

Off to the Races

by Jimmy Baracia

Carnegie Mellon Rowing Club flew under the radar for the past several years. However, since last fall they have grown from 14 members to more than 50, and the numbers just keep rising.

The team was quite prominent prior to COVID-19, which set everything on hold. Senior Estée Goel, current president and women's team captain, said that when she joined as a first-year, in the midst of COVID-19, all training was virtual and regattas were impossible to participate in.

"It was very classic COVID, we were all in masks, only small boats," Goel said. "I did think there was a lot of disconnect; the men's and women's team didn't really talk to each other."

As a new member, it was difficult to make new friends and get involved with the other members, Goel explained. This hurt the team as a whole, as crew is "the team sport." You need to be able to work alongside your other rowers or the boat will fail.

As restrictions were lifted, leading into Goel's sophomore year where she held the position of Secretary, she found there was still a rift on the team.

The coaching staff failed to train the boats effectively, causing boats to fail, increasing tensions among not only teammates but with coaches as well. Rowers only showed up occasionally and it was all very inconsistent.

Goel said they went to their first race that season and "got completely crushed by everyone." Worse, the coaches blamed this failure on the rowers, taking no blame themselves. Goel finds this to be "a fault of them not training us," a sentiment with which many other members of the team agreed.

The team attended Head of the Charles, the largest rowing regatta in the world. Goel's boat placed third to last which she faulted on the fact that they had only practiced in that line up a total of six times before competing. Once again, this defeat was pinned on the rowers.

Many rowers asked themselves, "With a lack of resources and no support from the coaching staff, why put in the effort?"

In January of her second year, Goel was voted President. "Something needed to change," she said. "I've loved rowing my entire life and I want other people to feel that same love for the sport that I do. Right now, that just isn't happening."

When team tensions were at an all-time high, Goel first set out to receive anonymous feedback from the team. She sought to learn what problems everyone had with the team. She noted there

were a lot of immediate issues: team culture and lack of practice. The most notable issue, though: the head coach.

In a six-hour meeting, all members discussed their feelings and what steps should be taken moving forward. "Long story short, we brought this to our alumni board who advised us to bring this to athletics," Goel said.

Athletics sought an issue with the presentation by the Rowing Club Board and decided to terminate the head coach's contract. That Spring consisted of coaching turnover and a brand-new head coach entered the picture. Other teams and boathouses gossiped about this coaching turnover; it was quite a big deal in the rowing community.

"I also got the short end of the stick since I was in charge of the team at that point," Goel clarified. "It's not my idea to fire him. We just wanted to reform the team and that is what Athletics decided. But that was really hard for me; as a sophomore I had all these seniors coming up me to saying, 'You fired our coach!'"

At the end of the year, the team was notably smaller than it was before but all rowers and coxswains committed themselves to their sport.

Last year, the team only had 14 members and the Board decided to focus all efforts on recruitment. Successfully, they recruited a full novice class, filling in the gaps of the small team.

The team that season grew to 45 people. Team culture flourished and they won races. Under the head coach's leadership, winter and spring training were very successful, leading to one of the best spring seasons the team has seen, especially in recent years.

"We now have over 50 members," Goel added. "Getting more all the time. New people want to join."

The team just got two of their bids into Head of the Charles, a women's varsity four and a men's varsity four. When asked about how she feels to attend the largest regatta another time, Goel responded, "I'm really excited. Honestly, it kind of feels like a redemption arc... The team has been training a lot. I have a lot of confidence that we can do super well this year."

The future of the team looks bright. The board has proposed to the Athletics Department to convert the team from club to varsity. "They were really receptive to it," Goel said. "They were like it may not happen when you're here. ... It could take as long as five to six years but that was two years ago. Maybe this year's freshmen will see it by the time they're seniors."