

At the limit: Rowers 'think you're going to die'

BY MICHELLE THRESHER
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Rowers like pain.

They like to feel their muscles on fire. They like to work so hard it hurts to breathe. They like to use every last bit of their energy to cross the finish line, and then collapse, exhausted.

They say it's fun.

"Sometimes, the more it hurts, the better it feels," said Erin Petersen, a senior on the University of Washington's women's varsity eight team, which finished first in the first heat Friday at the National Collegiate Rowing Championship at Harsha Lake and is a favorite in today's championship at 3 p.m.

"Your arms feel like lead bricks. Your legs hurt. There's a metallic taste in your mouth. There's a

If you go

► **WHAT:** The National Collegiate Rowing Championship.

► **WHEN:** Today.

► **DETAILS:** Admission is \$7. Races begin at 8 a.m. and culminate with the women's varsity eight championship at 3 p.m. and the men's varsity eight championship at 3:30 p.m.

► **WHERE:** Harsha Lake at East Fork State Park, located just off State Route 125 (Beechmont Ave.), 10 miles east of I-275.

Schedule, results, D6.

burning in your lungs — you almost don't want to breathe. You think you're going to die. But you

survive. You do it."

Petersen has competed in volleyball, basketball, soccer, track and cross country, but said no sport is more painful than rowing.

From the shore, it looks almost effortless. As a boat glides across the water with eight pairs of oars moving together, it looks more like art than sport. But when the rowers are asked if it's peaceful out there, they laugh.

"What looks peaceful is actually eight athletes giving everything they have," said Nat Keohane, a senior on Yale's men's varsity eight. "The ideal race would be to be completely exhausted with the last stroke across the line."

But they want it to look effortless. Keohane said the teams making frantic strokes are actually

struggling. When a team's rowing well, he said, it doesn't look like the rowers are working at all.

On the water, it's total concentration. It's quiet out there, Petersen said. The rowers don't yell, or do anything that could waste energy.

"You try to relax your face, because you don't want to use any extra energy with any part of your body," she said.

The rowers need all the energy they can get. Petersen said it wasn't easy to train her body to keep going through the pain.

"My sophomore year, I would want to take just one stroke off, so I would," she said. "My junior year, I would want to take a stroke off, but I wouldn't. This year, I don't even want to take a stroke

off."

Now, Petersen says she likes the pain. The rowers must learn to like the pain, or they can't make it through training — or the race.

"You sort of have to have a weird mentality to compete in the sport," Gus Koven, a senior on Brown's men's varsity eight team, said. "You have to relish the pain."

Koven, like many of the other rowers, struggles to find words to explain *why* he enjoys the pain. Somehow, he says, rowers find satisfaction in pain.

"It's hard to explain," he said. "It's just attached to something really primal — something really in me. Working your body to its limit is fulfilling. We devote ourselves to our sport."