

# FROM ROWING TO MEDICINE: THE LESSONS GLEANED



Text and photos by Dr Chan Shu Kiat

It is six o'clock on a Friday morning and the air is still. For the recreational runner at the reservoir this morning, there is silence all around except for the rhythmic soft splashing of the reservoir water and the low humming of the coach's pontoon. But there is anything but silence for the rower in the boat, for in his head, a thunderous voice screams: "Don't give up, don't give up! Just two more kilometres!" Of course, the voice is as much encouraging as it is lying – there are still 12 kilometres of 20 left.

This was my daily routine for a large part of my university life, 12 times a week (twice a day every day, except Mondays).

I can look upon these memories with more nostalgia than trepidation, being so far removed from the rigours of training as a national rower. I was asked to write this article after losing myself on one of my trips down memory lane, which have been occurring far more often these days – making me feel more aged than I should, although my various orthopaedic ailments from the sport are already doing a fine job of that.

Rowing is one of the oldest collegiate sports in the US and the UK, involving many of their top universities (eg, Harvard vs Yale boat race, Oxford vs Cambridge boat race), and is also one of the oldest

sports in the modern Olympics. Commentators often remark on the physical demands of the sport – two kilometres, or seven minutes, of utter pain and agony. The race starts off with a sprint for the first 100 m, utilising anaerobic metabolism, before quickly settling into an aerobic steady state. What this means is that a large amount of lactic acid is produced right at the start of the race, constantly tearing at the rower's body till the end. In fact, the amount of lactic acid produced in a single race is enough to make any surgical registrar pounce out of bed and come running.

## As a national rower

I stumbled upon the sport in my first year of medical school, eventually qualifying and remaining in the national team for the rest of my university years. The lessons I learnt from rowing taught me a great deal about the practice of medicine as well. Here are a few of them.

### Lesson 1

**When you think you have hit your limit and feel like giving up, there is always a little more you can give.**

This is probably one of the first few lessons you learn upon getting into the boat. After all, a world of pain descends upon you literally just seconds into a race. You never get

used to the pain, you just learn to ignore it and press on – a hundred metres by a hundred metres, minute by minute. Eventually, rowing becomes a contest of pain and will – a matter of who wants to succeed more. This lesson came in handy when I started my first year as a house officer and was thrown into the deep end. No amount of time spent in the lecture hall (of which, I had little), could prepare this eager-faced junior doctor for the horrors of the wards. Like a rowing race, the trials of work began moments after starting my first day of work.

*"Men as fit as you, when your everyday strength is gone, can draw on a mysterious reservoir of power far greater. Then it is that you can reach for the stars. That is the way champions are made."* – George Pocock, legendary boat-maker

### Lesson 2

**Quitting becomes a habit, as does excellence.**

Leading up to the 2015 Southeast Asian Games, training became much tougher. That year, my medical electives brought me to the University of Oxford, where thankfully, there was an abundance of rowing. However, I was alone and far away from my teammates. After one particularly tough

training session on the rowing machine, I reported to my coach that I had completed the instructed programme, save for the last set. I figured I was far too tired and demoralised to finish it. My coach's reply was short and simple: "Quitting becomes a habit." Those four words had more of an impact on me than an hour's scolding would have had. He was right – once I got used to the facade of the comforts that quitting provides, what was stopping me from throwing in the towel in the middle of a race? That day was the last time I ever gave up prematurely in training.

This concept of practising excellence till the very end in all the little things can be applied to everything in our daily lives, especially in clinical practice. Start taking shortcuts in the care of patients and soon enough, it could be ingrained into one's practice of medicine.

*"Rowing is perhaps the toughest of sports. 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."*  
– George Pocock

### Lesson 3 There is no star rower in the crew boat.

This was perhaps the hardest lesson I had to learn. I was one of the more physically adept on the team, but every two-man boat (pair boat) I rowed on seemed to always come in dead last and I was thoroughly frustrated after each training session. I conveniently laid the blame on my weaker partners. There seemed no end to the losing streak till one fine day, George Bridgewater (World Rowing Championship gold medallist pairs 2005, Olympic bronze medallist pairs 2008), who trained with us while working in Singapore, told me exactly where the problem lay – I was fighting the boat. Instead of trying to work with my partner to make the boat move as fast as possible, I was trying to prove just how much



stronger I was than my partner. A fatal mistake indeed.

This can be applied to any team we work in. There will always be colleagues with different abilities from you – instead of fighting the differences, the team would benefit from everyone maximising each other's strengths.

Again, no one could have encapsulated this better than George Pocock who once rightfully said: *"Following the Stroke in a winning boat means giving up something of your own rhythm and joining in with others – in a collective swell. This is a willingness, nay eagerness, to lay aside individual and sometimes limiting personalities to make a tonal blend for the sake of winning. Abandoning self-determination for team-determination. This is when followers are leaders themselves. What happens is that the victory is due the team."*

Being a doctor is in many ways similar to rowing – the hard work, teamwork and unforgiving standards expected of its members. And like rowing, the ultimate joy is in the process, the people we meet and the adversities we overcome together. ♦

#### Legend

1. After the traditional "fun" Christmas Row. "Fun" to the team's coach meant 30 km of rowing
2. Shu Kiat with his Southeast Asian Games Coach, John Faulkner, who now coaches the Swiss team
3. Shu Kiat with then-SMA News Editor, Dr Toh Han Chong, a very proficient rower himself, in Oxford, beneath the oar of the legendary Sir Matthew Pinset

Dr Chan is a fresh-faced junior doctor who looks upon his years ahead in the profession with much excitement and enthusiasm. Prior to starting this adventure, he was on another one as a national rower, representing Singapore in international competitions. He is currently serving the remainder of his National Service.

