



# Pinnacle of PERFORMANCE

IN ROWING, POWER, STRENGTH AND TECHNIQUE INTERSECT TO CREATE AN ELEGANT, EFFORTLESS SPORT. AN OLYMPIAN GIVES A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT HOW A BOAT BECOMES ONE WITH THE WATER, THANKS TO A TEAM OPERATING AS A PERFECTLY TUNED MACHINE.

by Brett Berk • Illustration by Beau Daniels

The graceful and potent sport of rowing, also called crew, traces its roots back thousands of years, as evidenced in how it is represented in the art and the history of Ancient Egypt. It was first popularized in Europe during the Middle Ages and in the United States in the early 19th century.

Rowing has been included in the Olympics since 1896, which was the birth year of the modern games. Today, at this elite level of competition, a

boat's design is limited only by a minimum weight requirement. The craft's overall structure and appearance is dictated mainly by scientific experimentation, by physics and by aquadynamics. But the specifics of its lightweight carbon fiber polymer construction—its deep engineering—is strongly influenced by the personal preference of the rowers who are operating these finely tuned crafts.

"Some boats are stiffer than others," says two-time Olympic Gold Medalist rower Meghan Musnicki, 33, who is fresh off her team's win in the 2016

Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro. "Others bend with the water a bit more."

The most successful boats contain an ideal blend of both of these qualities.

This kind of tactile precision, of engaging connectedness between human and machine, is key to the experience of being a successful elite-level rower. There are myriad moving pieces in a vessel like the one Musnicki pilots. But they all have to function, in every moment, in perfect harmony.

"The boat's speed is highly dependent on everyone doing the same thing together at the same time," Musnicki says. "There are no individual superstars in rowing. If you're rowing a boat and you're standing out, you're doing it wrong."

In order to achieve the optimal and most dynamic performance, a rower must put their oar (known as a "blade") in the water for the longest possible stroke, and position themselves in their seat and through the range of motion to maximize the load that they're putting on the blade.

"This, essentially, is what propels the boat forward," says Musnicki. "To make the boat go the fastest, obviously you have to have power, strength and endurance." But there's a very technical aspect to all of this, as well, she explains.

In rowing, the importance of the connectedness between these athletes means that they must not only know how to work together within the context of their responsibilities in a competition, but on an elemental emotional level.

"We are constantly motivating and pushing each other," Musnicki says. She admits that they also "know how to push each other's buttons." And this is not a bad thing. "When one of us is having a bad day, we see that, and we try to pick that person up and get them through."

"Flow," is how Musnicki describes the resultant synergy: an almost meditative mental and physical space where everything is going right, where impossibly hard work feels effortless. When it occurs, when she and her teammates are clicking with one another and with their record-setting boat, it is like nothing else she has ever experienced.

"You can hear the water run under the boat. The boat lifts up and sits on top of the water, and you can feel it move underneath you," Musnicki says. "It's just phenomenal."

BRETT BERK writes about topics ranging from cars and politics to popular culture. His work has appeared in *Travel + Leisure* and *Departures*.