

The Boys in the Boat

Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics

REVIEW BY GLENN RIFKIN

FOR MOST PEOPLE, rowing is a sport out beyond the edges of popular attention. Unless you've rowed crew in high school or college, it is difficult to imagine the lure and the beauty of the endeavor. Mostly, rowing is a cutaway shot in movies set in Boston or Philadelphia and its esoteric nature is elusive at best.

Then along comes a book, out of the blue, propelled to best-seller status by nothing more than word of mouth, and readers discover the remarkable blend of the physical and the cerebral, the spiritual and the ferocious, that lies at the heart of rowing. Set as the backdrop the rugged Depression-era Northwest, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and the 1936 Berlin Olympics in Hitler's Germany, and add a group of Seattle-area farm boys and a taciturn Scandinavian coach and British boat maker, and suddenly, you have a story as compelling as "Unbroken" and "The Right Stuff."

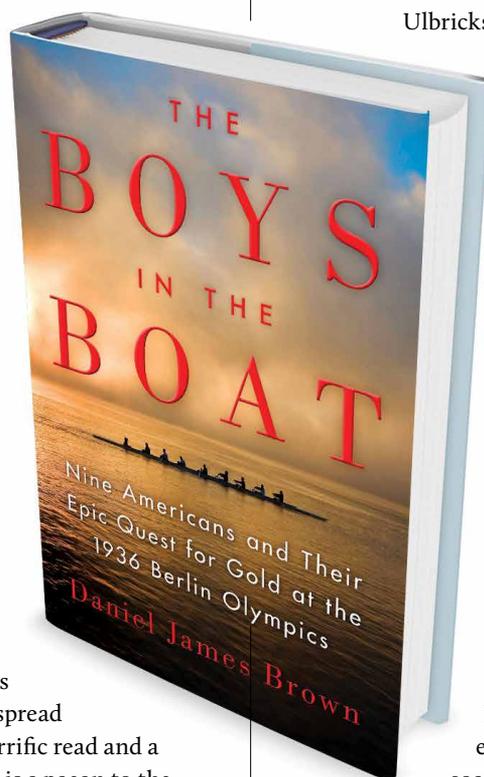
"The Boys in the Boat" by **Daniel James Brown**, a Seattle-area writer, has done what every author dreams of: it has struck a chord and sparked a widespread buzz. Beyond the fact that it's a terrific read and a great story, "The Boys in the Boat" is a paean to the idea of selflessness, sacrifice and dedication, of sublimating the individual's ego for the sake of the team in order to reach unprecedented success.

The story traces the University of Washington's eight-man crew through the early 1930s as its quietly intense coach Al Ulbrickson attempts to find a unit skilled enough and tough enough to compete for a gold medal at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Crew back then was a hugely popular sport, drawing na-

tional attention in the sports pages and big crowds to the shores of rivers and lakes where competitions took place. Rowing had long been the province of the Eastern elite, the prep school grads who went on to Ivy League bastions such as Harvard, Princeton and Yale. But out on the West Coast, two college programs, Washington and the University of California, Berkeley, had become unlikely powerhouses and fierce rivals.

Ulbrickson built his teams with working-class boys who worked on Depression-era farms or as fishermen and lumberjacks and could barely find the money for tuition. Daniel James Brown had a chance encounter with one of those boys when he was an old man near death. Joe Rantz, whose strength and spirit rivaled that of Louis Zamperini, the hero of "Unbroken," is the central character in "The Boys in the Boat." Brown listened to Rantz's remarkable story, a tale of a heart-breaking boyhood, of his introduction to rowing and shells and oars, and the redemptive qualities that rowing brought to Rantz's life. The book is built around Rantz and his teammates, who begin as wide-eyed, naïve freshman and eventually coalesce into Olympic champions, a journey both improbable and inspiring.

In the mix is a Yoda-like figure, George Yeoman Pocock, a British boatbuilder who made his way from England to Seattle and set up his workshop in the University of Washington boathouse. There, he built the world's best shells, shells that were in demand around the country at every university rowing program. Pocock is a legend in the world of rowing and his skill as a boat maker was rivaled by his deep



love and philosophical commitment to rowing. He believed that rowing made a man more of himself, fashioning a lifelong mix of strength and discipline that would form the foundation of a successful life.

“Rowing is perhaps the toughest of sports,” Pocock said. “Once the race starts, there are no time-outs, no substitutions. It calls upon the limits of human endurance. The coach must therefore impart the secrets of the special kind of endurance that comes from mind, heart and body.”

As Brown writes, the physical demands of rowing, especially in the eight-oared shell, are exacerbated by the complicated sequence of movements that each oarsman must execute with precision, a precision that becomes more and more complicated as the race heats up and the stroke rate increases.

But beyond the strength and coordination lies the paradox at the heart of the sport.

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sublimation of his own raw strength into the symphony of the crew that carries the narrative forward. Abandoned by his father and shrewish stepmother when he was just 15, Rantz grew to be a strapping, 6’3” athlete who probably would have succeeded in football or basketball. But his place as an oarsman for Washington, the torment of being demoted and placed in a lesser boat, of finding a life balance amid unspeakable hardship, is Shakespearean in scope. Rantz was just one of nine Olympic champions in the Washington boat in Berlin but he epitomized the extraordinary effort it required to be on that water, in front of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi propaganda machine, against hand-picked German oarsmen, and power its way to the gold medal.

The race is actually available on YouTube because it was part of the notorious “Olympia,” the Leni Riefenstahl documentary released in 1938 as an homage to the Nazis and the Aryan dream. The Nazis did everything they could to ensure German victories and

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earth,” Brown writes. “On the one hand, they must possess enormous self-confidence, strong egos, and titanic willpower. They must be almost immune to frustration. Nobody who does not believe deeply in himself or herself—in his or her ability to endure hardship and prevail over adversity—is likely even to attempt something as audacious as competitive rowing at its highest levels. The sport offers so many opportunities for suffering and so few opportunities for glory that only the most tenaciously self-reliant and self-motivated are likely to succeed at it.

“And yet, at the same time—and this is the key—no other sport demands and rewards the complete abandonment of the self the way that rowing does. Great crews may have men and women of exceptional talent or strength; they may have outstanding coxswains or stroke oars or bowmen; but they have no stars. The team effort—the perfectly synchronized flow of muscle, oars, boat and water, the single, whole unified and beautiful symphony that a crew in motion becomes—is all that matters. Not the individual, not the self.”

It is Rantz’s journey to self-awareness and this

in rowing, they won gold medals in the first five races before the British doubles shell rowed to victory in the sixth race. When the eight-oared American boat, despite being placed in an extremely disadvantageous position on the course, still managed to win the gold in the signature event, Hitler stood and stalked off the viewing platform in a fury.

Like track star Jesse Owens, the Washington eight showed up Hitler on his own turf. They eventually became lost to time and history and their story more than deserves this resurrection. For Joe Rantz and his eight teammates, the endless hours on the water, in the cold, the rain, the wind and the snow, became indelibly etched into their souls and they stayed in touch and held reunions as long as they lived. Having experienced the joy of melding into a selfless, singular unit, a part of them held on to that joy for the rest of their lives. They believed deeply in Pocock’s tribute to rowing.

“Where is the spiritual value of rowing?” Pocock wrote. “The losing of self entirely to the cooperative effort of the crew as a whole.” //

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