

MM Fall Blue Sheet Number 2 — A Book Report

THE BOYS IN THE BOAT

Nine Americans and their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics

DANIEL GAMES BROWN

I put this in the “must read!” category. Few books have touched my mind and emotions like this one. I almost felt like part of the story. I grew up mostly within walking distance of the University of Washington. The first sporting event I remember as a little boy was standing on the shores of Lake Washington along with 100,000 fans, peering down the beach and hearing the crowd begin to shout, “Here comes Washington!” As I grew up and attended more races I learned the names of major Universities from their crews — Navy, Syracuse, California, Stanford, Columbia, Cornell, Pennsylvania and others.

I entered kindergarten the year the Olympics were held, knowing nothing about the history of the moment. Although living in the midst of the Depression I had no idea about it. I had no idea about the dark rise of The Third Reich in Germany. And, of course, I knew nothing about those nine boys who made history. The book brings all the history to life. It’s worth reading for that part alone.

The author traces the path of each rower from humble and often poor beginnings in various small towns in Washington. One was Joe Rantz, abandoned by his family and left on his own in Sequim. The story of Joe getting from Sequim to that podium in Berlin is gripping. That path included a year at my own Roosevelt High School. These stories tell how students in the grip of the Depression struggled to stay in school.

One prominent figure in the book is that of George Pocock. He was legendary long before I grew up. He had a world-wide reputation as builder of the fragile sixty foot cedar racing “shells”. Virtually every racing program used his boats. His shop was in the old crew house on the south east corner of the University. I liked seeing the crew members lift the boats above their heads and take them to the dock for launching.

Each chapter begins with a quotation from George Pocock who was not only a craftsman and rowing expert but something of a spiritual philosopher and inspiration to both coaches and crew members. He once wrote:

“Where is the spiritual value of rowing?...The losing of self entirely to the cooperative effort of the crew as a whole.”

Years later I would see him at University Christian Church when I was on the staff as Youth Minister. Even in those days I didn’t comprehend his historic significance and his contribution to the rowing program.

The author puts you on the boat in the race. There’s no other way to describe it. It’s an exciting ride. And dramatic. The description of Hitler and his henchmen walking out of the stands when the German boat lost by a fraction of a second as the first three boats finished in the same second. It doesn’t bring out the fact that the Washington coxswain learned only a few weeks before leaving for Germany that his European ancestors were Jewish. The photo shows him standing on the podium as he and the rest of the Washington crew receive their Olympic Gold Medals for the USA.

A number one New York Times Best Seller for a good reason.

— Art Morgan, October 17, 2014