



Preakness

Swiss Skydiver beats Authentic

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LONG & FOSTER REAL ESTATE
410-725-6238 (c)

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CALENDAR

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INVITE THE WORLD
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A full page, colorful "Event" calendar with Mid-Shore events, entertainment and educational opportunities.

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LOCAL



PHOTO BY TOM MCCALL

Aiden Lowrey is part of the Easton-based Freedom Rowers. The junior rowing team has had to innovate and adjust because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Silver linings

Freedom Rowers overcome COVID-19

By **TOM MCCALL**

tmccall@chespub.com

EASTON — Many sports have been hit hard by COVID-19. Seasons have been cancelled or postponed. Kids are stuck at home with glowing screens.

Freedom Rowers, a competitive coed junior rowing team in Easton, had to find a way to keep kids out on the water.

How do you stay socially distant while heavy breathing in a pencil thin row boat? The answer is you don't.

You innovate.

Chris Gill, Freedom Rowers coach and executive director, moved from sweep to sculls. This means the athletes now have one hand on each oar instead of two on one oar. The big boats are put up in storage while the sculls are rowed by one person instead four or eight plus a coxswain.

See **FREEDOM**

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Coach tosses Duncan Culvert a sponge to get water out of his boat. It takes several squeezes.

FREEDOM

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The Easton-based non-profit, typically has between 30 and 40 participants a season.

Part of the innovation was the creation of pods. Each has five people. There are five pods total. So in the COVID-19 era Freedom Rowers is down from 40 to 25 participants.

"This past summer we wanted to test if we could comfortably put a program in place that would comply with COVID regulations. With only 6 singles which our club owns, we had to get creative. We turned to "socially distant "PODS" as our answer. Through the guidance of US Rowing we came up with safety protocol that would comfortably enable us to run a program of both team practice and "learn to row" participants. A single rowing shell is 27 feet long, so two kids carrying one are plenty distanced. Once each rower chooses their oars, they are theirs only to touch for the entire practice, and disinfected in a bleach bath before being put back on the rack after they are off the water. Each boat is also washed down after each outing," said Gill.

Gill sees the upside in the challenges.

"The silver lining of COVID-19 is they are surprising themselves in a single. The only one to correct is your-

self. Correcting your self is half the battle. They are really becoming much better rowers," said Gill.

The kids also get much more individual coaching. Stroke length, balance, leg pressure, keeping your hands loose. There are hundreds of adjustments, most of them intuitive. Speed, line, and accuracy are key. The sculls are super sensitive to every ripple on the water and every puff of wind.

Gill gives encouragement and correction from the 13-foot whaler. She has a megaphone. The kids call her "coach" or "coach Gill."

"Each of my pods are at the same skill level. It worked out perfectly, they are happy with each other, but they miss the whole group of 40," said coach Gill.

There is something magical that happens on the water doing something aerobic, according to Gill and her team. There is a glow in kids' faces when they get to the end of practice. They open up and want to talk with each other. There is a palpable esprit de corps as the kids do their post rowing chores. They carry the boats and hang them. They clean the boats with fresh water and a sponge. They un-tape their blistered hands.

"We are a family. We love each other so much. When you are rowing you relax. You have a cheery time with the team," said team captain Chloe Dixon.



PHOTO BY TOM MCCALL

Elise Lankford, post practice, breaks the skull down. Another great day outside on the water.

Elise Lankford echoed those sentiments. "We are happy with each other but we miss the bigger group of 40," said Elise Lankford.

Something bigger than rowing and exercise is happening. Gill goes out of her way to know each kid. Every day is different and Gill notices. Are they distracted or focused? Are they stressed or relaxed?

"They're all out here working on something. They become stronger, better and more confident," said Gill.

The majority of sports are ball oriented. Chase it. Kick it. Dunk it. Rowing is different. Aside from the myriad technicalities to perfect your stroke, there is the simple joy of being on the water, Gill said.

"Kids don't always gel with fall sports. Some of these kids are finding a sport they love for the first time. Usually it is the kids that don't gel with ball sports," said Gill.



PHOTO BY TOM MCCALL

All the members of the pod. From left to right: Duncan Culver, Elise Lankford, Aiden Lowery, McKenna Culver, and captain Chloe Dixon. There are four other pods who get to row.

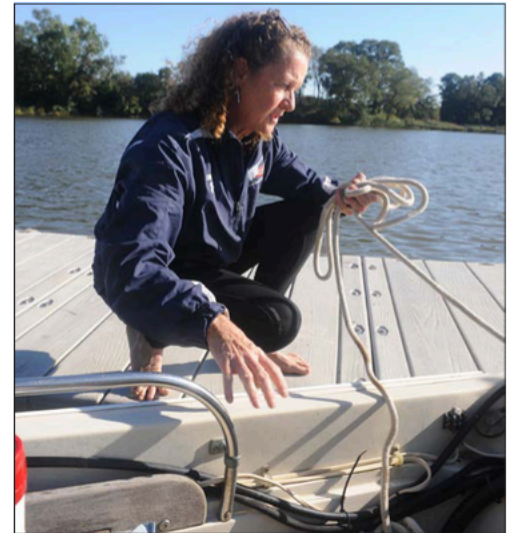


PHOTO BY TOM MCCALL

Coach Chris Gill grew up on the water. She has a passion for sharing that with her team. Here she unties the chase boat getting ready to hit the water. Luckily today nobody capsized. She one day a kid capsized the same skull twice.



Twins McKenna and Duncan Culver take a moment to listen to Coach Gill. They row on the Tred Avon River near Easton Point.