

# Defending a Title

AFTER COUNTLESS HOURS IN THE GYM AND ON FRIGID WATER, CREW STRIVES TO KEEP ITS CHAMPIONSHIP CROWN

BY CAROLYN KOVACH



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**I**N THE PREDAWN HOURS, when most Clevelanders are still hitting their snooze alarms, Saint Ignatius crew is quietly launching its nine shells onto the frigid, misty Cuyahoga River.

It's a crisp March morning. The calendar indicates that spring is near, but the below-freezing temperatures and small chunks of ice floating on the river tell a different story. The boys can easily see their breaths in the air and despite the multiple layers of clothing, won't be able to keep the chill off their red, bare hands. Rowers must row without gloves in order to feel the subtleties of the oars' movement against the water. And, once in the boat, the oarsmen are required to slip off their tennis shoes and slide their stocking feet into the "boat shoes."

Of course, the crew and coaches would prefer rowing on warmer days, but with snow falling in April, the team can't wait. Running stairs, lifting weights and rowing on ergometers doesn't compare to the real strength conditioning that occurs on the water.

That's why after Valentine's Day, Head Coach Matt Previts '97 becomes a big fan of the five-day forecast, gauging weather and water conditions to determine when he'll get his guys out of the gym and onto the water. Most people picture crew rowing on straight rivers among fall foliage or budding spring trees. For second-year coach Previts and his 84-member crew, those images are mere fantasy.

Cuyahoga means "crooked," which is why Saint Ignatius crew never hosts a regatta. There are few trees that line the riverbanks. Small mountains of gravel, salt and iron ore; rusty bridges; docked freighters; and decaying buildings lace the river's edges. Some greenery fights for attention in spring, but in late February and March when the Saint Ignatius navy braves icy waters, the scenery is drab brown and gray.

As if being crooked and cold isn't enough, the Cuyahoga presents bonus obstacles for the team. Trash, dead rats and birds, discarded tires, abandoned shopping carts and the occasional toppled telephone pole have floated past the boats. Even a computer monitor has bobbed up from the murky waters, a personal affront to Previts who makes a living keeping the school's computers humming along.

Bigger obstacles come in the size of freighters, barges and tugboats, which is why Previts must make a radio call to all river traffic as soon as his boats push off the dock. After all, at 5:45 a.m., it's still dark, and the slim unlit boats could get lost in the shadows. "We call off where we're going because in blind turns, we would be on the losing end," Previts says.

It could be that these river obstacles have helped more than harmed the crew's practices. Compared to the city's river, the competition's unspoiled waters don't present the same challenges. The competition practices on clean private lakes or fairly straight rivers that don't allow commercial traffic, according to Previts. But crew doesn't complain about the Cuyahoga's shortcomings. In fact, before every regatta, rowers dump a jug of Cuyahoga water into the competitor's water for luck. "It's our own body of water," Previts says. "We take pride despite her conditions."

# Rowing Lingo

## A DESIRE TO WIN

“**C**hamps on three,” commands Previts after gathering his team. With all hands in, a cheer ensues. Three times Previts yells the word “Midwest.” Each time he bellows the word, the team responds in unison, “Champs.”

The cheer reminds the team of what it has achieved and what it has yet to accomplish this season. After shedding its club status to become a varsity sport in 1992, crew has garnered three Midwestern Scholastic Rowing Championships – one in 2000, one in 2002 and the latest in 2004.

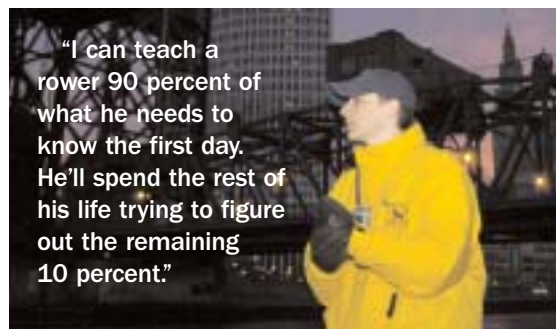
To add to the record, last spring marked the first time a boat won a national title. The junior four-man shell of coxswain Arcie Petty, stroke Pat Hurley and rowers Tom Paulett, Chris Baranowski and Mike Fath took first place in the Scholastic Rowing Association of America National Championship Regatta in Orlando, Fla.

Both the team and the senior four-man (now consisting of Hurley, Paulett, Fath, rower Joe McKenna and coxswain Brad Movens) will be defending their titles this season.

“There’s a lot of pressure, but we’re handling it well,” says Hurley, captain of the senior four-man national champs. He then shared the team’s strategy. “We’re looking to do more winning and not just focus on points.”

An overall team score determines the winner of a regatta. Points are based on place, with first place receiving the greatest number of points. A team can tally points quickly if more of its boats win. Of course, each boat’s goal is to come home with its own gold medal.

Divided into four-man and eight-man boats, crew consists of teams within a team. In the four-man and eight-man, there are novice, varsity, second varsity and lightweight varsity categories. In the lightweight category, each rower in the boat must weigh 150 pounds or less. The novice team, which practices in the afternoons, includes first-time oarsmen and coxswains who range from freshmen to seniors.



## The Boat

**Boat:** also called a “shell” because of the hull’s thinness. The hull is only one-eighth to one-quarter inch thick. Constructed of fiberglass composite material, shells can be 60-plus feet long, weigh as little as 200 pounds and carry as much as 1,750 pounds. A racing shell costs around \$30,000 and can reach speeds up to 20 mph.

**Hatchet:** a term for an oar developed in 1993. The blade resembles the shape of a hatchet and has completely revolutionized rowing, dropping times by tenths of seconds.

**Slide:** the track on which the seat moves

**Skeg:** a small stationary fin located on the boat’s stern; used to help stabilize the shell

**Bow:** the boat’s front end

**Stern:** the boat’s back end

**Port:** the left side

**Starboard:** the right side

## The Players

**Coxswain:** pronounced (cox-sin), the captain and motivator who determines the pace and rhythm during a race. He steers the boat and warns the crew of potential problems. His voice should be the only one heard onboard.

**Oarsmen:** the rowers

**Stroke:** the rower in the last position of the boat who is responsible for setting the rhythm that everyone else should follow exactly

**Bow:** the rower in the front of the boat who is responsible for keeping the boat stable  
**Coach:** person yelling at the boat to go faster from the powerboat 50 feet away

## The Power

Physiologists claim that rowing a 2,000-meter race (equivalent to 1.25 miles) is equal to playing back-to-back basketball games.

Elite rowers fire off the start at 53 strokes per minute. With 95 pounds of force on the blade end, each stroke is a weightlifter’s power clean.

Rowers cross their anaerobic threshold with the first stroke. Then there are 225 more strokes to the finish line.



**Previts compares the set to running down a balance beam while lifting weights overhead.**

To manage all these teams, Previts employs the assistance of seven coaches: Andy Bramante, Doug Carlson, Jim Kozak '99, Pat Monroe, Paul Sabaititis '95, Don Saer and former Head Coach Bob Valerian, who offers sage advice when needed.

Because there are no high school teams in Cleveland to compete against, the Ignatius crew racks up miles traveling to races in southern Ohio, Pennsylvania and New Jersey from early April to mid-June. For sport, the team races against local colleges. "We beat up the college teams," Previts boasts.

Previts also brags about his team's ability to launch in 60 seconds or less. "We have a reputation for being fast off the dock. We like to say that we're fast off the dock but even faster in the water. Teams try to get out in front of us to psych us out, but it doesn't work."

Ignatius crew's intimidation techniques include dip drills and sets during warm-ups. In a dip drill, rowers practice their timing, repeti-

tively synchronizing the movements of their blades in and out of the water. In a set, rowers keep the boat still for a lengthy time period. To the uninformed, this "trick" may not look like much. But to the competition, the drill showcases balance and strength as rowers set their position with their legs.

Previts compares the set to running down a balance beam while lifting weights overhead.

Showing off leg strength sends a message to competitors because legs account for 70 percent of a rower's power. "After building up the lungs, rowers tend to develop strength in the legs and torso, particularly the back, abs and shoulders," Previts explains. "The arms are mostly for control and are only the source of 5 to 10 percent of the power."

Although the sport requires endurance, Previts notes that it doesn't require natural athletic ability. "I can teach a rower 90 percent of what he needs to know the first day. He'll spend the rest of his life trying to figure out the remaining 10 percent," he says.

For students lacking the bulk to play football or



height to play basketball, crew offers an alternative. And for the smaller students, the sport gives them the power trip of bossing bigger guys around.

A former coxswain during his high school years, Previts calls the position "the brains" of the boat. Weighing in at 120 pounds or less, the coxswain operates like a drill sergeant, barking commands to the oarsmen in the boathouse, on the dock and along the racecourse. Seated in the stern, the coxswain is the only one in the boat who sees what's ahead, which is why he gives direction, sets the pace and motivates the team. If the race is won, however, rowers have the "last word." It's rowing tradition that the coxswain gets tossed in the drink to celebrate a victory.

Regardless of where a person sits on the boat, one thing all the team members have in common is a strong work ethic. "In this sport, there aren't any superstars. You can't just show up and win. You've got to work hard," Previts says.

That's evident by the number of team members who start their gym workouts in November. Strength conditioning isn't mandatory until mid-January.

Joe McKenna, junior captain and first-year varsity, seems anxious to get the rowing season started even sooner. He says he has been thinking about racing since last summer. "I want to build a lightweight eight to win nationals."

Sophomore Captain Sean Tulley says what motivates him and other underclassmen are the achievements of the experienced rowers. "The upperclassmen push us to be better," he says.

It's obvious that Previts and his coaching staff have managed to build a committed winning team, the question is whether or not the Ignatius crew can maintain its championship status.

For senior Mike Fath, who won nationals last spring, the desire to win has an easy explanation. "There's nothing that feels better than a well-rowed eight," he says after a rigorous early morning practice. **SI**



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