

Nobody Loves the Coxswain



By
**Alastair
MacBain**

Any good crew is in a state of war, with eight husky oarsmen on one side and one diminutive cox on the other. And the cox always wins—as long as they're in the shell. Mr. MacBain, assistant coach of the Columbia crew, describes the woes of this indomitable figure

Coxswain Rosencranz gets his traditional reward after leading Washington's Huskies to victory

THE race is over, the yachts at the finish line are cranking their sirens and tying down their whistles in a single continuous blast, the alumni are leaping and falling off the observation train, waving Dearold pennants and chanting Dearold songs in riotous celebration. A half-mile upstream, before the Dearold boathouse, the eight winning oarsmen stand at the edge of the float, in tight rowing trunks and sagging wool socks, their bodies gleaming with sweat, their chests still heaving after the gruelling four-mile dogfight they have just won.

Are they exulting in their triumph? Are they thumping each other across naked shoulders, hugging each other, capering in sheer joy? Are they anticipating breaking training at last after months of self-denial? Are they planning to polish off a dozen beers, or look up a sweetheart or two back home, or paint the town with Dearold colors tonight? Not a bit. Their faces are grim, their jaws set, their eyes burning with a single thought.

"All right," the stroke mutters significantly, "now let's get that damned coxswain . . ."

Together they close in on a cocky little figure in oversized white ducks and a sun-bleached baseball cap, his tiny megaphone still strapped to his face. One grabs him by a flailing arm, another by the scruff of his neck, another by the laces at the back of his pants, another by a kicking moccasin. In silent unison they swing him once, twice, three times . . . and he end-over-ends into the air, executes an impromptu jackknife, lands with a splash and disappears beneath the surface of the water.

His head bobs up again instantly, he squirts a contemptuous stream of water through his megaphone. "Come on, gang," he orders. "Get hold of that shell. Lift 'er wide. Take it easy, there, you clumsy bunch of . . ."

Who is this stepchild of the varsity squad, this ninth member of an eight-man crew, this persistent little pain in the stern? Why does he take this annual abuse: kicked, cussed, always blamed for everything that goes wrong, never praised for anything that goes right. Why are coxswains?

A Beating from All Concerned

For a coxswain's life is not a happy one. From the middle of March until the end of June he takes a daily beating from the elements, the coach and the crew. When the oarsmen first take to the water, in the freezing spring winds, he sits huddled in his little compartment in the stern of the shell, usually in a pool of ice water that has sloshed over the washboards. Whitecaps break over the stroke's outrigger and roll into the coxswain's shivering lap, up his sleeves, even into his megaphone. He grows numb with cold as he drives the eight complaining oarsmen into the teeth of the gale.

"What are you crabbing about?" he shivers. "At least, you lucky bums can keep warm rowing."

The arrival of spring does not ease his troubles. When the weather grows warmer, a merciless sun arrives to blister the back of his neck, and his eyes ache at night from the steady white glare on the river. Day after day, his body is shaken and bruised by the buck-

ing shell. At each quick catch of the oars in the water, for instance, the base of his spine bangs into the hard slanting board at the back of the washbox, and his head snaps forward sharply at each shoot-away, as though from an invisible rabbit punch. If he pulls a bad boner, moreover, there is always the very visible menace of the stroke's huge fist, gripping the end of the oar and swinging within three inches of the coxswain's nose each time he stretches out to the full reach.

Nor is it only the elements that give him a daily beating. The coach's megaphone seems always to be trained on him from the pursuing launch. "Don't you know enough to take your crew inshore out of rough water, cox? You haven't got brains enough to keep your ears apart . . ." His weight is of vital concern to the eight oarsmen—after all, they have to lug the little weasel around—and they become self-appointed guardians of his diet and exercise. At training table they steal his dessert. They rinky-dink the scales before the coach weighs him in. They hide wrenches and railroad spikes in his hip pockets to make it look as though he had gained overnight. They bundle him in towels and sweaters and jumpers and sweat pants, and make him jog along the railroad tracks in the blazing sun, with oarsmen stationed at appropriate intervals to peg rocks at him in case he is tempted to slow down.

And yet it would not be a winning crew without him. He is as important to the race as a jockey is to the horse. He is the spark plug of the combination. He is at once the trainer, the sparring partner and the manager in the corner

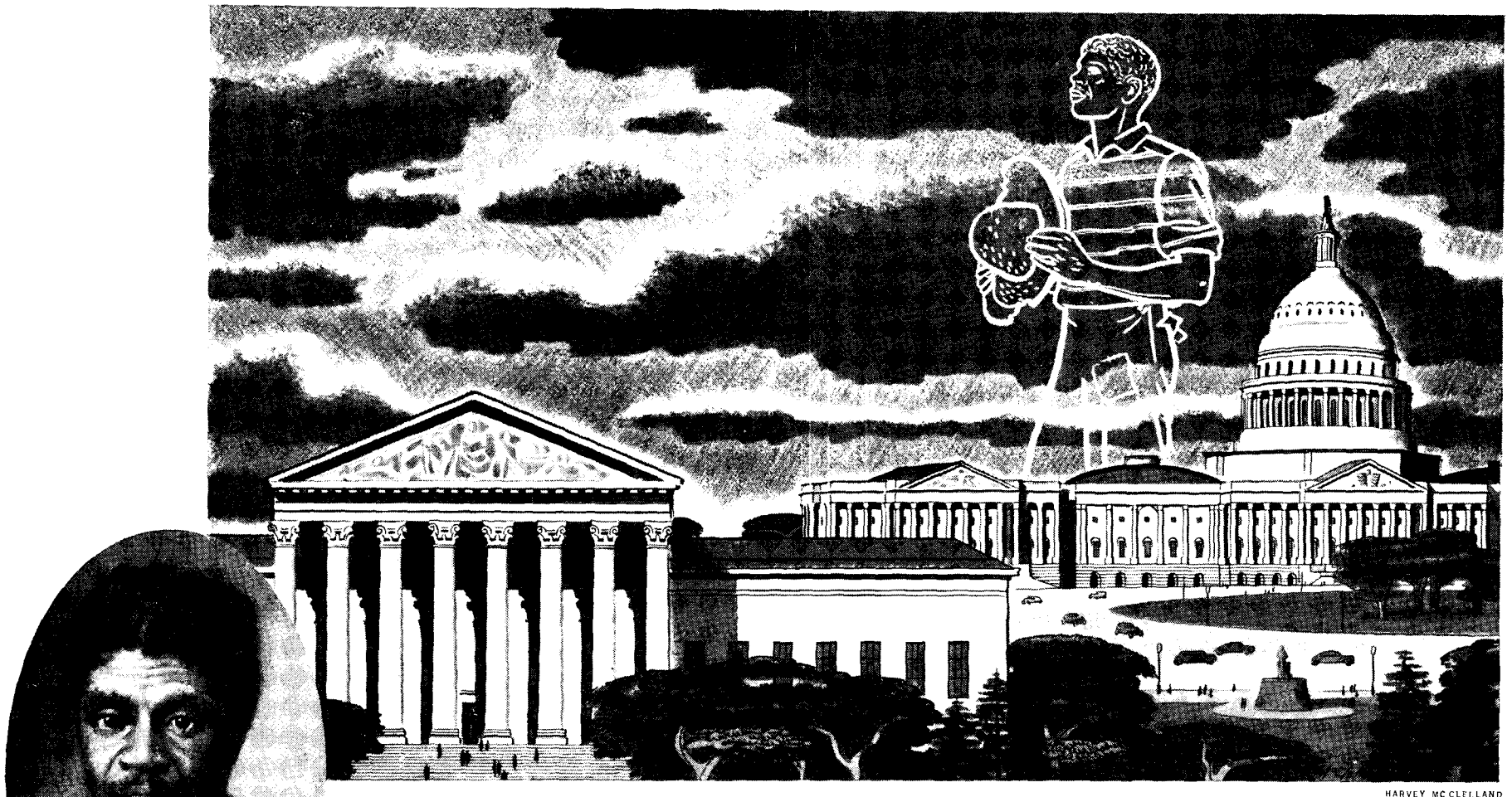
who shouts, "Go on in and slug, he can't hurt us. . . ." He is the buzzing hornet who jabs them mercilessly in the tail in that last half-mile when their corks are pulled and they are thinking of home and Mother. A good coxswain can make his crew win when they ought to lose; a poor one can drop a race despite the best eight oars that ever manned a shell. Once that gun goes off, it's in the hands of the cox.

And Somebody Moved the Bridge

Take Poughkeepsie in 1929, and a strong upstream wind whipping the Hudson into a sea of whitecaps and rollers that tossed the fragile cedar shells like matchsticks into the wave troughs, drowning the bows under big breakers at each stroke, blowing spray that drenched the oarsmen and caught the blades squarely as they fought them out of the heavy water. Already Tech and Syracuse had filled up and swamped before the field reached the mile-and-a-half mark. The Columbia coxswain, seeing crews go down on each side of him in the worst part of the river, was yelling to his crew to hold the beat down, to keep the sweeps in the water as long as possible on each stroke, to carry the feather right out to the full reach, in that disheartening headwind, and cut down the resistance on the blades.

The Cornell shell broke its back and sank, California and Navy were floundering helplessly with their outriggers under water. Washington and Columbia hit the smooth water almost nose-and-nose; but the Columbia coxswain had a trick up his sleeve. He had figured on

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HARVEY MCCLELLAND

Dred Scott Marches On

By George Creel

COLLIER'S WASHINGTON STAFF WRITER

Dred Scott, whose case before the Supreme Court stirred up sectional antipathies which led to the Civil War

Dred Scott's name is immortal. Dred would be surprised to hear it. He gave the Supreme Court a headache and helped free the slaves, but it meant nothing to him. All Dred wanted was not to be free

WELL, well! How misconceptions do persist. After a lapse of eighty years, the Dred Scott case is back in the news, and just about as muddled and misunderstood as in 1857. During those fevered times when Dred convulsed a nation, eventually sending North and South to war, the overwhelming majority of Americans believed implicitly that what they witnessed was the fight of a wretched slave to win escape from the whips and chains of a cruel master. Even today, when he again figures largely in the press and public discussion, this view is accepted without question.

Nothing was ever quite so far from the truth. Dred's owner, instead of trying to keep him in bondage, fought only to get rid of him. Nobody wanted the poor forlorn black, and in its beginning the litigation had no other purpose than to determine who should bear the expense of providing food and shelter for him and his family. As for Dred, there is no indication that any thought of freedom ever entered his woolly head or curdled his happy-go-lucky attitude toward life. From first to last, his one desire was to be owned.

Blundering journalists, however, have an excuse, for everything about Dred himself is so obscure and confused that no two historians are in agreement on facts. Only by piecing together the patches supplied by old newspapers and yellowed manuscripts, diaries and records, is the true story made to stand clear. The start of it goes back to 1833,

when Dr. John Emerson, an Army surgeon stationed in St. Louis, bought the squat slave for a house servant. A year later the master was ordered to Rock Island, Illinois, and in 1836 to Fort Snelling in what is now Minnesota. Here Dred fell in love with Harriet, a comely young Negress, and the kindly surgeon purchased her so that the two might marry. Returning to St. Louis in 1838 on the steamer Gypsy, Harriet was delivered of a child on the boat, and in due course a second girl came into the world on Missouri soil.

Dr. Emerson, dying in 1844, left Dred, Harriet, Eliza and Lizzie in trust for his wife and daughter, but when the widow decided to make her home with relatives in Massachusetts, knowledge of the anti-slavery sentiment in New England made her conclude that it would be wisest to leave the Scotts behind. Unfortunately, this proved less than simple, for owing to the trust provision in her husband's will she could neither sell the slaves nor free them. A pretty how-de-do for one who meant to live among Abolitionists, and after much fruitless stewing Mrs. Emerson solved the problem by flight, leaving Dred and his family to shift for themselves.

No wave of thankfulness swept over the Negro at finding himself his own

master. Not at all! Faced with the grim business of earning his own living, he let out a moan of dismay and hotfooted it to the home of Taylor Blow, son of the old Virginian who had owned him in his youth. There he sat down with his wife and the two children, joyously confident that his troubles were over now that his Young Marse had been found. Mr. Blow was without use for more slaves, nor did he greatly relish the idea of supporting another's property, but having played with Dred as a boy he took care of the derelicts for a year or more.

How Dred Got into Court

At the end of that time he went to a well-known law firm in search of legal relief. How, he asked, could Mrs. Emerson be made to assume her proper responsibilities? Surely something could be done to a woman who ran off and left her darkies to starve?

After considering the facts, the lawyers came to the conclusion that they had a case. Both Illinois and Minnesota were free states, the marriage had taken place on free soil and one of the children had been born in free territory. In their opinion, these matters of record gave Dred and his brood a valid claim to freedom. In 1846, therefore, the illit-

erate black, not knowing in the least what it was all about, made his cross to a petition asking the right to sue Mrs. Emerson for false imprisonment on the ground that removal to free territory automatically constituted manumission.

The first verdict went against Dred, but this was set aside, and a judgment in 1850 granted him the right to sue. Two years later, however, the Supreme Court of Missouri reversed the decision, ruling that while Dred may have been a free man in Illinois and Fort Snelling, return to Missouri made him a slave again.

In the meantime Mrs. Emerson had ceased to be a widow, marrying Dr. Calvin Chaffee of Springfield, Massachusetts, a member of Congress and also a prominent Abolitionist. Naturally enough, the new husband broke out in goose flesh at being put in the position of denying a slave's claim to freedom, and after a series of family powwows Dred's nominal ownership was vested in John F. A. Sanford of New York, Mrs. Emerson-Chaffee's brother.

Far from helpful chicanery, as it turned out, for choleric Mr. Blow took advantage of the diversity of citizenship to bring a new suit in the United States Circuit Court. Grinning Dred, highly delighted with the fuss being made over

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