

A Step in the Right Direction

- Adaptive Rowing -

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Spring 2001

Being an athlete or even a recreational sports participant is a wonderful life style. Being an athlete with a disability is more like a rush! The thrill, excitement and challenges to work around disabilities to perform as well as the regular athlete.

One of my favourite pass times is reading through large print newsletters provided by the CNIB, Focus, Vision and Toronto CNIB. In the Toronto newsletter what really caught my eye was '*Argonaut Rowing Club*'. For the first time the Argonaut Rowing Club was offering rowing lessons to people who are visual impaired or blind; hence, Adaptive Learn-to-Row (LTR) Program. Just so happens I was just itching to do some sport activity for the upcoming summer months and I said to myself, "Nothing stop me before from trying something new, why not this."

Being nervous and excited at the same time, I dial the phone number and behold I was taking the first step in a direction of a life style of rowing, with no turning back. Also, the Argonaut Rowing Club was taking its first steps in providing rowing for people with disabilities. Like two peas in a pod, we boldly go forward.

First day at the club was orientation and upon my arrival, without a word, someone just jumped next to me and guided me through the club house to the meeting place. At the meeting place there was a whole crowd of folks waiting to greet and begin the show. These weren't any ordinary folks, they were exceptional folks fighting over each other to get that first chance of offering me their elbows and guide me around.

"Wow!" I said to myself, "Where this place has been all my life?"

After all the introductions... whew! ... the lessons started off learning all the terminology of rowing along with safety issues and physical aspects of a rowing shell. All very interesting and fascinating or one heck of a learning curve. We then tried out the rowing machine with a sliding seat and practiced the art of the rowing stroke. So, after all the land base training procedures we then moved onto the next stage of (I couldn't wait any longer!) getting into the boat and pushing off from the dock onto our maiden voyage.

Wow, out there on the open water, what a great sense of independence it is! Where you just focus on the task at hand and that is to row in sync with seven other people in the boat all sitting behind each other holding onto one oar each and rowing together. The Coxswain, who's sitting in the back of the boat, is steering and shouting out commands and instructions on how to row. Exhilarating! The beauty of this program are the

volunteers who work with the athletes on a one-on-one basis (buddy) where you get personal attention and instructions on how to row. The buddy also rows with you out on the open water, which further enhances the experience and safety. Along side the rowing boat is also a motorize coach boat which also has other volunteers as instructors and providing more safety features.

After the first time on the water, all you can think about for the rest of the week until you get back to club to do the next the lesson is ROWING! Your working, watching TV, sleeping, or whatever, all you think about is rowing. I was hooked like a bee on a honey bun.

After four weeks, eight lessons, 16 hours of rowing you get set to do your first regatta (racing). This regatta consists of several other groups of Learn-to-Rowers' gathering together on one-week night to race, barbecue and presentations or bragging rights. Our LTR adaptive crew came second overall out of 8 other regular LTR groups. Not bad, Eh?

To put it quite simply, FUN!

Without blinking an eye, I could have signed my life away I join up with the club.

Rest of the summer was hopping from one boat to another of different crews, as a spare, right through the briskly chilly fall season and up to the first weekend of November. At this time of the year the very last regatta is held at the club and rightly so called, The Frostbite Sprints.

Darn it, the season is over. And you just can't wait until the season opens up again but you just have to be patience until that fine day in April.

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The great thing about the club is that it is never closed. During the winter months you can still train at the club's weight-room, working on your physical conditioning and be ready when the season opens up again.

Two things I planned to do this season; 1) include myself into a crew and row consistently to improve my rowing skills; 2) volunteer, as the club is a member run organization, where it is important to help support the club. That being said, one thing I did focus on was supporting the Adaptive LTR Program.

Being an adaptive rower myself, I figured I could provide the club with an inside direction on promotion, recruitment and as a buddy rower/instructor for the adaptive program.

First thing being promotion that is getting the word out to CNIB clients of this exciting and worthwhile physical activity. Working with Client Services at the CNIB we were able to make arrangements and along with City of Toronto, Parks & Recreation do a

presentation on recreational activities to CNIB client services to pass on the information. Working with another volunteer from the club, also working on promotions, we made arrangements with the VoicePrint radio broadcast for me to do a live interview for the promotion of adaptive rowing and offering listeners a chance to win a free seat in the Adaptive LTR Program.

Next is recruitment. Using my knowledge and as a participant of other clubs and groups that cater to offering physical activities for people with disabilities, I used my personal touch to encourage others to come out and try rowing.

Now the real fun part.

Being part of the adaptive LTR program, as a buddy rower/instructor, is the best role because you get to meet all sorts of interesting people willing to take the challenge and are usually enthusiastic fun seekers! It is great to hear them say what a great time they had and it just reminds me of all the fun I had when I first tried rowing and even now. Having first hand experience, I can easily relate, coach them along and take pride in giving others with disabilities the great opportunities of rowing.

Now, as you can see, I not only got hooked on rowing but I got hooked on volunteering as well.

I took my volunteering to a new level by co-chairing the Hogtown Heats Regatta. This regatta is held annually at the club every summer in August. It mainly caters to recreational rowers who wish to compete with other from across Ontario and even from the State of New York. We had over 9 clubs attending the 2002 Hogtown Heats Regatta with about 160 athletes competing. The volunteer responsibilities involved arrangements of sanctions, Port Authority approval, First Aid staff, coordinating volunteers, officials, schedule races, food and the list goes on and on. It was one of the greatest learning experiences I have ever enjoyed, with satisfying rewards.

Anyhow, seeing how I was co-chair, I moved forward on my own to introduce adaptive racing for the first time at the regatta by organizing with 2002 Adaptive LTR graduates from the club and from Durham Rowing Club who also has a well established adaptive rowing program. Came up with three races in all! (Two doubles and one four.) It was a combination of buddies with adaptive rowers competing against each other and I must tell you... the onlookers gave the most resounding applause that would have brought tears your eyes. It was a splashing success!

Meantime, I was still training and rowing with my summer crew and competing in other regattas with regular athletes. As you don't have to row with adaptive rowers all the time but rather integrate yourself into the norm of the club members as well. Moving on to further improve my rowing skills, I join up with the Men's Fall Development Program. This program started up in September and ran to the end of the season where a highly recommended coach (a volunteer too) shaped the group for competitive racing and physical conditioning. This program prepares you for the rigid aspects of elite regattas.

Once again, it's November and brrrrrrr... Frostbite Sprints.

Next Season, Spring 2003

Looking forward to the next season where there are new and challenging tasks I'm hoping to follow thru on.

Firstly, I will be helping to expand the Adaptive LTR Program by increasing the numbers of people to come out and join in on the fun; also, to work forward to help make the club more accessible to a wider range of disabilities.

Secondly, on a personal note, I plan to work harder on my training for the competition level. As I have been offered a great opportunity to enter races at the 2003 Canada Cup with the introduction of adaptive racing for the first time in Canada. Hopefully, to promote adaptive rowing and create a team at the national level, to then compete in the World Championship level. All of this will work toward qualifying Adaptive Rowing for competition into the 2008 Summer Paralympics.

A step in the right direction, of course it is!

It not only promotes physical activities for people with disabilities but also, promotes community spirit within the club and the community it serves.

In closing, I must apologize to my family and friends for I have not seen much of them lately, because of the time devoting or the addiction to working for a worthwhile cause. If they were to blame someone or anything, it would have to be Allison Sheard. Who, on her own initiative, started up the Argonaut adaptive program as program coordinator in 2001 and then later became co-chair of Rowing Canada Committee on Adaptive Rowing. Thanks to her and all the '*extraordinaire club volunteers*', I'm now taking a step in the right direction.

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