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Rowing News

the magazine of rowing

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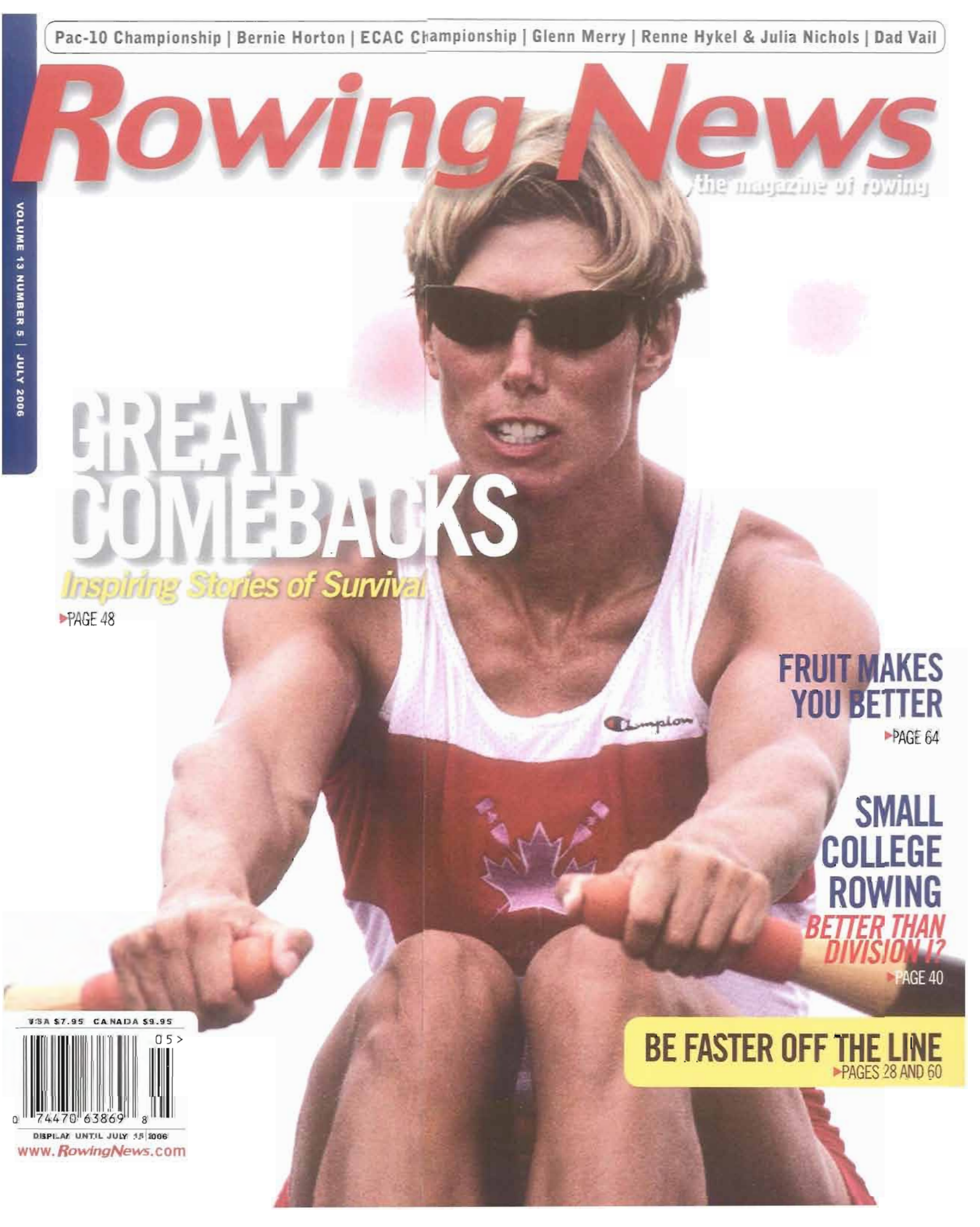

GREAT COMEBACKS

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Rowing News
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features

40
Small college rowing

So you don't row at Harvard, Princeton, or Ohio State. Does that mean your rowing experience is less valid? As **Ben Ames** points out, of course not. No matter where you row, this sport can bring out your best. In fact, rowing in a small program may mean you are more in tune with what makes our sport so great.

48 cover story
Rowing's greatest comebacks

Sports comebacks are the stuff of legend. As fans, we live for them. There are the famous ones of recent years: Lance Armstrong, coming back from near-death at the hands of cancer to win a record seven consecutive Tours de France; and the Boston Red Sox, coming back from a 0-3 deficit to beat the hated New York Yankees. As **John Tracey** reports, in rowing we have our comebacks as well. Some are famous and awesome; others are small and personal, yet filled with meaning.

AHEAD

ON THE COVER
LOCATION: SILKEN LAUMANN AT THE 1996 SUMMER GAMES
PHOTO: PETER SPURRIER

Ben AMES

Ben Ames is a wire service reporter in Boston, writing about business and technology. He went to the Columbia University School of Journalism, then covered fires and the police beat for daily newspapers, computers and software for monthly magazines, and hiking trails for a book he wrote about walks in Massachusetts. Ben's feature this month on **SMALL COLLEGE ROWING** is near and dear to his heart —he rowed in the lightweight four for the club crew at Colby College, and married the stroke of the lightweight women's four. Today, they live with their baby son and daughter in Arlington, Mass.

John TRACEY

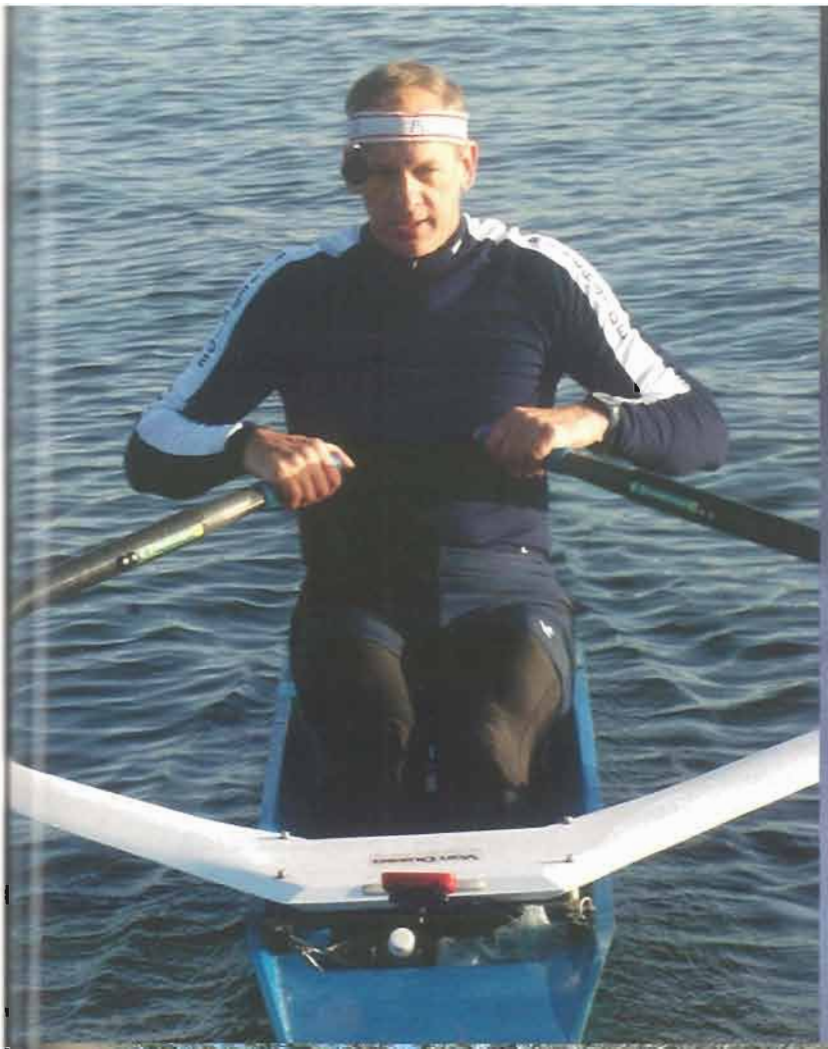
A professional writer in the investment field, **John Tracey** has tired of writing about portfolio attribution and enthusiastically embraced his favorite subject—rowing. At the age of 40, the long-time Riverside Boat Club member got his mid-life crisis on and poured himself into competition. As his perplexed wife and kids looked on, he managed to medal four times in the Head of the Charles, getting a win in 2003. He also came in 4th at Speed Orders in 2001 and won silver in the LM Int. 2x at Nationals in 2003. Now older, slightly wiser, and injured a lot more often, John has relaxed behind the keyboard and is beginning to mellow out. This month, John tells us the story of **ROWING'S GREATEST COMEBACKS**.

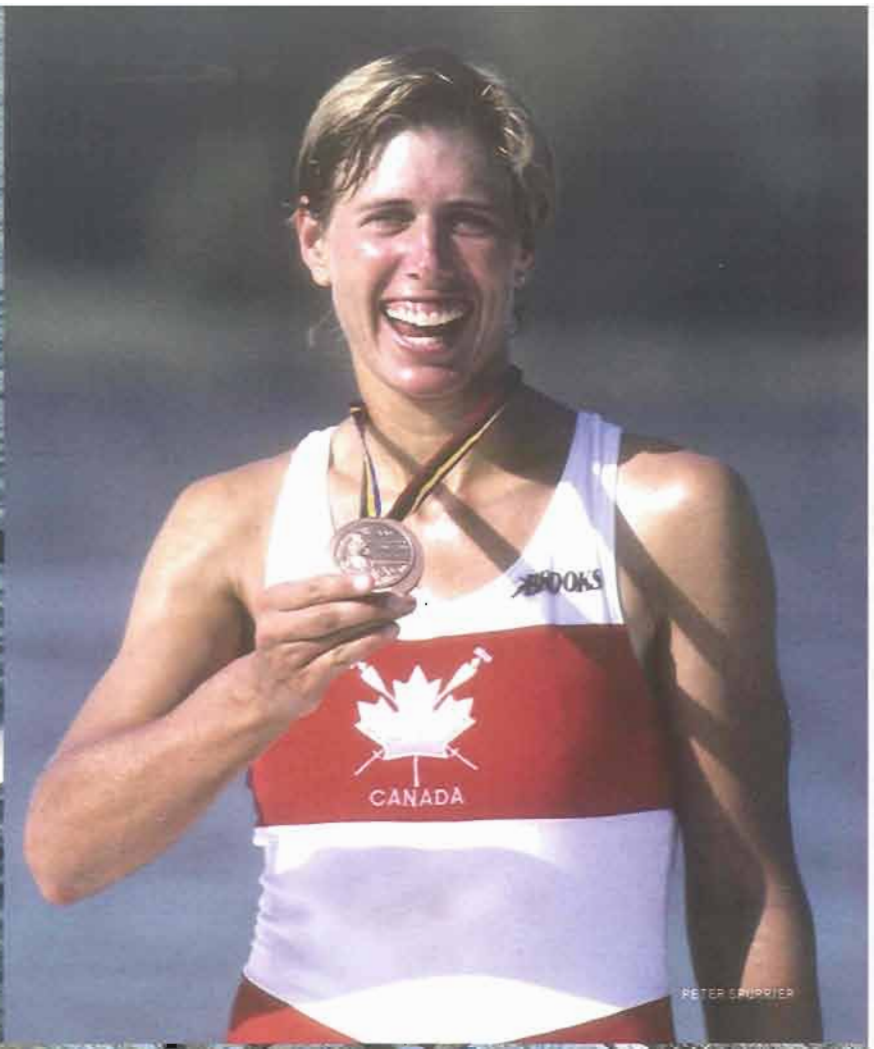
Rowing's Greatest Comebacks

Sports comebacks are the stuff of legend. As fans, we live for them. There are the famous ones of recent years: Lance Armstrong, coming back from near-death in the face of cancer to win a record seven consecutive Tours de France; and the 2004 Boston Red Sox, coming back from an 0-3 deficit to beat the hated New York Yankees.

In rowing, we have our comebacks too. Some are famous and awesome; others are small and personal, yet filled with meaning. Here are three that inspire.

story by John **TRACEY**





PETER SNIPPER

MIKE VESPOLI

John Yasaitis

THE MOST REMARKABLE THING about John Yasaitis's story of injury and recovery is...everything. It doesn't matter who you talk to—his chief surgeon, an oarsman in the eight with which he collided, or Yasaitis himself—you come away awestruck. Every facet of the story is extraordinary: the severity of the injury; the fact that the outcome could have been much worse; the bravery and cool-headedness of everyone involved; and the sheer courage and determination of this masters oarsman.

In the fall of 2002, Yasaitis was having the best year of his competitive rowing life. The Riverside Boat Club sculler had earned a silver medal in the single at masters nationals in August, and his times in Riverside's Head of the Charles practice race series indicated he could easily place in the top five in the grand masters singles event at the Charles.

The week before the Head of the Charles is always utter mayhem on the Charles River. Both morning and evening sessions are packed with boats—most unfamiliar with the river's many twists and turns. On the morning of Wednesday, October 16 2002, four days before his race, Yasaitis was rowing upstream through the Arsenal Street bridge. He had just overtaken a slower boat and was probably farther into the middle of the river than he should have been. He may also have been taking the turn a bit wide to avoid the brush and downed trees that protrude into the river upstream of the arch, where the river turns toward the rower's left. Whatever course he took, his mind was, at least partially, on the upcoming race.

Coming downstream, a Gentle Giant eight had just finished a set of 20s and 30s. They had just passed the sandbar upstream of Arsenal bridge, which forces boats into the middle of the river. As they approached Arsenal bridge, they probably didn't get back over as much or as soon as they could have. Colin Dicke was sitting in seven seat. The former lifeguard had no idea that his prior skills in emergency care would be needed within seconds. The cox, a young but experienced high school coxswain, looked ahead and saw nothing but the blades of her crew as they slowed down after their last piece. Yet something looked odd—it seemed there was an extra set of blades, but she couldn't tell.

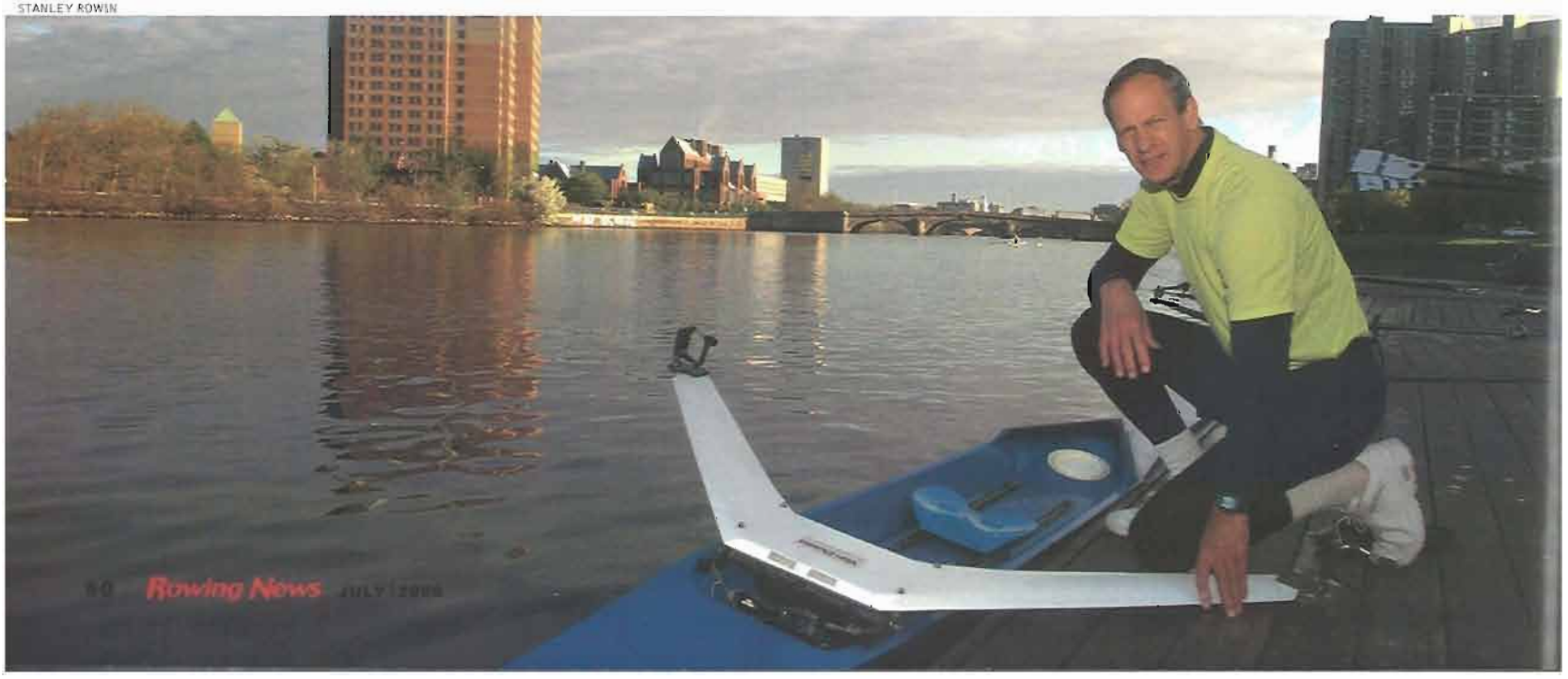
A split second later, the eight stopped instantly. "It felt like we hit a sandbar," recalled Dicke. "We just stopped." Soon, they realized they had hit a sculler, and that he was badly hurt. Dicke recalled the details of the event as though it had happened yesterday. "When you're in a situation like that, different people react differently. Some aren't quite sure what to do, and sort of freeze. For better or worse, my training as a lifeguard caused an instant reaction to just do something—anything." He jumped in the water and swam toward Yasaitis, who was near the bow of the boat in the water. The bowball had come off on initial impact, revealing the sharp point and the screws that held it on.

It had gone entirely *through* Yasaitis.

With the help of Chris Walker, the bow-seat rower, and Yasaitis himself, who initially couldn't feel any pain, he got Yasaitis up onto the deck of the boat, noticing a gaping hole in his back. Dicke maintained his composure, helping Yasaitis into the bowseat of the boat. He then instructed the eight to row Yasaitis to Northeastern's boathouse, which was not far downstream, while he and Walker would run ahead to prepare for their arrival.

Walker found a policeman and told him to call an ambulance, while Dicke continued on to Northeastern, had someone call 911, and cleared the dock. A passing Community Rowing launch with coaches Ellen Minzner and Ethan Curran was called over by the Gentle Giant rowers. Minzner and Curran transferred Yasaitis into the launch and drove him to the Northeastern dock. "He was hurt badly," Minzner recalled, "but he was fully conscious and completely aware of what was going on. He said, 'My intestines are coming out of my back,' and, sure enough, they were. Fortunately, when we got to Northeastern, people were ready and waiting with blankets and first aid supplies."

STANLEY ROWIN



On the dock, Yasaitis started to feel significant pain. Not helping the situation, the ambulance driver had misunderstood the instructions and went to Harvard's Newell Boathouse, adding a painful 10 minutes to their response time. Once in the ambulance, Yasaitis insisted on going to Massachusetts General Hospital, a decision that may have saved his life. Upon arrival he was put in the care of Dr. Robert L. Sheridan, a burn trauma specialist, and was immediately sent to the operating room; but that was no easy trick. "Eight-o-clock in the morning, Monday through Friday, is one of the worst times for an emergency surgery because the [operating] rooms are almost always full," said Dr. Sheridan. However, with one look, he realized Yasaitis would need to be the priority, so they moved another patient out of one of the rooms. "You don't see many serious trauma cases at that hour," he recounted. "The bad people are usually asleep, and the people in their cars are stuck in traffic." This was not a typical ER case. In fact, of all the trauma cases he had seen over the years, Sheridan had never seen anything like it.

In the OR, Yasaitis' situation was tenuous. "We couldn't put him on his back, so we had to sort of prop him on his side," Dr. Sheridan recalled. But as horrific as it was, the slow speed of the eight literally saved his life. Had they been at full pressure or even at a strong paddle, things would have been much different. A few more inches, and his aorta would have been struck, causing him to bleed to death almost instantly. Nevertheless, while no major organs or arteries were hit, the damage was still severe. His back muscles were shredded. His intestines were ruptured. In addition, he had landed in the notoriously polluted Charles River, raising the fear of infection. "Well, you can probably thank the work of the Charles River Watershed Association," laughed Dr. Sheridan, noting that cleanliness of the river has improved dramatically. Of course, infection was still a concern, so they put Yasaitis on a heavy dose of antibiotics and flushed his insides with sterile saline solution.

He had lost a lot of blood so much had to be done, and quickly. Parts of both his large and small intestine had to be removed and the rest repaired. Part of his pelvic bone had chipped off, so the piece had to be found and removed. To add to the confusion they couldn't x-ray his spine, so they had to assume it was all right. It was amazing work, done carefully—yet efficiently—by some of the best surgeons in the world. But the trickiest part was closing him up. "He wouldn't stay closed," Dr. Sheridan said, "which was frustrating." They brought in a world-renowned specialist, Dr. Malcolm Smith, who manipulated the fasica—the fibrous connective tissue that both separates and binds muscles and organs—in such a way that it could hold.

Yasaitis' initial recovery was difficult and painful. "For the first eight days, I was in intense, continuous pain and couldn't sleep," he remembered. But after the pain went away, it took two more months before he felt somewhat normal. "My heart rate was around 80-90 all the time—my body was really working overtime to heal itself," he said. "But the doctors told me, that's normal."

After three months, his body finally settled down. He immediately returned to the weight room and the erg. Dr. Sheridan was stunned. "John was in excellent physical shape and was highly motivated. That's a great combination. Still, his recovery amazed me, given how serious his injuries were. After all, he had been put together in a very non-standard way."

The accident had a profound effect on Yasaitis. "It was a strong reminder of my mortality—that we're not going to live forever," he reflected. "You have to be careful with what you have, and in how you do things. In rowing, I look around a lot more. I use my mirror all the time. But it goes beyond that—in everything else I do, I often think, 'OK, slow down,' because life is just too precious to charge ahead without thinking about what you're doing." It also affected everyone around him, especially those in the eight. "John impressed me on so many levels," said Dicke, now at grad school at Cornell, but still emotionally moved when talking about the accident. "As a fellow athlete and oarsman, he just struck me as an amazing human being. Talking with him in the hospital, and getting to know him was something I'll never forget. He will always inspire me."

Yasaitis' new approach to life has made him much more careful in practice, but it hasn't slowed down his racing. Just six months after the accident, he was competing in the Riverside Sprints. As club member Kate Sullivan looked on from the dock, an approaching non-Riverside competitor asked, "Hey, that guy, John Yasaitis—he's a member here, right? How's his recovery going?"

"Well," Sullivan said dryly, pointing to the river, where Yasaitis was leading in his heat (he won it by 13 seconds), "Given how he's doing in his race tight now, I'd say his recovery is going pretty well."

Tulane University Rowing

NOT ALL ROWING COMEBACKS involve individuals returning to compete after a serious injury. But there is commonality in the devastating impact of an unforeseen event. Tulane University's rowing program in New Orleans can identify. While school is back in session New Orleans remains a completely different city in every way imaginable. People are coming back, and certain sections on higher ground, such as the French Quarter, remain intact, but much of the city still resembles a war zone, having been ravaged in Katrina's one-two punch of high winds and massive floodwaters.

Bob Jaugstetter, Tulane's rowing coach, stayed in the city as long as possible. He'd seen many storms come and go over the years and wanted to make sure the boathouse was as buttoned up as possible. Perhaps it was a combination of complacency and good-heartedness, but he stayed too long. Things happened quickly as the all-powerful Category 5 storm, which slowed to a Category 4 as it approached the coast (eventually reaching Category 3 status at landfall), moved toward New Orleans. On the morning of Saturday, August 27, 2005, Jaugstetter and his crew were tying down boats and making preparations, with one key decision to move the new boats to the Reily Center, a student athletic facility that had been designed to withstand hurricane-force winds. Hours later, everyone was gone.

Confusion reigned immediately after the storm as cell service was either spotty or nonexistent. As time passed, he was able to contact all of his athletes, who were by now spread across the country in the various colleges and universities that had taken them in. While Jaugstetter was able to provide daily workouts via email, the future of the Tulane program was very much an open question. "It wasn't clear right away that there was even going to be an academic second semester," said Jaugstetter. "So obviously, you can't rebuild a rowing program if there's no school."

Even four to six weeks after the storm, there was no way to assess the full extent of the damage. "The entire boathouse and the trailer were completely under water," he said. The Reily Center, which was also flooded, was closed, so those boats couldn't be checked for damage until November. Fortunately, when he finally inspected the boats, there was little structural damage beyond some messy, but superficial, flood-related issues.

As a testament to the power of humans to rebuild their homes, neighborhoods, schools, and cities, New Orleans is slowly, but surely, being rebuilt. With Tulane back in session, the rowing program is up and running. Volunteers from boathouses all over the country helped get the boathouse in useable condition, though tornados in early February 2006 did more damage.

One of the hardest parts is just getting people out to row in a limited number of boats. "We've been rowing on alternate days, men and women, because I don't have enough seats to put everyone in at once," Jaugstetter commented. "We have the novices rowing the varsity hulls, because the lower boats were the ones left at the boathouse and were destroyed. I have three good eights, another eight that we cobbled together, and a few more that we're trying to slap silicone, fiberglass, duct tape, and whatever we can on them to make them rowable. Some of the boats might not go very straight," he laughed, "but it's better than not having anything to row. Most of the time, we're able to put our heads down and just plow forward," he reflected. "But sometimes, you stop, look around at everything that's still in varying states of devastation and rebuilding, and you just wonder, 'Where the heck do I start?' It can be overwhelming."

From the students' perspective, many were lucky that the storm hit before they arrived at school. While that good fortune precluded an unpleasant or harrowing evacuation, they still had to find other schools to attend. David Cotter, a senior in the varsity men's eight and president of Tulane's club program, was one of the lucky ones who didn't have to evacuate—but it was a close call. "My first flight was cancelled because of the storm," he said, "so I rescheduled for the next day. But literally, as I was driving to the airport, the news came on that the levees had broken, so I turned right around and went back home." He spent a week with a girlfriend at the University of Indiana, contacting schools to see which one could take him. He spent a week at the University of Portland in Oregon but then got a call from Stanford with an offer to enroll there. He accepted, as it was closer to his California home and "because Stanford is Stanford."

Upon returning, things were a little rough in the boat from a rowing standpoint. "Not everyone [on the men's team] was able to

MIKE VESPOLI

DAVID COTTER

find a rowing program," Cotter said. "So we had some people in the boat who hadn't rowed for six months." In addition, they lost a few rowers due to academic conflicts resulting from being at another school for a semester. But soon they were piecing against each other in the canal, and the technique was coming back. "Everyone who is here is excited and ready to work," Cotter asserted cheerfully. "I feel we're going to have a solid team with the potential to do well this spring."

One of the most touching aspects of the rebuilding effort is the fundraiser that Mike Vespoli organized for Tulane's program. Seeing an obvious need for funds, Vespoli launched the "$20,000 Challenge," a fundraiser on the company's Web site in which Vespoli would match donations to Tulane's crew program up to $10,000, dollar for dollar. As with many of the heartwarming stories coming our of New Orleans and the ravaged Gulf Coast region, individual selflessness has carried the day.

Vespoli's efforts illustrate the close-knit nature of the rowing community. "My wife and I wanted to do something" for the region, Vespoli recalled, and when Bob Jaugstetter called him on an unrelated matter, it came to Vespoli to offer to help Tulane's program. "It was just right there, staring me in the face—this is something real and tangible that we can do to help." A challenge grant made sense because "it indicates that we're not just raising money, but we're committing our own money to help this worthy cause." The fundraiser was successful early on in large part due to Power 10, a New York-based organization of rowers from national teams dating back to the 1970s. Vespoli asked John Moore, the group's president, if he could request donations at Power 10's annual dinner in January. Moore immediately offered $2,500 from the Stewards of the organization and also allowed Vespoli to include a request for donations in the invitations. By the end of that event the total raised grew to $45,000. A subsequent advertisement in *Rowing News* produced a steady stream of contributions, and as of March 30, 2006, over $70,000 had been raised—a huge, and much-needed shot in the arm for the program that more than covered the costs that insurance did not cover. Humble about his efforts, Vespoli cited the example of Larry Gluckman, a coach at Trinity in Hartford, Connecticut, who "just went down there in January and spent a week helping them rebuild their boathouse." The generous donations from everyone—financially and otherwise—"shows how much the rowing community cares," he said.

As with all catastrophes, there are many stories to tell. Certainly one of the most painful aspects of New Orleans after Katrina involved the 100,000-plus residents who couldn't evacuate and were forced to endure both the hurricane and the ensuing floods, the combination of which will go down as one of the worst natural disasters in the history of the United States. Compared to that epic struggle for survival, the story of Tulane's rowing program might seem to exist on a completely different plane. But everyone has to deal with the current environment of bleakness and despair. As Jaugstetter said, "It's not what you see on TV." Rowers still have to drive through dark streets littered with debris. "It's not like most houses were destroyed—in many areas, every house was destroyed," Jaugstetter described. One can still drive for miles and miles and see nothing but complete destruction. So while the cleanup remains the first priority as the city tries desperately to get back on its feet, getting on with life is also high on the agenda. In that regard, we in the rowing community would like to think that the sight of a couple of eights going at it in a grueling piece down one of the city's canals might bring back a sense of normalcy to the residents of the Big Easy.

Silken Laumann

FEW EVENTS IN LIFE are as instantaneously and thoroughly transformative as winning an Olympic medal. A person can win the lottery and become fabulously wealthy overnight, but, beyond a few days of media attention, they will fade back into obscurity. But in winning an Olympic medal, an athlete becomes an historic and very public figure, sometimes of mythical proportions.

Aspiration and inspiration. These terms define great Olympic performances. But take the typical drama of every Olympic athlete's training process, throw in a potentially life-threatening injury just months before the Games, from which the athlete amazingly and unpredictably not only recovers to compete, but also goes on to win a medal, and you have baked the perfect casserole—a story of inspiration that the public can't seem to get enough of.

Such has been the case for Canadian Olympic rower Silken Laumann, whose incredible recovery from a severe leg injury 10 weeks before the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain earned her a bronze medal and catapulted her into Canadian sports history. Even for those who have read the countless newspaper or magazine articles, or have read the book, *Hearts of Gold: Stories of Courage; Dedication, and Triumphs from Canadian Olympians*, or have seen the documentary, *Flying on Water: The Life and Times of Silken Laumann* (CBC-TV, 2000), or the made-for-TV movie, *Golden Will: The Silken Laumann Story* (CBC-TV, 1996), Silken's story remains one of the great comeback stories in Olympic history.

Laumann was warming up at an Olympic trials regatta in Essen, Germany when her single scull was struck at full pressure by a German pair, rowed by Colin von Ettingshausen and Peter Höltzenbein. In an interview for the CBC documentary *The Olympians: A Century of Canadian Heroes*, she described the event, "The bang, which sounded very much like two cars crashing, was my boat splintering. I didn't really feel anything and then I looked down at my leg and it was just a mess…I actually wondered whether I was going to lose my leg, because I could see the bone." There was some difficulty in getting her across the 2.5 kilometers of water to the dock. Von Ettingshausen had passed out from the sight of her injury, but Höltzenbein called over an emergency boat that was unprepared for such duty and had to be snapped into action by Laumann and Höltzenbein. They made it safely to the dock, and after one hospital was deemed unsuitable, she was taken to a trauma hospital near Essen and was operated on by its top surgeon, Dr. Friedrich Neudeck.

Laumann was in shock and didn't know quite what to make of her situation. "I was there at the time of the accident, and when I arrived at the hospital just after she had been admitted, she was in quite an emotional, tearful state," recounted Mike Spracklen, the legendary Canadian coach who had taken Laumann on in addition to coaching the men's eight for Barcelona. But soon it became clear that she possessed the internal fortitude needed for a return to training. "I left her and returned a few hours later, after her operation. Upon return, I could tell, just by seeing her demeanor and talking to her, that she would compete in the Olympics. In her mind, there was nothing that would stop her from going on [to Barcelona]," Spracklen said, recalling the moment as if it had happened yesterday. "But her main concern was that I would not be around to help her." At that point, he assured her she had nothing to worry about. "I said, 'I will always be there for you, and I will never let you down,' and that was a promise I made to her, holding her hand." In that same conversation, just hours after the accident, Laumann asked him for exercises she could do in the bed. "She wanted weights," he said, still amazed. "So she could start training right there in the hospital."

She had several more operations on her leg in Germany, and then returned to Vancouver, British Columbia. "The doctor asked what kind of exercises she could do," Spracklen said, "and I suggested that she put her injured leg in a sling. That was successful, so there she was, rowing one-legged on the erg." Spracklen went back to camp to coach the men's eight for a few weeks, and then Silken caught up with him at a training camp in France, with just three weeks to go

PETER SPURRIER

until the Olympics. While her attitude was strong, many in the media had their doubts. She was the reigning world champion before the accident, favored for the gold medal, but of course, there were now serious doubts and some backstabbing among the pundits. Spracklen pulled no punches. "I said to her, 'You either go to Barcelona to win, or go home. You've had these criticisms, but I'm going to treat you as though you haven't had an injury.'" But because she had missed three weeks of training, he couldn't give her the same training program that he normally would have. So he told her, "I'm just going to push you as hard as I can each day, and when I see you've had enough or can't take any more, then we'll stop." Laumann's toughness amazed even Spracklen. "I tried to stop her! But when ever I said, 'OK that's enough,' she would row an extra 20 minutes or so."

Between Spracklen's coaching and Laumann's attitude, work ethic, and natural abilities as a rower, something good must have happened in those three weeks. In Barcelona, she made it to the final of the women's single, and, in the last few hundred meters, moved past American Ann Marden to capture the bronze. "I just went crazy," she's quoted as saying after the race. "I just kind of put my oars in the water and gave it everything I could for the last 20, 30 strokes of the race."

Silken Laumann has never slowed down. She continued rowing, winning another world championship in 1995 and a silver medal at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, after which she retired from rowing. But it was the "golden bronze" for which she will always be remembered. Today, she has become something of an industry. She is often on the road as a motivational speaker, represented by the Lavin Agency, whose other clients include Billy Beane, Dr. Robert Ballard, Sir Bob Geldof, and Spike Lee. Her accomplishments include winning the Lou Marsh Award as Canada's Outstanding Athlete; membership in Canada's Sports Hall of Fame; and serving on the board of directors of Nike Corp. and Ronald McDonald's Children's Charities. In addition, she helped create the Dynamic Opportunities For Youth Program, a rowing and self-esteem-building program for high-risk youth. Clearly committed to children (she has two of her own), she has recently written a book entitled *Child's Play: Rediscovering the Joy of Play in Our Families and Communities.*

Despite the intense media adulation over the years—and there's been a lot of it—Laumann remains committed to good causes and is still down to earth. "I can't even get in touch with her," said Spracklen, "but she still calls me regularly, and we're still close friends." According to Marnie McBean, a Canadian Olympian with two golds in Barcelona and gold and bronze in Atlanta, "Canada doesn't have as much of a 'hero-worship' system for sports figures as the United States does. It's more that people here take a true interest in our athletes, and there's a deep respect for someone who overcomes injuries or other hardships." Other peers share this respect. "You have to understand just how phenomenal her natural abilities were," said Kay Worthington, a three-time Olympian for Canada who won two gold medals in Barcelona and was at one point Silken's partner in the double. "I trained with her in the 1980s, and I remember vividly how, before she was really known, she would walk into the weight room and leg press the entire stack. Believe me, people took notice." Moreover, the competitive landscape was different back then. "In the single scull event, during the 1980s and even into the 1990s, we were competing against steroid-enhanced Eastern European athletes," Worthington added. "Gold was practically out of the question [in the Olympics], so the Canadians and Americans were essentially fighting for bronze or silver." Silken's two Olympic medals and two gold medals at worlds (1991 and 1995) in the single remain amazing accomplishments that still impress Worthington and many others.

Though transformed by her Olympic performance in 1992, Silken's life today shows that it's not always about the medal. For her, it was, and is, about being the best you can be. No matter what you're doing.

PETER SPURR