

One of the differences that sets crew apart from other sports might just be the thing that attracts new participants. Alan Engle, head club coach and coach of the girls' team at Mt. Lebanon High School, says, "You can't get started until ninth grade, so everyone who starts comes in at the same level. With other sports, you grow up with them and can figure out whether you can play by high school. But with crew, you all start together."

Engle adds that while an extremely skilled football or basketball player may receive superstar treatment by a coach, that just doesn't happen in crew. "It's the ultimate team sport," says Engle, who has coached at Mt. Lebanon since 1997. "A superstar isn't going to carry a boat."

The boats hold either four or eight rowers, and Engle says, "You need to have every person [working] together—they have to do the same thing, the same way, at the same time."

In addition to the rowers, each boat has a coxswain, who steers the boat, gives the commands and keeps everyone rowing together. Liz Fishback, coach of Mt. Lebanon's novice team, began rowing with the high school as a student under Engle in 1999 and served as coxswain for the boys' team. Two things are taken into consideration when choosing a coxswain, Fishback says: "First and foremost is size. No matter how effective you are, you're dead weight. So you need to be shorter and a little bit lighter. The second part is an ability to be secure in giving commands and being responsible for the safety of the rowers in the shell."

Although the coxswain is different from other positions, it's not necessarily more prestigious. "Normally you don't fight to be the cox," said Engle, of Ohio Township. "Most kids want to be rowers, but you can't have a boat without a cox. It's just a question of getting the right person in the [right] seat. You want good

Mt. Lebanon High School Crew strives to be a unified force as it glides down the Allegheny River.

strength in the stroke seat, strength in the middle and good stroke work in the bow."

Benefits of rowing include the obvious ones of a full body workout—arms, torso, legs—yet it's a non-impact sport. Although the legs do a considerable amount of pushing, it's not hard on the joints; and Fishback maintains, it's beneficial academically as well. Academically? Yes.

"Kids benefit from it because they're fit; they're getting a lot more oxygen; their bodies are in better shape; they focus well in school," she explains. "And they do well in school because they have to budget their time. They don't practice at the school, so they have to travel back and forth. In the spring and fall, you travel for regattas—the busiest time academically in the spring is the busiest time competitively for rowing. They have to do their homework because we are strict with our grades. Academics are a priority."

High school junior Caroline Saunders, Roycroft Avenue, agrees: "Crew is rigorous—it spills into other aspects of life, and has made me a better student. I taught myself not to give up as easily and I can apply it to other areas."

Saunders has played soccer and lacrosse but wanted to try rowing after watching the Olympics. She eventually gave those sports up. "They had never been what I was looking for," she says. "Crew was unusual; crew has been more than I could have wished for."

For Jack Ohrman, a sophomore, crew is a "family thing." His mother's side of the family is from New Jersey, and his older relatives both rowing and coached rowing. Ohrman tried football, wrestling, track and field, and baseball, "They're fun, but I like this more than anything," he says. He especially enjoys practicing on the river in the mornings, and on being the water in the fall when it

rowin' down the river



Coach Brian Cusick (upper right) works with the experienced men's team as it practices in a boathouse.

Liz Fishback, inset top right, practices with the novice team. Her greatest challenge is taking a group of kids who know nothing about the sport and teaching them to be self-reliant.

gets dark earlier: "That's cool."

The team (which is a club sport, as opposed to a WPIAL sport) is under the umbrella of Three Rivers Rowing Association and practices at the association's boathouses on the Allegheny River. Much more practice is involved than actual competition, because traveling to the races is costly, and whether the races take place at all is weather-dependent. They compete in only two races in the fall—the Head of the Ohio in Pittsburgh and the Head of the Occoquan in Virginia. The schedule picks up in the spring, with races beginning the last week of April and continuing for the next four or five weekends.

Despite the shortage of competition, the practice helps the rowers form special friendships. "I like the bond you get with the team," Ohrman says.

Paul Heyse, a senior, who just moved to Mt. Lebanon with his family last August especially appreciates the connection. He had been part of a club team in New Jersey but says, "It's nice to be on a high school team. It's more personal, you get to know people, and I'm making friends."

A number of the Mt. Lebanon rowers are continuing the



Crew team members find the sport enhances their academic performance because it teaches them to budget their time. Physically, it gives them a great full body workout.

At left, club head coach and women's head coach Alan Engle keeps a watchful eye over the team. One of the team's biggest goals is to recruit new members. Another, because it is a club sport, is funding.



sport in college. Engle says one of the girls received a scholarship to the University of Minnesota; others are rowing at Boston University, the University of North Carolina and the University of Virginia, and one of the boys is at Cornell. "And all of them rowed in varsity in their first year," he says.

In the past, Mt. Lebanon has had as many as 60 to 70 students participating in crew, but the numbers have currently declined to 30 or 40. "The sport has grown in general," Engle says, "especially on the girls' side with more scholarship money available. But we're a club sport, so we're self-funded. And getting the word out about it is a struggle, he says, because while people can see other teams competing right in Mt. Lebanon, the crew team always rows elsewhere.

The high school has five 8+ (eight rowers plus the coxswain)

and five 4+ boats, and along with Engle and Fishback, Tim Cusick coaches the boys team and Brian Cusick assists with all of the teams. So there is plenty of room for students to give what Engle calls this "niche sport" a try next season.

As Fishback says, "One of my favorite parts of being a novice coach is that in September I've got this group of teenagers who have no idea what the sport is unless an older sibling did it. And by May, they are racing in these boats, they're on their own on the water; they are loading trailers that are the size of semi-trucks with this equipment; they are handling themselves in all sorts of weather. It's a phenomenal process to watch these guys go from being absolutely clueless, to handling \$35,000 worth of equipment and making it look easy." 📌