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Row, row, row: Sport returns to the Hudson

By Jane McManus
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NYACK - It is one of those rainy, misty mornings over the Hudson River, and it is too cold for a lone rower to head out over the water. But inside the deceptively large armory building at Nyack Beach State Park, scullers use old-fashioned rowing machines to mimic the motion, filling the bones of the old building with a sound like a thousand bees.

The noise is made as the pulling motion moves a fan in the so-named erg machines, and with a dozen people doing the workout, it can get loud. The River Rowing Association won't head out unless the air and water temperature combine to reach 100 degrees. The winter would be a natural offseason for this early-morning sport, but not even for many of the teenagers in the club.

"You have to explain to your friends why you get



Rohanna Mertens/The Journal News

Peter Klose of Nyack trains on an erg machine with the River Rowing Association in the Armory at Nyack Beach State Park.

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www.row2k.com — A clearinghouse for information on the sport, including local clubs.

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up in the morning to torture yourself," Ben Demarest said.

The 19-year-old was home from college in New Paltz, and found that he missed the morning workouts, even if he didn't get the payoff of cutting through the still dawn waters with seven friends in a shell.

The River Rowing Association is a 4-year-old organization, one of several trying to bring the sport back to the Hudson River. It was started by Ivan Rudolph-Shabinsky, 43, who grew up in South Nyack but didn't learn to row until he was a freshman at Cornell. Back when he was a kid, the Hudson didn't seem like a friendly place.

"You didn't think about swimming in the water," Rudolph-Shabinsky said.

Right now, the group has found a temporary home at Nyack Beach State Park. Its shells are perched on a wraparound balcony in the run-down building, a once-grand hall which now serves as a storage lot for small parks vehicles. With the help of the town, the club can launch boats in the summer from the town dock near Memorial Park.

Although the program is geared toward high school age kids, there are adults who take to the sport as well. One of those is Jane Atwell, Demarest's mom, who has been coached at times by her son.

"It's a little weird saying, 'Mom, you're doing something wrong,' " Demarest said. "She kind of rolls her eyes, but she's pretty good at listening."

Talk about role reversal. Atwell's favorite memory is rowing out to the start line for a race in a women's four-person boat as her son rowed out in a boys eight-person shell. She thought it would be totally uncool to let on that they were related, but then she heard, "Hey mom!" as he waved to her.

She is just as hooked as he is, the family even has an erg machine in the dining room. This year they decorated it for the holidays.

"When you're killing yourself in the boat with four other strong women, there's nothing better," Atwell said.

Maureen Vermazen, 44, was working out with her sons, 14-year-old Liam and 15-year-old

www.usrowing.org — U.S. Rowing oversees the sport nationally at all levels, including the Olympics. The site has some really beautiful photographs.

www.newrochellerowingclub.com — The new Rochelle Rowing Club was started in 1880, and is one of the strongest in the area. The Yonkers Paddling and Rowing Club (www.yprc.org) was started in 1886.

Local rowing clubs

The following are a few of the independent rowing clubs in our area. There are other groups associated with high school and college teams, and many other groups which include rowers amid sailors, kayakers and other boaters.

East Arm Rowing Club, Greenwood Lake
New Rochelle Rowing Club, New Rochelle
New York Athletic Club, Pelham
Piermont Rowing Club, Piermont
River Rowing Association, Nyack
Yonkers Paddling and Rowing Club, Yonkers

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Christian. She said they didn't take to the erging, a word derived from the Greek word for work, but once they got out on the water they were hooked.

The sport has a lot of history in Nyack, even the building where the club's erg machines are now perched. Peter Klose, an attorney who rows with the club, detailed the Nyack armory as the spot where the Nyack Rowing Association was chartered in 1881.

The opulent boathouse that resulted was eventually sold for scrap and fell victim to the elements, but the River Rowing Association hopes to revive the tradition, as it has grown along the banks of the Hudson in other communities.

"Our goal is to have a boathouse," said Rudolph-Shabinsky, "so we can expand our program."

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