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One Motley Crew

The Lads Who Brought Home Rowing's Holy Grail

Todd Simpson remembers it in slow motion, a nautical version of that climatic scene in *Chariots of Fire*, eight oarsmen straining in desperate synchronicity, one coxswain urging them on, thousands of spectators lining the River Thames to catch a glimpse of England's Royal Henley Regatta. He recalls the roar of the crowd diminishing in volume, muted into hollow background, the dominant sound being the slice of wood through water, as the Cornell crew took on the best the world had to offer.

He remembers it as if were yesterday. But it was 40 years ago this month, in the wake of McCarthyism and at the peak of the Cold War, that nine Cornellians found themselves 3,000 miles from home in a muscle-burning arms race against the Russians. Both crews would surpass the record for the fastest time over one and five-sixteenths miles in this, rowing's most prestigious event. Neither boat had any intention of coming in second.

Forget *Chariots of Fire*. This was a movie moment.

They were a motley crew, the 1957 Cornell nine. Motley in the sense of variegated and diverse. Four were from Western New York, one from Long Island, the others from Oklahoma, Ohio, Massachusetts and Wisconsin. Seven were engineers and two were Aggies. Four wore glasses, all wore crewcuts.

The oarsmen, seniors all, brought their own personalities to the boat. In the front of the shell was John Van Horn, the light-hearted clown. "Words from the bow," they called it whenever he took it upon himself to break the tension. Behind him was Bob Staley, the cheerleader, followed by steady and silent Dave Davis. In the number-four seat was the six-foot-six Simpson, an outspoken Southerner who always seemed to finish a race bloodied, having chafed half the skin from his hands onto his shirt.

Behind Simpson, in the engine room of the boat, were Bill Schumacher and the commodore, Clayton Chapman. George Ford in the number-seven seat and Phi Gravink, the stroke, were the two Aggies, the self-described farmers in the back of the boat. Watching it all from his seat on the stern was 125-pound coxswain Carl Schwarz, the coach in the shell, a fiery

competitor who loved to command eight guys who were double his size. “He could look you in the navel,” says Gravink, “and spit in your eye.”

None had ever rowed before arriving in Ithaca. Only one had even seen a race. Yet from the beginning they were something special. “They were a good freshman crew, a very good freshman crew,” recalls Coach R. Harrison “Stork” Sanford. “They gave the varsity a very good run that year. In fact they may have been a little better.”

Featuring eight of the nine oarsman who would share a shell as seniors (Davis was in the second freshman boat), the undefeated 1964 freshman crew left the competition in its wake, setting several course records and winning the Eastern Championships. Seven of the nine freshmen, all but Davis and Staley, moved straight to the varsity boat the following year. Though the Big Red placed second to Navy in Annapolis and to Penn twice early in the season, the crew rebounded to set a course record in Princeton, New Jersey, and beat Penn by more than two lengths at the Intercollegiate Rowing Association Regatta. Cornell boasts more IA championships than all other Ivy League schools combined, but this was the Big Red’s first in a quarter-century.

The crew grabbed a second consecutive IRA victory a year later, but the story of the 1956 season was the remarkable rivalry between Cornell and a non-IRA competitor, Yale. The Elis took the first encounter, winning by a length-and-a-quarter on Connecticut’s Housatonic River in early May. The Big Red won the second meeting, finishing six-feet ahead of Yale a week later at the Eastern Sprints. The rubber match came on the final day of June when the two rivals met in the final round of the U.S. Olympic Trials. The Big Red lost by less than the length of the boat. The Elis went to the Melbourne Olympics, winning the gold, while the Cornellians went home to various points in the Lower Forty-Eight to ponder what might have been. “I don’t take anything away from Yale. They were a great crew, but I still think we were better,” Schwarz says. “We had the outside lane, where the water was choppiest. They had the inside lane, where the water was calmest. And we lost by a few feet. It’s a loss that still pains.”

It was so painful, in fact, that the coxswain would later join Staley, Davis, Schumacher and Chapman in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to earn a four-oared spot on the 1960 U.S. Olympic team. Still, others in the shell have become more philosophical about the agony of defeat. “I learned far more from crew and Coach Sanford than I did from any course at Cornell about the business of living life,” Simpson says. “It causes you to come to grips with your own performance, and losing is a part of that.”

They would not lose again. Staley moved up to the varsity boat in 1957, and the boat moved up to a higher level. On May 11, a week after defeating Navy and Syracuse, the Big Red crew covered two miles on Cayuga Lake in 10:01.2, beating Yale by a length, as well as Princeton and Syracuse. It was the fastest time in seventy-five years of regatta racing on Cayuga, nearly six seconds better than the old mark. The performance led *Sports Illustrated* to run a story under the headline “ALL HAIL CONELL.” It also led the race referee, former Olympic rowing chairman Tippy Goes, to admit that this Cornell team was damn near as good as the one he used to cox at Syracuse more than fifty years earlier. “From him, that’s high praise,” Big Red

trainer Georges Cointe pointed out. “Nobody ever gets as good as an old-timer, until they become old-timers.”

Sanford’s crew followed the triumph with a victory over Yale by a foot at the Eastern Sprints a week later and over Penn a week after that. In late June, the Big Red became the first school to win three straight IRA titles since – well, the Big Red in 1912. But the big one was yet to come. For the first time in sixty-two years, Cornell was invited to compete in the Royal Henley Regatta.

The last time the Big Red crew has participated, in 1895, it had finished third, winning only a fouled-up first heat that had left the defending champion at the post. “The British newspapers ragged us unmercifully, criticized our manners, deprecated our sportsmanship, and gloried in our losing,” former Athletics Dean Bob Kane ’34 would later recall. Six decades later, it was an opportunity for sweet redemption, not only in the eyes of the British press but also because at the last minute, Yale decided it was going to Henley, too. Some observers grumbled that the Elis, having already had their day in the sun at the 1956 Olympics, were simply trying to steal the spotlight from the Big Red. But the Cornell crew looked forward to the challenge. “It was the ultimate revenge,” Gravink explains, “to be able to go into international competition against the Olympic gold medal team.”

But first they had to get by the Russians. They were lucky to receive a first-round bye, enabling Sanford to scout the Leningrad-based Club Krasnoe Znamia in its first heat and develop a strategy. When the race rolled around on July 5, the Big Red rowed faster than anyone had ever rowed in 118 years of Henley heroics, beating the Russians by a length and breaking the old record by eight seconds. This time, the *London Daily Telegraph* wrote, “No praise is too high for Cornell. The fine judgement of their stroke, the splendid backing of crew behind him, and the power and length they achieved throughout reached classic standard.”

The following day, Cornell and Yale hooked up in the first all-American Challenge Cup final in Henley history. Earlier in the season, Penn coach Joe Burke had declared them “the best crews in the history of rowing.” But many thought Elis, who returned four members from the Olympic gold medal shell in 1956 had the advantage. “Everybody wants to beat the Russians, and this was a climax race for us. Afterwards, there is a natural letdown and you have got to build again.” Sanford told the Associated Press. “For Yale it’s different.” They are pointing at us.”

Not only had the Elis had an easier time in the semifinals, but they’d arrived in England nine days before the Cornell contingent and were more accustomed to the climate, time difference, and Henley sprint distance of a mile and five-sixteenths. Said Yale Coach Jim Rathschmidt: “We are going to have a real close race.”

He was right. Although Cornell took an early lead of six feet at the quarter-mile mark and maintained a three- to eight foot edge for most of the race, a late spurt by Yale closed the margin. The Big Red shell answered with a closing push of its own, crossing the line in 6:53. “Thus,” reported the *Daily Telegraph*, “did two splendidly trained crews wind up a wonderful and memorable race with Cornell leading by just a half a length.”

Following the victory, an AP photographer snapped the Big Red rowers tossing their coxswain into the Thames. That same day, just down the road a bit, Althea Gibson became the first black tennis player win a Wimbledon singles title; the two stories shared an above-the-fold headline in the *New York Herald Tribune*.

After the race, Sanford, Cointe, and Simpson (whose wife was pregnant) traveled back to the States aboard the Queen Mary. The Big Red shell traveled with them. But the rest of the team opted to compete in the European Championships in Switzerland. With Glenn Light '58 filling in at number four, Cornell attempted to cap its first unbeaten varsity season in forty-five years by racing in a borrowed shell, which is a bit like borrowing a piece of lumber with the bases loaded in the World Series. "On Monday or Tuesday of that week, I wouldn't have given you a dime for our chances. It felt extremely awkward and different," says Gravink. "But by the race weekend, we won the whole thing."

After a triumphant return home, the crew members scattered to all corners. Four decades later, the physical distance remains. Bowman Van Horn died in 1993, succumbing to pancreatic cancer. Staley is in Hong Kong as a vice chairman of Emerson Electric Company. Davis, a retired construction company president, lives in Danville, California. Simpson owns a small business in Houston and a ranch in west Texas. Schumacher roams the globe for SR Consulting, based in San Francisco. Chapman is commissioner of the 288-member Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference on Cape Cod. Ford is a truck driver, cruising the country in his own rig. Gravink, who rowed stroke, is CEO of a New Hampshire ski area. Schwartz, the coxswain, is a lawyer in Washington, DC.

But the bond between them, constructed from hours of sweat and moments of glory, is still strong. The oarsmen see each other as often as possible—at Gravink's place in the White Mountains, at Simpson's ranch, at Cornell reunions, even at Henley on the occasion of the thirty-fifth anniversary of their triumph, when seven regulars and two backups from the '57 crew (Light and John Meakem '58) performed a ceremonial row-by before the final race. "They looked quite different than they had in competition," jokes Sanford, who was there, too. "They'd gained some weight."

The oarsmen will always be together in at least one respect. In 1985 they were inducted into the Cornell Athletic Hall of Fame, the only Big Red squad honored en masse. "We have so many fond memories and we've maintained close relationships over the years," Chapman explains. "It's appropriate because whatever we did, we did as a team."