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Sports

AHS crew has all its oars in the water

by Mike Briotta

The oldest intercollegiate sport in America is also the newest to be offered at Avon High School. A developmental rowing program continues this month as the crew team prepares to take on neighboring schools for the upcoming spring season.

"It's a brand new sport for the high school," said co-coach Eric Rosow, who along with fellow coach Soo Passmoor worked for nearly three years envisioning the team's maiden voyage. Passmoor is an active member of the Farmington Valley Rowing Association, and Rosow is an experienced rower who has won national honors, as well as coaching at both Trinity College and Simsbury High School.

When the Avon squad began its inaugural season in the fall, rowers and organizers were primarily concerned with finding the proper depth of water. Long before winter workouts could take place, members of the crew team simply had to get their oars wet in a body of water deep enough for training.

"We were looking for a body of water, and we've paddled the entire length of the Farmington River," said Rosow. "You have to have access there, and it's

somewhat narrow and windy for novices in an eight-person boat." Also complicating usage of the river are steep banks and private property rights that fur-

ther impeded regular practices.

Fortunately, the group was given access to Batterson Park Pond, which is owned and managed

by the City of Hartford but is located in Farmington.

"It's the perfect body of water for our needs," said Passmoor. "It's deep enough and long enough, probably 18 feet deep and measuring 1,200 meters." The group also made use of Fisher Meadows Pond, a spring-fed pond near Avon Old Farms School, where the town has soccer fields and baseball diamonds.

As evidenced by a strong turnout, the new program was a huge hit with first-time rowers.

"Of about 80 kids, only two or three had done it before," said Rosow. "It was the second-highest

turnout for any fall sport, behind soccer. A lot of neighboring towns have crew teams, so I think it's a sport people have been itching to participate in for a long time."

Passmoor was surprised that so many student-athletes would turn out for the initial sign-ups. "We were only planning on about 40," she said. "We had no idea, because it is a developmental, startup program. We had to buy three eight-person boats."

Other expenses included oars, slings to hold the boa, and a rusty old trailer. Many of the boats are

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Take me to the river

Avon High School crew team

has all its oars in the water.

"third-hand" watercraft previously used by teams in Simsbury and Stonington. The lion's share of equipment was purchased by crew athletes' fees of \$250 per person.

Rowing coaches travel alongside their teams in motor boats, and the Herman family of Avon donated one such vessel. Riverfront Recapture, a Hartford rowing program, loaned the team a floating dock and boat manufacturer Vespoli of New Haven donated a crew shell.

For the athletes, it was an all-inclusive debut season as the team retained all members who signed up and desired to stick out the first challenging weeks.

"There's been a lot of training. It's a startup program, so we want to give each person a chance to learn about the sport," said Passmoor.

Although the group did not participate in competitive matches in the fall, the crew team is looking forward to competing in a novice category this spring against area towns. Among nearby communities that already offered the sport, Simsbury recently celebrated its 30th year of high school competition. Farmington High School developed its team in 2005.

Offseason training for Avon continues this January at indoor water tanks at Trinity and using ergometers, or rowing machines, at the high school garage. The goal is to be competitive in the spring

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These eight female rowers are led by a coxswain, whose role is similar to that of a ship captain.

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against teams from Farmington, Simsbury and Glastonbury.

Much like running cross-country in the fall compared to track in the spring, fall crew races are longer three-mile efforts, while in the spring they compete in 2,000-meter sprints.

"I think we're going to have a very strong team in the spring," said Rosow. "We'll separate out who's really committed in a more competitive, formal season. We'll be training much harder."

One athlete who immediately took to the sport is sophomore Ben Levine, who is eagerly anticipating spring races. "This was my first experience with it," said Levine. "My friend from Simsbury started doing it his freshman year. He's been challenging himself and having a lot of fun, so I wanted to give it a try, too." Levine has since done it all, filling in as a rower, "coxswain" who captains the boat, and "stroke" the lead rower.

"I got knocked out of the boat once," said Levine. "When everything doesn't go right, it's called eating a crab and you get knocked out of the boat." He's among many students who are opting for crew in the upcoming spring season instead of more mainstream sports. "I had to face a difficult decision to go with crew this spring instead of lacrosse," said Levine. "I realized that crew is what I'm looking forward to at the end of the day."

The fall crew season typically wraps up by the third weekend in October, and the more competitive spring season usually starts again in March, as long as the local rivers, ponds, and lakes are not frozen.

A booster club, Friends of Avon Rowing, also formed to help raise funds for the new school sport. Their immediate goal is to raise a minimum of \$8,000 within the next few months to match an \$8,000 contribution from the AHS Booster Club and help toward the purchase a new racing shell.

"I'm very pleased we now have crew here," said Jeff Sunblade, the high school's director of athletics. "We look forward to this being a long and prosperous program."

"Our aim was first and foremost to get these athletes excited about the sport. Some are really just trying to figure out if they want to jump in. You can row into your late 80s, so you can pick it up pretty much any time and do it forever," Passmoor said. **AL**

Anyone seeking further information about the crew team should visit the web site avoncrew.org. Students interested in participating have through mid-February to sign up for the spring season.