continues Upstream Fight,” is a reflection on the first twelve years of the Oregon Program and indeed the entire history. “The University women’s crew team is in the same shell,” noted *The Emerald*, “they find themselves competing against schools where money and emphasis produce consistent high quality teams.” Schultz, the women’s coach, went on to point out the success and dedication of the 18 novice women on the 1979 team who won the petite finals at the Corvallis Invitational that year.⁷²



Oregon 8+, Spring 1979

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