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150 Years of Women at Berkeley

The Establishment of Cal Women's Crew in 1974-75

INTERVIEW WITH PETER LIPPETT, Cal '58 and Chairman of the US Women's Olympic Rowing Committee, 1972-1981

A few women who attended Cal had been rowing during the 1960s at an Oakland rowing club, but I'm told that in pre-Title IX days the University was not interested in sponsoring or funding a Cal women's crew. A confluence of three events that all took place in the seminal year of 1972 laid the groundwork for 1974 to be the year when the Cal women's crew was founded.

First, the passage of Title IX by Congress on June 23, 1972. Second, the August 1972 decision of the International Olympic Committee to admit women's rowing to the Olympics¹, beginning with the 1976 Games. Third, the Fall 1972 creation of a U.S. Women's Olympic Rowing Committee (WORC) at the behest of the president of the fledgling National Women's Rowing Association (NWRA), to manage funding from the United States Olympic Committee exclusively for oarswomen without interference from those beholden to men's rowing, and to form coherent long-range plans to bring U.S. women's rowing up to international capabilities.

As a former coxswain on the Cal men's crew ('58) with many years of post-graduation activities in the rowing world, I was tapped for the new WORC, and at its first meeting was elected Chairman (serving through 1981). The funding that the WORC received to prepare for the 1976 Olympics permitted the first-ever full team of U.S. women to attend the 1974 World Rowing Championships in Lucerne, Switzerland. As the manager of that team containing some club but mostly college oarswomen from East Coast universities and Wisconsin, I became overwhelmingly embarrassed that Cal, with its national reputation of three Olympic gold medal crews and several national championships in men's crew, did not have a women's crew.²

Upon returning home determined to try to rectify the situation, I sought to discover any interest from local oarswomen for establishing a Cal women's crew. There was, particularly from local rowers Nancy Turner (daughter/niece of two members of the 1948 Cal Olympic champion eight)³ and Sue Bassett, so I invited several folks to a meeting at my home in the late summer of 1974 that showed enthusiastic support for a current effort. Due to my Olympic Committee "cachet" plus other experiences in the U.S. rowing world, I volunteered to approach Cal after I had made two strong requests of the group—that the coach be someone who had rowed under the nationally respected Cal coach Steve Gladstone,⁴ and that as much as we might have preferred to share the men's boathouse, the space constrictions there simply couldn't permit any such demand; everyone agreed on both counts. My initial meeting at Cal resulted in my being asked to create a proposal and budget

to address the impediments to forming a not inexpensive team that Cal didn't yet even grasp: a potentially large squad, acquisition of costly equipment, choosing and paying a coach, where to row, boathouse facilities, travel, uniforms, and myriad such details.

"I became overwhelmingly embarrassed that Cal, with its national reputation of three Olympic gold medal crews and several national championships in men's crew, did not have a women's crew."



1975 Cal Women's Crew Varsity 8+. Left to right: Katie Sherwood (stroke), Jane Waller (7), Barb McCutchan (6), Dana Whitacker (5), Lee Wilder (4), Jean Hayward (3), Jane Toro (2), and Nancy Turner (bow). The cox, Arline Tsuchiya, is out of frame.



Cal Women's Crew Boathouse at Briones Reservoir in 1978.

At that time Cal did not have a department of women's athletics, but its existing women's teams were supervised by Dr. Barbara Hoepner out of Phoebe Apperson Hearst Memorial Gymnasium for Women.⁵ She was a forward thinking, genial "yes person" who approved creating the team with what in retrospect seems an astoundingly low budget, although where she found even those funds was never asked and is unknown to this day. To attempt to present a convincing proposal, I negotiated a small rent to use the site and equipment of the rowing and canoeing club at Aquatic Park in Berkeley.⁶ As coach, I recommended Daig O'Connell (Cal '73), a mechanical engineer and recent Cal varsity stroke who had refined his knowledge of technique by rowing three varsity years under Steve Gladstone. He was confident that he could teach even novice women to row fast, which he certainly proved in the very first year.

All this was taking place in late summer/early fall when I returned from the World Championships in Switzerland, so all we could do was reserve a meeting room and proceed to post leaflets on every telephone pole and bulletin board on campus. Fearing zero to low turnout, Daig and I nervously approached the meeting; we about fell over to find 66 enthusiastic women waiting. The rest is history. Although I had almost no coaching experience, that large turnout forced me to leave my law office every afternoon to act as Daig's assistant "coach", by simply parroting what he told me to say or do.

The first year, Fall 1974 and Spring 1975, was spent at Aquatic Park in Berkeley, with Daig competing with freeway noise to be heard. The ever-supportive Steve Gladstone even volunteered to put the 16 seat flat-bottomed teaching "scow" at Aquatic Park; for weeks the novice men traveled daily to the

women's site until they no longer needed to learn in the scow, a complete departure from past practice without which we might have foundered. Recognizing the need for a suitable racing eight, Daig, Dr. Hoepner and I agreed to split the cost of a new Pocock eight from our own funds. Steve even pulled up one day with the long unused "Miss Italy" eight, given to Cal after being rowed by Italy in the 1932 Olympics, that he brought from storage for the women to row.⁷ Amazingly, the crew that Daig selected and trained, which at its first race was only beginning to learn a racing start, was undefeated in intercollegiate dual races on the West Coast. With the team having proved itself worthy of competing at the 1975 NWRA national championships in Princeton, New Jersey, we requested and again received funding from Dr. Hoepner to travel to it. That remarkable crew made the national finals in its first year, and three women (Dana Whitaker, Barb McCutcheon and Nancy Turner) along with Daig were invited to attend the national selection camp.

The very narrow Aquatic Park in Berkeley with barely the (then) racing distance of 1000 meters of water was insufficient for adequate training, so a better location seemed imperative (the first team conditioned mainly with stadium stairs at Memorial Stadium and Edwards Stadium, and running on the fire trails in the hills above the Berkeley campus, plus a memorable row down the Sacramento River from just below Redding to the Bay). It remained clear that the men's boathouse on Glascock St in Oakland simply didn't have room for any equipment for a women's team, even if locker and other facilities could have been worked out. After extensive scouting, I could locate no other suitable space on the Oakland Estuary. We had noticed a small shed at the long, wide and usually calm Briones Reservoir in Orinda on which a few women from Mills or St. Mary's colleges were sometimes rowing, even though no human contact with the drinking water supply was ever allowed.⁸ I thought "if them, why not us", so I simply phoned the water district office for an appointment, and went in to make a hopefully well-reasoned pitch, including a necessary guarantee to have only equipment, not people, be in contact with the drinking water supply. While I knew that our proposal would have to go through channels, what I didn't know was that one of my former Cal crew mates was then the president of the water district's Board of Directors. Soon, our request was approved. Sanford "Sandy" Skaggs and I have always "discussed" whether it was his presidency or my compelling presentation that won the day. Even though monumental for the crew, getting Briones was really as simple as that.

¹See Chapter 6 of Amanda Schweinbenz, [Paddling Against the Current: A History of Women's Competitive International Rowing Between 1954 and 2003](https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/831/1.0077008/1) (<https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/831/1.0077008/1>), PhD Thesis in Human Kinetics, University of British Columbia, 2007.

²Crews from Cal have the unique distinction of winning gold medals at the Olympics Games in 1928, 1932, and 1948 in the men's eight. The crews won the right to represent the United States at the Olympic games by winning the Olympic trials against other crews from U.S. clubs and universities. The crews were coached by Ky Ebright (1894-1979). Ebright's crews won six national championships and he was inducted into the U.S. Rowing Hall of Fame in 1956.

³Nancy's father, Ian Turner, and uncle, David Turner, were the stroke-seat and seven-seat, respectively, of the Cal crew that won the gold medal at the 1948 Olympic Games. The rowing events were held in Henley-on-Thames, England.

⁴Steve Gladstone was head coach of Cal Men's rowing from 1973-1980 and 1997-2008. His crews won five IRA championships. He has also served as the head coach at Brown University (1982-1994) and Yale University (2010-2023).

⁵Dr. Barbara J. Hoepner, who was an Assistant Professor of Physical Education, was named the part-time coordinator of the women's sports program under the auspices of the Physical Education Department in November 1973. Later, in March 1976, then-Chancellor Albert Bowker made the decision to create the Department of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics (WIA). Dr. Luella "Lue" Lilly was appointed the full-time director of the Department of WIA.

⁶This club is now known as Berkeley Paddling and Rowing Club. It was also the home of a group of a pre-Title IX Cal women's rowing coached by Art Sachs and Karl Drlica in the late 1960s. [Learn more about the history of this program \(https://150w.berkeley.edu/cal-womens-rowing-1960s\)](https://150w.berkeley.edu/cal-womens-rowing-1960s).

⁷The "Miss Italy" was a wooden shell made by the famed Italian boat builder Cantiere Navale Donoratico. The shell was used by the crew from the Unione Canottieri Livornesi (Livorno Rowing Club) who were representing Italy in the 1932 Olympic Games. The Cal crew representing the United States beat this crew in a 2000 meter race in Marine Park in Long Beach, California, by a margin of 2/10 of a second. Many members of this remarkable Italian crew subsequently competed in the 1936 Olympic Games where they again won the silver medal. For further details, see Peter Mallory, [Sport of Rowing, Volume 2 \(2012\) \(https://worldrowing.com/about/history/the-sport-of-rowing/\)](https://worldrowing.com/about/history/the-sport-of-rowing/).

⁸Briones Reservoir was constructed as a terminal water storage reservoir in 1964 and is operated by the East Bay Municipal Utilities District (or EBMUD as it is commonly known). The reservoir is named after the Briones family whose farm was flooded to create the reservoir.