

Column: Life Lessons from Rowing: finding purpose on the water's surface

By Lynne Golodner Special to MediaNews Group | Mar 7, 2020

In the early morning or early evening, the Detroit River is tranquil, glass-like. Rowing in an eight is one of the best ways I know to be present and focused, to step away from the stresses of daily life, connect with soul, purpose, and friends, and remember what matters.

Rowing and swimming coach Kerry Shaffer knows this firsthand. As a former Canadian national champion and current Macomb County resident, Shaffer sat in 3-seat when her team won a bronze in the World Cup, but says the key to success is being flexible enough to sit in different seats and build a variety of skills that are valuable to moving the boat forward.



Lynne Golodner



Kerry Shafer

Yes, the metaphor is intended. There is so much about rowing that is impactful for business and even family life. Striving to have all oars move forward and back at the same time. Being in sync with other people. Focusing your gaze forward. Being present in this moment only. Knowing that purpose comes from stillness and focus, and when you do things with purpose, you build a life of meaning.

In my interview with Shaffer on the Make Meaning podcast <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-make-meaning-podcast/id1448252358>, we discussed how team sports can teach us to get along at work and in life, and help us become the person we are meant to be. Here are some insights from that interview, and life lessons I learned from rowing.

Motivation Comes From Within

There are coaches that yell and degrade, and coaches that lift up and encourage. Shaffer is the latter kind of coach -- because she knows that kindness creates motivation. Lift people up, and you lift up the whole team.

Discipline Is Its Own Motivation

Rowing demands precision, but most rowers never achieve perfection, Shaffer notes. Life is like that. The challenge and the beauty lie within constantly trying for perfection and accepting that you'll never get there. The journey is truly the destination.

Teamwork Requires Selflessness and Confidence Simultaneously

The coxswain calls movements for the rowers, and those in the boat perform what is called. In any seat, you must believe you can do it but also defer to those in front of you and consider those behind.

It's Hard to Get in Sync - Eliminate Distractions to be Present

I started rowing in my 40s and love the sense of community and camaraderie with the fierce workout. I love being mesmerizingly close to the water, watching the oar peel through the river's surface. "It is rhythmical, beautiful and artistic," Shaffer says. "Like most things, it's deceiving. When things look good, it usually takes a lot of work to get there."

Look Inward to Fix Things

All of us have "caught a crab" at one point or another -- when the oar gets stuck and knocks you back. It's terrifying and sudden, and throws the whole boat off. Of course, no one intends for it to happen. When we're thrown off course, we must reconnect with our inner purpose to keep moving forward.

Even Hard Things are Worth Doing

When I complain about the challenges of owning a business, my mother reminds me, "If it was easy, everyone would do it." Rowing is not an easy sport. The benefits are many -- fitness of mind, spirit and body, fresh air, sunshine, increased confidence. The challenges are many, too -- callouses on your hands, utter exhaustion from head to toe, fear of flipping the boat or throwing everyone off. Any time we face a challenge head-on, we build character and increase overall happiness.

Repetition Brings Progress, and Skill

One of the things I love about rowing is that I mostly focused on improving my own skill to be better in the boat. Personal improvement makes the whole team better. You're competing against yourself -- to best your last record, get an inch closer to the finish line. Winning is about persisting.

Don't Compare Yourself to Others

It's hard to not feel inadequate when we see people posting perfect images of their lives. National sports teams contribute to the illusion of perfect, Shaffer warns. When she rowed for

Team Canada, she felt like she was failing more than succeeding. “We put people on pedestals, but they’re just normal people doing extraordinary things,” she says. It’s easier to admire someone when you know they are human.

The Most Beautiful Moments are Often the Ones We Sleep Through

I didn’t row often with the masters at 5 a.m. because it hurt to wake up at 4 and drive along sleepy streets. But when I did, I had the best days. Many of the world’s leaders wake before the sun to experience uncluttered time and connect with purpose. Even if it’s not a regular occurrence, consider adding an early rise to your calendar and fill that time with meditation, writing, or contemplation. Seeing the natural beauty of each day reminds us that life is meaningful.

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https://www.theoaklandpress.com/column-life-lessons-from-rowing-finding-purpose-on-the-water/article_0f90fdd6-5f2c-11ea-b4f1-03881eb89934.html