

International unit plays well together in women's eights

By Barbara Matson | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 21, 2013



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

The University of Virginia finished fourth in the championship women's eights race won by Cambridge Boat Club.

Eight of the world's best scullers climbed into the same boat Sunday and raced to victory in the championship women's eights at the Head of the Charles, gaining the finish line in 15 minutes, 59.55 seconds and beating the eight-time world champion US Rowing team by 1.2 seconds.

The team, often called the Great8, was rowing under the banner of the regatta host Cambridge Boat Club, but it is a multinational crew of scullers: three from New Zealand, and one each from the Czech Republic, the US, Austria, Lithuania, and the Netherlands.

“It was a great experience,” said Miroslava Knapkova, 2012 single sculls Olympic gold medalist from the Czech Republic. “Normally we race against each other and now we sit together in one boat, and we want to beat other boat. It was very fun.”

A similar multinational group of scullers raced last year in the quickest raw time of the race, but incurred a 10-second penalty for going outside a buoy and came in second to the US Rowing squad. This version of the Great8 was determined.

Among the scullers in the boat was Maine’s Elle Logan, a two-time Olympic gold medalist in the US eight who has switched to the single sculls.

“We were just trying to have a good race together, have fun,” said Logan, “because we’re all rowing differently. These are really experienced racers in that boat and they just raced it.”

Logan admitted she enjoyed getting the edge on her former US teammates.

“Everyone’s in training mode right now, so I just see it as making them faster,” she said.

Coxswain Jack Carlson, a former Georgetown University cox now studying at Oxford, initiated the organization of the boat with the three New Zealanders. Newton’s Gevvie Stone, a US Olympian single sculler who rowed in the Great8 last year but did not join the team this year, helped recruit some of the other rowers. Her father, Gregg, coached the eight. Along with Logan and Knapkova were New Zealanders Emma Twigg, Rebecca Scown, and Kayla Pratt; Inge Janssen from the Netherlands, Austria’s Magdalena Lobnig, and Lithuanian Donata Vistartaite.

“It was a little last minute but if you get a chance to race in the Head of the Charles, everyone wants to,” said Logan. “And a chance to row with people you normally race against is a cool idea.

“Something worked.”

Carlson said placing Logan at stroke helped set a tone for the boat. “She set a really good rhythm,” said Carlson, “and she also set the tone for the crew in terms of, we’re not going to make this too complicated, we’re not going to try and make everyone do

exactly the same thing. If we can get relatively on the same page and everyone is putting down the power, I think that'll be enough, and that's pretty much what we did."

The team had three practice rows this week, just enough to get a feel for each other's style and perhaps, each other's personality.

"Everyone is at such a high level anyway and everyone is obviously very motivated to win; people have come a long, long way for this," said Carlson. "It clicked really, right from our first outing.

"It definitely was a little bit scrappy, there was a lot of water flying around in the race. But it jelled enough, because we did have the quickest time today."

All of the rowers are very familiar with elite competition, if not with sweep rowing. Gregg Stone said the respect the athletes had for each other made the ride smooth.

"It was just a matter of trying to form a boat that worked as one," said Scown, 2012 Olympic bronze medalist in the coxless pairs. Scown rowed in a combined British-New Zealand eight last year that came in fourth. "There's a few different styles but I think we just generally all had the same idea about picking the boat up, and it felt like a pretty light easy boat to row and so we enjoyed it."

The US boat started in the one position, and hit the first split at Riverside Boat Club about five seconds faster than the Great8. But the international crew picked up speed as it streamed down the river, particularly in the final third of the race.

"The good thing is everyone is very fit from rowing in smaller boats," said Twigg, silver medalist in the single sculls at the 2013 world championships, "so over a long course that's probably to our advantage as well."

And the scullers found that for once, they liked rowing with, and not against each other.

"It's completely different," said Knapkova. "In the single, it's only me and my responsibility, and in the eights, it's a team. It's in some ways easier; because of the others, I feel the teamwork and I can pull harder and harder."
