



NORTHWESTERN CREW

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Understanding the Competitive Landscape for NU Crew

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As alumni or friends of NU Crew, we are pleased to hear that the team is “doing well” or is having a “good season.” For many sports at NU, competitive success can often be distilled to a single, easily understood measure; for example, winning the Big Ten, or making the NCAA tournament. Such is not the case for NU Crew, where the structure of collegiate rowing requires a more dynamic concept of competitive success. This article seeks to provide the context by which the team’s performance can be understood.

Summary

For Northwestern Crew, medaling at any one of three national level regattas – the Dad Vail Regatta (men and women), Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC) National Invitational Regatta (men and women) or the Intercollegiate Rowing Association (IRA) Regatta (men and lightweight women) represents a tremendous success. Performance at the Indianapolis Collegiate Invitational, currently recognized as the regional championship regatta for the Midwest, is indicative of the potential for success in the national level regattas. Strong performances at head races held during the fall, while not leading to a defined championship, add to NU Crew’s stature. Beating any boat from a short list of Midwest schools – any time, any where – is a significant success; these schools include Michigan, Michigan State, Ohio State, Purdue and Grand Valley State. Against this backdrop, NU Crew has achieved notable success in recent years, including the lightweight women’s varsity 4 winning gold at the 2004 Dad Vails, the lightweight men’s varsity 8 winning bronze at the 2006 Dad Vails (where NU beat Purdue), and a top 5% finish by the men’s varsity 4 at the 2005 Head of the Charles.

Defining Success

Collegiate rowing has two distinct competitive seasons: the head race season in the fall and the sprint race season in the spring.

Head races are long-distance races, typically 4,000 meters or more. Head races involve staggered starts, with boats competing against time rather than the boats surrounding them. The most notable head race is the Head of the Charles, held in Boston each October, which can attract hundreds of crews. While the fall head races constitute a distinct season, and strong performances carry a significant level of prestige, the head race season does not culminate in any recognized championships. Rather, champions are determined during the sprint season, where the course is 2,000 meters long.

Collegiate sprint races are generally held in one of three formats: Match/dual races, regattas (often championships), or Henley style. Match/dual races are between boats of



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the same class (8, 4+, etc.) from two or three teams racing side-by-side (e.g., California vs. Washington race). Regattas typically consist of boats from six or more different schools racing each other simultaneously in a progression/elimination format (e.g., Dad Vails). Henley style races are a blend of the other two formats: multiple schools participate, as in a regatta, but individual races are held between two boats at a time (e.g., Redwood Shores). While a team's reputation can be built in any of these formats, prominence is generally achieved through performance at certain nationally recognized championship regattas.

In many ways, the structure of collegiate rowing is akin to the traditional bowl system found in collegiate football – there are a select number of regattas, the medaling at which allows the medalist to claim champion status. Also like collegiate football, there has been a move towards identifying one regatta as the “national championship” regatta. Unlike the bowl system, however, because of the timing of the various regattas, it is possible for crews to participate in what would be their “traditional” championship regatta and also participate in the “national championship” regatta.

The NCAA does not sponsor a championship for men's rowing or lightweight women's rowing. Over the past few years however, one regatta – the IRAs held on the Cooper River in Camden, New Jersey on the first weekend in June – has achieved the stature of a national championship (with the school with the best overall performance recognized as the “national champion”). While the IRA is an open regatta – meaning that any school can send a boat, it enjoys a reputation of attracting the fastest boats in the country. As a result, while some schools send boats to the IRAs as a matter of course, most schools send boats only if they believe they will be competitive.

Crews generally measure their boats' potential competitiveness at the IRAs based on their performance in one of several national regattas which are generally considered championship level in their own right.

For traditional rowing powers, such as Harvard, Wisconsin or California, this means their boats performance at either the Eastern Sprints or the Pac Tens. These races effectively serve as the regional league championships for the top caliber schools. Before the emergence of the IRAs (and the NCAA Championships for heavyweight women), the winners of these races often laid claim to being the “national champion.” With the emergence of the IRAs as a race where all the elite programs participate (for a while Harvard and Yale did not participate), performance at the IRAs rather than the Eastern Sprints or Pac Tens has become the leading yardstick by which the top caliber men's programs measure competitive success. Likewise, for heavyweight women, performance at the NCAA Championships is the primary measure of competitive success.

For most rowing programs, including Northwestern, who compete outside of these two leagues, a successful performance at either the Dad Vail or the ECAC regattas is broadly recognized in the collegiate rowing community as having achieved champion



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status. The Dad Vail regatta, which is held each May in Philadelphia, is the largest collegiate regatta and has historically been considered the “club” championships. Like the IRAs, the Dad Vails are an open regatta. The ECAC regatta (formerly called Champion International and later, Avaya, for its sponsors) was established in 1993 by a group of New England schools as a direct competitor to the Dad Vail regatta. The regatta location has changed several times, but has most frequently taken place on Lake Quinsigamond in Worcester, Massachusetts. Over time, the ECAC has developed a reputation as being a faster regatta. This has been achieved, in part, by the ECAC’s policy of limiting entry to boats that have placed in one of several regional championship level regattas. While the ECACs may be a faster regatta, various logistical considerations can make the Dad Vail’s a more attractive regatta for many crews. The two regattas are almost always held on the same weekend; therefore, crews which can’t send all of their boats to the ECACs are put into a position of having to decide whether to split their team between the two regattas, focus on the ECACs while leaving some boats behind, or sending all of their boats to the Dad Vails.

The NCAA initiated a national championship regatta for women’s heavyweight rowing in 1997. Participation is limited to schools sponsoring varsity programs and is by invitation only (based on a variety of criteria). For schools at which women’s rowing is a club sport (such as Northwestern), or those which sponsor women’s rowing but whose program has yet to reach a level to receive consideration by the NCAA selection committee, the highest level of competitive success for heavyweight women’s rowing is achieved at either the Dad Vail’s or the ECACs. For lightweight women, competitive success includes performance at the IRAs.

As mentioned above, eligibility for the ECACs (on both the men’s and women’s sides) is determined based on a boat’s performance in a regional championship level regatta. In the Midwest, the regional level championship regatta recognized by the ECACs is the Indianapolis Collegiate Invitational, typically held in mid to late April of each year. By virtue of its stature, Indianapolis Invitational draws a deep field containing many fast boats (from both within and outside the Midwest). The Indianapolis Invitational prioritizes eights and allows very little “double rowing.” This means that teams must field their most competitive eight before placing rowers in a four. As a result of these rules, while Northwestern’s performance at the Indianapolis Invitational is an important barometer of the team’s strength, the crew’s performance may not translate into a medal count because the team is sometimes more competitive when prioritizing smaller boats (4s).

The Competition in the Midwest

When considering notable rowing programs against which NU Crew competes, it is important to keep in mind that for the most part, collegiate rowing does not stratify itself based on whether the sponsoring school otherwise competes in Division I, II or III. Thus, NU Crew’s competition is as likely to come from another Big 10 school as a Division II



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participant. Similarly, a crew's designation as being varsity or club does not dictate the program's level of competitiveness. Most crews at the club level do not maintain separate lightweight and heavyweight programs; rather, the composition of the team in a particular year often dictates which boats will be fielded throughout the season.

The men's schedule at Northwestern can be generally grouped into three tiers. Besides varsity programs like Wisconsin and Marietta (in Ohio), the top tier includes Michigan, Purdue and Ohio State. While these three programs are club sports, they share certain characteristics. Each has a full time coach and each receives significant funding from either (or both) the sponsoring institution or a related alumni organization. Of these, Michigan is the top program, having raised itself to Eastern Sprints level after winning at both the Dad Vails and ECACs over the course of several years. The second tier of schools consists of those programs which have achieved a consistent level of competitiveness. This tier includes Northwestern, as well as the programs at Notre Dame, Marquette, Michigan State, Grand Valley State (in Michigan), and Dayton. All of these are club programs. The third tier of schools consists of those programs which have yet to reach a consistent level of competitiveness; this tier includes programs such as the University of Chicago, Wheaton, Iowa and Indiana. Very few men's programs in the Midwest row lightweight so the primary competition comes from schools on the east coast like Boston College, Holy Cross, Mercyhurst, St. Joe's (Philadelphia), and Georgia Tech.

The women's schedule at Northwestern generally includes strong programs at both the varsity and club level. Typically on the schedule are Ohio State (club), Purdue (club), Michigan State (club) and North Park University (DII varsity program in Chicago). Other programs that Northwestern's women face include those at Grand Valley (club), Dayton (varsity), Drake (varsity), and Indiana (varsity). For lightweight women, Wisconsin is the best in the Midwest and one of top national women's programs. Other successful lightweight women's teams on the east coast include Princeton, Villanova, and Bucknell.

Although the men's and women's teams don't always race the same opponent, they generally travel together and compete at the same races during both the fall and spring seasons.

Recent Varsity Successes

Within this extremely competitive landscape, NU Crew has been able to achieve remarkable success, including:

- At the 2006 Dad Vails, the men's varsity lightweight eight won the bronze medal
- At the 2006 Indianapolis Collegiate Invitational, both the varsity men's lightweight eight and the varsity men's four won bronze medals
- At the 2005 Head of the Rock, the men's varsity lightweight 8 won the gold medal

For more information on Northwestern University Crew, visit:
<http://groups/northwestern.edu/nucrew>



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- At the 2005 Head of the Charles, the men's collegiate four finished in the top 5% guaranteeing a bid to the race for 2006
- At the 2005 Dad Vails, the women's varsity lightweight four won gold
- At the 2005 MACRA, the women's lightweight four won gold
- At the 2004 Head of the Elk, the men's varsity heavyweight 8 and men's varsity 4+ placed 3rd losing only to Purdue and Michigan in the 8
- 2006/2004 Chicago Indoor Rowing Championships – men's crew won indoor city championship with grand prize being a new Model D Erg

Goals – “What’s next for NU Crew?”

As the above results demonstrate, NU Crew has established a consistent presence in the national rowing community in the last few years. Success at this level has been made possible by several factors. Most critical have been established coaching, better equipment, more accessible facilities, increased alumni and family involvement, and more effective high school and campus recruiting. This success, however, has only been achieved with the substantial and sustained commitment, in both time and financial resources, of the students, families and coaches.

The coaching staff believes that NU Crew can become one of the fastest crews in the Midwest and compete at the national level. Many of the pieces are in place. Moreover, Northwestern has an ideal atmosphere for a highly competitive rowing program. With continued improvement in organization and increased support, NU Crew will have stronger showings at Indianapolis, the Dad Vails the ECACs, and even at the IRAs.