THE CrossFit JOURNAL

When "Harvard" Won't Do

A decision in 1976 by the Radcliffe women's crew continues to affect every single woman who puts an oar in the water at Harvard University today.

By Emily Beers **May 2014**

Emily Beers

When Cory Bosworth rowed for the University of California, Berkeley, it often felt as if she was a second-class citizen in her own boathouse.

"The boathouse was built for men," said Bosworth, who is now the assistant coach of the Radcliffe women's crew at Harvard University, a position she's held for the past 14 years.

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"We had to walk through the men's locker room—and walk right through the men's showers—just to get to the boat bay," she added.

The boathouse at Berkeley did have a women's locker room. It was built as an afterthought. In the attic.

"And there were no showers. There was no room for them," Bosworth said, smiling and shaking her head at the memory.

Facility inequality like this was the norm in college athletics in the 1960s and 1970s in the years before Title IX was instituted in the United States to end discrimination based on sex in federally funded education programs.

Since 1972, Title IX has been at least partially responsible for helping decrease inequality between men's and women's varsity sports. From increasing participation numbers to improving facilities, equipment, funding and scholarships, Title IX has ultimately helped bring about better opportunities for female athletes.

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An assistant coach at Radcliffe, Cory Bosworth dealt with inequality as an athlete at the University of California, Berkeley, in the '90s.

But like many pieces of legislation, real change often takes time. In fact, Title IX came into effect before Bosworth's time; she and her teammates were still shuffling through the men's showers on their way to get a boat for practice every morning even in 1999, Bosworth's last year rowing for Berkeley. Bosworth doesn't remember complaining about it. It was just the way things were.

And to a certain degree, despite decades of progress in women's sports, it's the way things still are.

You don't have to dig any deeper than to look at average attendance numbers at varsity athletics games to see men still dominate many sports today. It's not uncommon for the stands at women's basketball games to look empty until the final quarter, when fans show up early to get a good seat as they wait for the men's game. At universities and colleges across North America today, the final seconds of many women's games are often coincidental opening acts for the main event—the men.

It's just the way things are.

Weld Boathouse

Perched on the shore of the Charles River that runs right through the middle of Harvard's campus, Weld Boathouse has stood for more than 100 years.

An architectural highlight at Harvard, Weld was donated to the university in 1906 and has been used by the Radcliffe crew since the birth of the women's program in 1971. It's impossible not to recognize how beautifully Weld has been preserved; it's tidy, unblemished and well manicured, to say the least.

The spacious boat bays take up most of the ground floor, void of any athletes in March because the river is still frozen. The team members have been spending their time upstairs in recent months training on Concept2 rowing machines as they wait for winter to pass.

The program's pride is instantly evident in the ergometer room upstairs. Pictures and trophies of successful Radcliffe crews of the past can be seen at every turn, including shots of the 11 Olympians who have graduated from the program over the years.

While the success is easy to see, you have to dig a little deeper to understand the impact Weld has had on so many lives.

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While Radcliffe and Harvard signed a merger agreement in 1977, parts of the campus still retain the historic name of the former.

Weld is a place that has always been ahead of its time, a niche where women have always felt capable. It's a place where not having as much as the men hasn't stopped women from succeeding, a place where women have been flourishing since 1971.

The Vote: Radcliffe or Harvard

In 1976 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Nelia Newell was a young college student at Radcliffe College, a liberal-arts institution founded in 1879 that essentially acted as the sister school to the all-male Harvard University.

Newell played ice hockey, and she joined the Radcliffe women's crew in 1975. The team first competed in 1971 and won its first national championship in 1973. Newell and her teammates were proud of what they accomplished in just a few short years.

At the time, things were changing fast. Harvard and Radcliffe had begun a lengthy merging process that wouldn't be totally complete until 1999. The athletics departments of the two schools had merged to form a new co-ed department, and later, in 1977, the two schools signed a formal "non-merger merger" agreement that really got the wheels in motion.

> Newell and her teammates, proud of their Radcliffe origins, weren't so sure they wanted to compete under the Harvard banner.

Along with the changes to the athletic department, the plan was for all Radcliffe sports teams to change their names and compete under the world-renowned "Harvard"

handle, but Newell and her teammates, proud of their Radcliffe origins, weren't so sure they wanted to change the name.

Thirty-eight years later, Newell, now a professor at Boston University, remembers the emotions involved with the 1976 decision.

"At the time, our identity was very much about Radcliffe crew. There was pride in that," Newell said. "We were very conscious of the fact that we were putting a black oar into the water. It was a part of who we were … . Our crew was successful, and we thought of ourselves as the Black and White."

Harvard's blades are painted crimson and white.

Newell's other team—her hockey team—was a different story.

"Ice hockey was a brand new sport, so we absolutely wanted Harvard jerseys. But with rowing, we were cheering 'Go, Radcliffe,'" she said.

Ultimately, Newell and her rowing teammates didn't feel they needed the Harvard name to feel legitimate.

The issue came down to a vote. The captains of each of Radcliffe's sports teams voted on whether to remain Radcliffe and compete in black and white or to become Harvard and compete in crimson.

Every single team chose to switch to Harvard, except one: the crew.

Architectural History

Deva Steketee, a senior from New Hampshire, is currently studying French and Spanish at Harvard. She's getting ready to wrap up her fourth season with the Radcliffe crew this spring.

Although Steketee rows in a different era than Newell did, she's very much aware of what happened at Radcliffe in 1976. The varsity rower is very conscious of her team's history and the importance of the past. And so are her teammates.

Steketee doesn't wish her team rowed under the Harvard name. In fact, she believes rowing for Radcliffe has made her experience as a varsity athlete even more meaningful.

"We still go to Harvard, but it lends something extra to have this incredible women's tradition. We carry the tradition of women's excellence at Harvard," Steketee said.

Courtesy of Nelia Newell

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Nelia Newell (top) rowed for Radcliffe in the '70s and is proud the crew's oars are still black and white.

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An indoor rowing machine of another kind.

One of the reasons Steketee believes the tradition has been able to survive through the last four decades is because of Weld.

"A big part of it has to do with having our own space—having Weld be our space. It's a space of incredibly powerful women," she said.

Newell agreed. Weld allowed her team to develop an independent and meaningful identity back in the 1970s, in a time where the men's team always had more.

> "My big fear is that girls now don't realize how recently things weren't equal and how easily it can be taken away."
>
> —Cory Bosworth

During Newell's rowing days, the athletic department didn't even pay for the women to have racing uniforms. The team wrote thousands of letters to alumni and their families and friends in an effort to raise money to buy their own racing gear, which they eventually silk-screened themselves.

But it didn't really matter to Newell and her teammates.

"We were in our own boathouse, training for our own races, and we weren't thinking about what (the men) had or what we didn't have in our boathouse," Newell said.

This was a unique experience for female rowers back then.

"The Yale (University) women's experience was very different because they were in the same boathouse as their men. The men would take showers after practice, and the women would sit on the bus and freeze waiting for the men to finish their showers," Newell said.

She added: "But we had our own showers."

Weld isn't the only thing keeping the Radcliffe tradition live. One woman has invested herself in the last 14 years to ensure every single member of the Radcliffe women's team understands its history.

"Cory (Bosworth) makes sure to pass on the legacy," Steketee explained. "Even if you walk on to the team as a novice, you find out pretty quickly what it's all about."

Bosworth explained she feels it's almost her duty to keep each generation of rowers informed.

"We're all here because of that hearty group of women," Bosworth said of Newell's team. "Marketing-wise, keeping the Radcliffe name wasn't necessarily the best choice. It's confusing to some people why we're called Radcliffe. But it has also given me an opportunity to talk about our history."

Bosworth added: "My big fear is that girls now don't realize how recently things weren't equal and how easily it can be taken away."

And so Bosworth makes sure every Radcliffe rower knows about Newell and her teammates from the '70s.

100 Million Strokes

As Steketee prepared for her final spring rowing season of her university career, she started to think about what she'll miss about the sport that has given her so much.

"I think rowing is about facing your fears down every single day, every single time you're on the line. We're on the line every single day in practice, and on weekends when we're facing off against other teams, and even when we're sitting on the erg getting ready for a 2 km (row). You know it's going to be painful, and you just have to keep putting yourself there again and again and again," Steketee said "It's about gritty determination."

Shared gritty determination is what bonds Steketee's crew to Newell's generation. It's something that trumps things like new uniforms, shiny equipment and adequate funding. And, of course, it trumps time.

Newell described her experience as a varsity rower 38 years ago in a similar manner:

"It's a really intense sport… . You compete together. You work out together. You deal with being freezing cold on the water together," she said.

Newell continues to be involved in the sport today as a volunteer coach of the Radcliffe lightweight women. On top of that, her two sons rowed for Harvard as lightweight men. Newell's younger son will graduate this year.

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A late thaw of the Charles River kept oars out of the water for a while, but the season is now in full swing for the Radcliffe crew.

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As at Harvard's Newell Boathouse, the walls at Weld are adorned with the history of the athletes who trained there.

Courtesy of Deva Steketee

Deva Steketee (center)

Despite the fact four decades separate her experience from her sons', and despite the fact they're men and she's a woman, Newell said it's the similarities that are impressed upon her mind. Her sons are rowing in a time where equipment is better, training principles are more advanced and funding is miles ahead of 1970's levels, but ultimately those aren't the things that really matter.

"Tons has changed, but every once in a while you become really conscious of what hasn't changed," Newell said. "The fundamentals are the same. You put your oar in the water and you pull. And rowing is about pulling as hard as you can for a race, and that hasn't changed."

She added: "And it's those fundamental things that end up taking up more of your memory than remembering the things you didn't have."

One thing Newell, Steketee, and future generations of Black and White rowers will always have is a shared history of strong women preserved by the name Radcliffe.

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About the Author

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