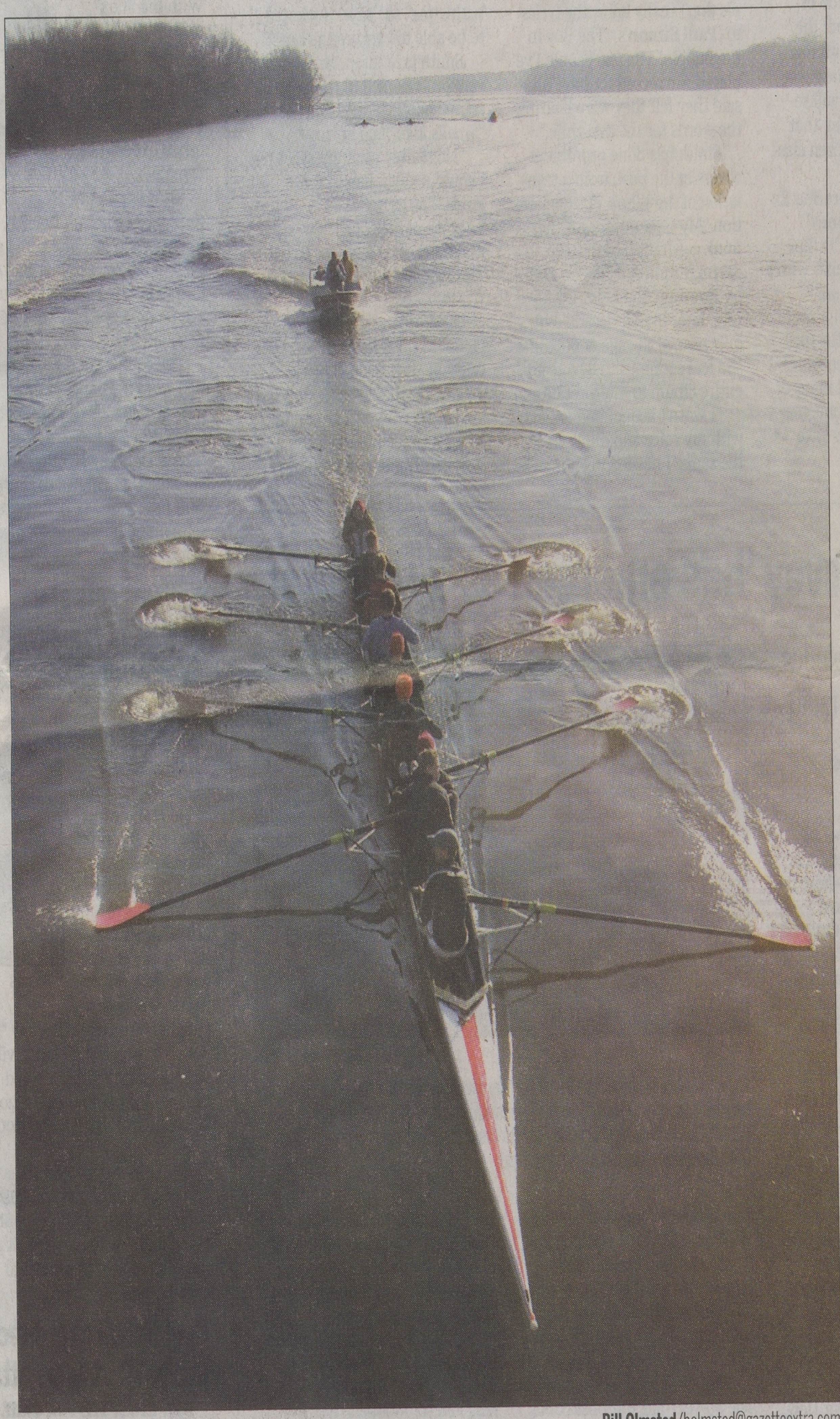
Rock 'n' row



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A boat carrying members of the coaching staff follows the UW-Madison rowing team on the Rock River during a workout this past weekend. The team has made forays onto the Rock River a rite of spring for nearly 30 years.

Spring comes to the river on the swift-moving shells of UW rowers

ANNA MARIE LUX
BETWEEN THE LINES

EDGERTON

Judy Nelson watched from shore Saturday as her favorite signs of spring sprinted up the Rock River.

"They look like big water bugs," she murmured, happily. "Anyone who lives on the river knows that spring is coming when they arrive."

Along with robins and redwings, rowers return faithfully at the end of winter.

But instead of migrating from the South, they drive from Madison.

Like many, Judy welcomes the return of the University of Wisconsin crew teams.

She knows when Madison lakes are still frozen, the athletes find open water near Newville.

UW men's crew coach Chris Clark calls the sheltered stretch of river from the mouth of Lake Koshkonong to the Indianford Dam ideal for early spring practice.

"These boats can't handle big waves," Clark says of the long, skinny

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Nelson
'Anyone who lives on the river knows that spring is coming when they arrive.'

Shells and boats carrying the UW-Madison rowing team and coaching staff head down the Rock River from Lake Koshkonong during an early season workout.

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River/UW rowers are sure sign of spring

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shells that stretch 55 feet and longer.

Both the men's and women's teams launched boats early Saturday morning, when the temperature struggled to reach 20 degrees and mist skirted the shoreline.

Some rowers wore Spandex shorts and light jerseys. They tied their feet into fixed shoes in the boats and sat on sliding seats. Then they practiced a sport so demanding that each burned 1,000 calories an hour.

"They pull hard for no other reason than they are cold," Clark explains. "Lots of times, they get splashed with freezing water."

The sight of rowers often attracts curious spectators, especially during spring break, which is the first week of April this year.

Judy parked near the Highway 59 bridge and watched the men's team from inside her warm vehicle. The sight stirred memories of when she and her late husband, R.Y., opened their Edgerton home to exhausted rowers.

During spring breaks through most of the 1980s and the early 1990s, members of the men's team rested between rigorous daily practices at the Nelson's 14-room house.

"Wet jerseys, sweatpants and half-written papers were strewn all over," Judy recalls, smiling.

For every 10 who try the sport, nine drop out because they have no idea how hard they will have to work.

"Sometimes the dog would run off with someone's socks."

R.Y. rowed with the UW team from 1948 until 1952.

One of his friends was Randy "Jabo" Jablonic, men's rowing coach from 1968 until 1995.

When Jablonic needed open water for the crew to practice on in spring, R.Y. suggested the lower Rock.

Team members began using the river in 1978, Judy recalls.

In the beginning, she did not know much about rowing. But she decided to learn when she saw crewmembers in her home with bleeding blisters, torn skin and hard calluses.

"It looks so easy," she says. "But I've seen races where they heave over the side when it is over because they are so exhausted."

She has nothing but admiration for the sport that requires absolute teamwork.

"There has to be complete synchronization," she explains. "Imagine eight people doing the same thing at the same time and not knowing where they are going."

She is referring to the eight rowers who sit single file in the narrow shell facing the stern and pulling hard on long oars to propel the boat forward. The coxswain (pronounced KAK-sen) sits in the back facing them and steers the boat, while motivating the rowers.

For every 10 who try the sport, nine drop out because they have no idea how hard they will have to work.

"We want the tallest, strongest people with big lungs," Clark says. "It's all about speed."

Boats line up side-by-side and travel 2,000 meters in a race. The first one across the finish line wins.

To Judy, all rowers are winners.

She has a basement filled with photos and faded jerseys from rowing teams past. She cherishes a medal given to her by a former team member. And she anticipates each new rowing season with fresh excitement.

"Just look at them," she says, pointing to crewmembers as they glided back up the chilly river. "They are grace in motion."

Anna Marie Lux is a columnist for The Janesville Gazette. Her columns run on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Call her with ideas or comments at (608) 754-3311, Ext. 264. Or e-mail her at amarielux@gazetteextra.com.