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HISTORY

The Barrier-Breaking Rowers of America's First All-Black Crew Team

At the height of the civil rights movement, Howard University's oarsmen held their own against rivals from established, largely white programs

Kim O'Connell

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Howard's Crew Beats Area Schools
Underdog Howard buck the odds and a 15 mile-an-hour head wind today to capture the Washington Crew championships on the Potomac River.

Howard Crew No Longer River L...
WASHINGTON, D.C. — a feat, the speed of which without a parallel in sports history at Howard University the Howard crew has progressed from "laughing-to-king" of the Potomac in the short period of years.
It was in the spring of when the Howard Rowing Club was created. But coached in these things, an arduous labor usually known University had a...
Howard Ware has for fledgling team an expensive business. Last year he invested over \$5000 in two shells, one for the Varsity and one for the Freshman team, oars, a motorboat, megaphones, uniforms and equipment. This year the budget of

Rowers Must Prove Themselves

Howard University Steadies a Shell Before Second Race; Spectators Line Area Near the Finish

Crew Team Returns To Water

Bison Crew Scores Upset Win

Rowing
Left to right: Ronald Yoes (Coxswain), Dennis F. Hightower, (Capt.), Charles Smith, Julius Haywood, Morris Marshall, Ronald-John Smith, Howard Fisher, William Beamer, Eddie Brinker, Howard W. Michael W.

financial remuneration coach is Mr. Leo Zajach, who rowing at Clark University then as a coach. initial outing last year Hightower failed to words of Coach Zajach lack of competitive

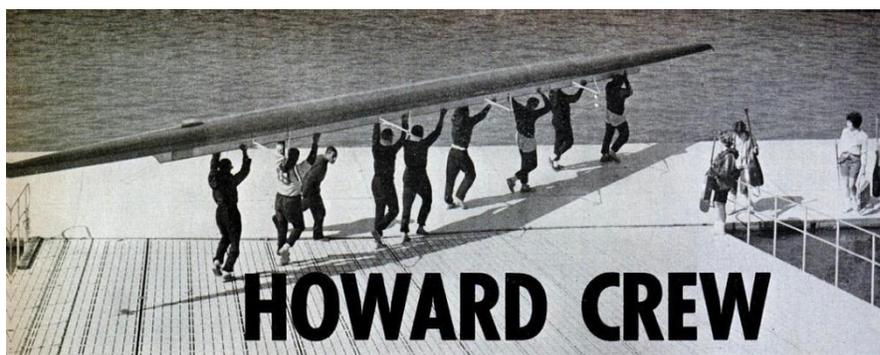
In 1964, when a journalist asked Howard crew coach Stuart Law about the team's last-place finishes, he just smiled and said, "We're getting better all the time." Illustration by Meilan Solly / Screenshots via Newspapers.com, Howard University, the Bison, the Hilltop

It was a perfect day for rowing. The wind was light and steady, the water glassy and smooth. On a Saturday in April 1964, the temperature on the Housatonic River in Connecticut reached the 80s, warm but not oppressive. The boats would be fast.

Three racing shells—long, narrow vessels outfitted with oars—lined up at the start of the two-mile course. On board were eight-man crews and coxswains (the people tasked with steering the boat) from home team Yale, Rutgers in New Jersey and Howard in Washington, D.C. Howard's single varsity boat was up against the third varsity boats from the other teams: solid rowers, but not first varsity, the top athletes.

As a new team—the first all-Black crew team in the United States—the Howard rowers knew they had little chance against boats filled with white boys who had probably rowed in high school. Indeed, Yale's first varsity boat would defeat Rutgers in its heat that day by four boat lengths. Howard's all-freshman boat was handily trounced by the Yale and Rutgers freshmen, too. That day on the Housatonic, the third varsity was Howard's last shot.

Their coach, Stuart Law, yelled one last piece of advice through a megaphone: "Okay, varsity, get 'em."



A photo from a 1962 Ebony magazine spread about Howard's crew team Ebony magazine

At the signal, the boats launched as if lit by a fuse, oars moving back and forth in unison. Unsurprisingly, the Yale team jumped out in front, but Howard kept the pressure on Rutgers throughout the course. At the end of the final sprint, the Howard oarsmen crossed the finish line just three feet behind the Jersey boys.

They had lost, but they weren't defeated. Howard's rowers knew people considered them underdogs based on their skin color alone. It was the height of the civil rights movement, a decade after *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned segregation in schools but years before the integration of most collegiate sports teams. With every stroke, the Howard rowers were proving themselves as worthy as any team on the water.

After the race, a *Sports Illustrated* correspondent noted that Howard was the first Black institution "to crash the exclusive ranks of college rowing." When the writer asked Law—a

white man whom he described as “no crusader for equality,” but rather someone whose “only interest in races is how to get his boys to the finish line first”—about the team’s last-place finishes, the coach just smiled and said, “We’re getting better all the time.”

The history of competitive rowing

Founded in 1867, Howard University is one of the nation’s oldest and best-known historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), with a long history of graduating academic and athletic superstars. When Howard first put eight rowers and a coxswain into a borrowed shell in 1961, however, their success on the water was an open question.

Unlike the experienced crews from other D.C. universities—namely, Georgetown and American—that regularly rowed the Potomac River in their sleek boats, the Howard oarsmen were complete novices. For some, it was the first time they’d ever been in a boat. Others weren’t strong swimmers, due in part to longstanding segregationist policies about public pools and beaches that kept generations of Black people from learning how to swim.

Rowing itself is an ancient sport, mentioned in Virgil’s epic poem *The Aeneid*, in which the Trojans engage in a frenzied boat race. Modern rowing dates to the 1700s, when the pastime gained popularity in England, which hosted its first Henley Royal Regatta in 1839 (a race that is still held annually to this day). The first recorded regatta in America happened in New York in 1756.



Howard launched its non-varsity club crew team in the spring of 1961. Courtesy of Bernard Thoms / Steve McGruder

By the mid-19th century, rowing had become a prominent sport at schools like Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom and Harvard and Yale stateside. Because boats and oars are expensive, and because the sport became so popular at these exclusive colleges, rowing developed a reputation as a sport for the elite and affluent—a reputation that lingers to this day.

The word “crew” is a nautical term that refers to the crew of any boat, and it’s common in the sport to say that one “rows crew.” Unlike other team sports that might showcase a star athlete—the quarterback, the clutch hitter, the ace point guard—in crew, everyone needs to row as one, in perfect synchronicity. If you stand out, it’s probably because you’re not keeping pace. “No member of a crew,” wrote philosopher Alfred North Whitehead for the *Atlantic* in 1936, “is praised for the rugged individuality of his rowing.”

Rowers usually engage in sculling (where they wield two oars) or sweeping, in which they each have a single oar and are equally balanced on both sides of the boat. The iconic eight-person shell, with four oars on the port side and four on starboard, is the best-known configuration in crew. Athletes row backward, facing the stern, or rear of the boat. Only the coxswain faces the bow and can see the course ahead. Usually slighter of build than the rest of the rowers, the coxswain keeps rowers focused with the sheer power of their voice.

Where one sits in the boat matters, too. The lightest and most technically savvy rowers sit at the two ends—the eight (also known as stroke) and seven seats at the stern, setting the rhythm and pace of the boat, and the two and one seats at the bow keeping the vessel balanced. The middle four are what’s commonly known as the engine room—the boat’s biggest and most powerful rowers.

The origins of Howard’s crew team

Howland Ware, the Howard crew team’s champion and benefactor, saw past the barriers keeping Black athletes out of rowing. A real estate broker and Howard alumnus, Ware attended a regatta in 1952 and became fascinated with this sport where no one looked like him. In the late 19th century, a Black rower named Frenchy A. Johnson had come to some prominence as a sculler, but stories of Black rowers were otherwise nonexistent. According to a 1962 *Ebony* magazine profile of the team, Ware made a vow after watching the regatta: “Even if I have to pay for it myself, they will have a rowing team at Howard.”

Ware eventually convinced the university to host the crew team as a non-varsity club sport (effectively a trial run for attaining varsity status). Donating nearly \$10,000 of his own money to buy a boat and basic uniforms, Ware sought out existing teams on campus—football, track and basketball—and recruited for crew, convincing athletes that rowing would be a good way to stay in shape in their off seasons. Once he had cobbled together enough recruits to form an eight-man crew in the spring of 1961, he piled them all into his Cadillac and drove them down to the Potomac River himself.

Howard Fulcher was one of these first rowers. The son of a New Jersey pharmacist, he had enrolled in Howard’s pharmacy program as a freshman. The crew’s first outings, Fulcher recalls, were sometimes comical and occasionally disastrous, with boats threatening to tip and rowers “catching crabs”—the crew term for losing control of an oar. “We started

practicing in February and it was freezing on the Potomac,” Fulcher says. “One day, the freshmen went out, and the boat went 20 feet from the dock and sunk.”

Fulcher remembers getting up before dawn to practice nearly every day. “We were just trying to get to the high school level because none of us had rowed before,” he says. “The practices were intense. It broadened our scope in life.”

Ware was determined to make crew an official varsity sport at Howard—a designation that would lend the team more status, legitimacy and funding. But first he needed a good coach. The team’s assistant coach, Leo Zajac, only lasted the inaugural season. With just days before the 1962 season was set to begin, Law, an attorney who’d been a collegiate rower at Yale, took the coaching job on a volunteer basis. At the time, one of his Yale crewmates, Don Cadle, was coaching Howard’s hometown rival Georgetown and may have convinced Law to take the job.

Law entered the fledgling team in as many races as he could, including the 1962 Dad Vail Regatta, a storied intercollegiate event on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. All the big shot crews were there: Georgetown, American, St. Joseph’s, Drexel. (Varsity and club teams alike competed in the regatta.) “We had no way to place in that race, but we were in the race,” Fulcher says. “That was the most important thing.” The team was even able to use the Schuylkill boathouse owned by Olympian rower Jack Kelly, brother of the actress Grace Kelly.



Howard crew alumnus Howard Fulcher in 2022 Kim O'Connell

Ware was a very proud man who was endeared to the alma mater, and he was very interested in Howard crew being on par with Harvard," says former rower Bill Beamer, the stroke seat for the Dad Vail race. "He would say anyone can bounce a basketball or run up and down a football field. He wanted to introduce the sport of crew to put us on par with other schools in the area."

The lack of wins didn't bode well for varsity sport status, though. "So far the first Negro Rowing Team in the Nation has not evoked any wild enthusiasm by its performance," noted a March 1962 editorial in the *Hilltop*, Howard's student newspaper. "But Coach Ware, who is well versed in such things, assures us that a long and arduous labor usually precedes the first win." By the fall of 1962, perhaps because of Ware's tireless advocacy, the university had awarded the team its hoped-for varsity status.



Rowing

(Left to right) Ronald Yoes (Coxswain), Dennis F. Hightower, (Capt.), Charles Smith, Julius Haywood, Morris Marshall, Rudolph Smith, Howard Fulcher, William Beamer, Eddie Brinker,

Howlad Ware, Leo Zajach (Coach), Sid Banks (Ass't Coach), Michael House (Manager).

Last year Howard launched the first Negro Rowing Team in the nation. Not yet a varsity sport, it is set up under the auspices (but not financed by) the Physical Education Department.

The existence of the Rowing Team was made possible by Mr. Howland Ware, Class of '41, who in addition to his services as head coach has contributed all the necessary equipment and uniforms

without financial remuneration.

Assistant coach is Mr. Leo Zajac who did competitive rowing at Clark University both as a crewman and then as a coach.

In their initial outing last year the team captained by Dennis Hightower failed to win in six ventures. But in the words of Coach Zajac "Our main problem is the lack of competitive experience."

The crew team's 1962 yearbook photo The Bison via Howard University

The team emerges victorious

On May 3, 1964, just a few weeks after losing on the Housatonic, the Howard crew team silenced the naysayers by winning the D.C. Regatta (which no longer exists), defeating Georgetown, American and George Washington University. "By four or five lengths!" says Bernard Thoms, who rowed five seat. At 6-foot-4, Thoms had long, muscular legs that were well suited to driving the oars through the water, generating power and speed in the boat's engine room.

The race's outcome was by no means assured. At the start, Thoms found himself with an oar that had been modified by another rower. Instead of strengthening the oar, the tweak may have weakened its blade. At the signal, Thoms pulled so hard the oar broke, forcing officials to postpone the team's heat. While that might have demoralized some crews, for the Howard rowers, it was a kind of catalyst. "When you have a person on your team that proves to you that they are strong enough to put that much effort to rowing with that blade," Thoms says, "you want to do that yourself." When they started again, there would be no going back.



A photo from a 1962 Ebony magazine feature about Howard's crew program Ebony magazine

Rowing against a strong headwind, the men found that swing, that rhythm, that almost magical feeling that happens when eight bodies work as one. They weren't all best friends outside of the boat. They'd had different upbringings before they came to Howard, and they would splinter in all directions after they left the school. Some of them would stay in touch for years; other would drift apart.

None of them were thinking about the future that spring morning. Rowers are often admonished to keep their "head in the boat," to not look around or get distracted; it's something Coach Law likely said to his rowers dozens of times. So they did. Against powerhouse boats from D.C.'s renowned universities, Howard's crew team showed that

they, too, belonged on the Potomac. After the race, the *Washington Post* wrote, "Underdog Howard bucked the odds." The *Philadelphia Tribune*, meanwhile, noted that the Howard crew had gone from "laughingstock to king."

"We had a good boat and we won, and we won fair and square," says Steve McGruder, the stroke seat. "I felt the resentment from these other teams, particularly Georgetown. We felt great about it. We had done something no one expected."

Allen Nesbitt, who sat at the bow, recalls, "I remember being barely able to hold the oar in my hand, I was so tired. But I finished up strong. The giant guys in our boat were the motors. It was a highlight of my career."



Crew team member Reggie Young (center) holds the first-place trophy won by Howard at the 1964 D.C. Regatta. *The Pittsburgh Courier via Newspapers.com*

The Howard crew team scored other victories, too. In 1965, its rowers won the Grimaldi Cup regatta in New York, beating American University by three-quarters of a boat length; in '67, they won the Dogwood Regatta in Charlottesville, Virginia, defeating their host school, the University of Virginia, and Georgetown. Over the course of its existence, the crew team's ranks included such illustrious alumni as Dennis Hightower, who served as deputy commerce secretary under President Barack Obama, and Edward Ellington, the grandson of renowned jazz musician Duke Ellington.

The end of the Howard crew team

In 1970, Candy Caruthers broke another barrier by becoming Howard's first Black woman coxswain and first woman member of the team overall. She recalled one horrible winter practice to a *Washington Star* reporter in 1971: "The sky was gray, the wind was blowing hard. I had to keep fighting the urge to get out of the shell and walk over to the dock."

Caruthers compared crew to other sports with stadium-bound audiences. "Guys who go out for crew have to do it for the satisfaction because there's no glory," she said. "There's no one running along the bank cheering you on. Most people, even on campus, don't know Howard has a crew."

That anonymity may have contributed to the sport's downfall at Howard. "Black people, generally speaking, particularly during that era and before then, were water averse," Thoms

says. "A lot of things that happened around the water, particularly in the South, were not good for Black people. We didn't have a lot of swimmers. We didn't have a lot of divers. We didn't have a lot of boats. It's not making any money for the university, so they thought, why should we support it."

(In the 19th century, rivers were intimately associated with both the sale and the escape of enslaved people; in the 20th, they were where white supremacists tossed the remains of Black lynching victims like Emmett Till. But rivers were also places of spiritual importance to the Black experience: "I've known rivers," poet Langston Hughes famously wrote. "My soul has grown deep like the rivers.")

Despite the valiant efforts of coaches and rowers, crew didn't last at Howard, disappearing from its sports rosters by the mid-1970s. Ware and Law had moved on by then, with Ware dying in 1979. Several former Howard rowers have since passed away, too, including Don R. Johnson, who rowed and won with Howard "Woody" Thornton as a pair at the Canadian National Rowing Championships in 1968, and Caruthers, who died in 2008. That same year, Law died of a heart attack while rowing in a regatta at the age of 79.

To this day, rowing organizations across the country, including the sport's governing body, U.S. Rowing, are working to diversify the sport and break down barriers to entry for people of color, from financing to access to boathouses to lack of swimming experience. Just this spring, the first all-Black women's HBCU crew team launched at St. Augustine's University in North Carolina.



*A photo of the crew team from Howard's 1972 yearbook *The Bison* via Howard University*

But Howard's groundbreaking legacy on the water remains largely unknown. As Patrick Johnson—national director of the rowing program for Athletes Without Limits, which creates opportunities for athletes with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and a board member for the Black Coaches and Rowers Association—says, "I flash back now to when I was a younger rower, right here in Washington, D.C. I had friends who are

professors at Howard, I'd gone to Howard football games, but I had no idea in all that time I was rowing that there was a Black rowing team there."

Johnson adds, "What hits me the most is how similar this is to our Black history in general, in terms of what makes it into the archives." And what is left out.

Sixty years after rowing at the Dad Vail Regatta, Fulcher still remembers how it felt in those magical, fleeting moments when the boat found its swing. "It was nine men," he says, "but one purpose."

Kim O'Connell

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<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-barrier-breaking-rowers-of-americas-first-all-black-crew-team-180980454/>
