Jimmy Sopko- MHS Class of 2000

My rowing career began in the winter of the 9th grade and it started because of a girl. Yup, my friend, Christina Pope (Tomcany), who is now a coach at Mathews, convinced me to begin rowing. Little did I know this move would completely change the trajectory of my life.

My parents are scrappy. They work their tales off and I was fortunate enough to have those genetics passed down to me. Mathews High School (MHS) and Mobjack Rowing Association (MRA) were able build on that scrappiness and give me the opportunity to learn what I love, build confidence, become a leader and take me places I couldn’t imagine.

I love racing. Before I rowed, I played soccer and football and I really didn’t get a chance to sit at a starting line and GO. Playing until the whistle blew was fun, but I didn’t love it. My freshman year at MHS, the boat I was in did not win a single race. We were terrible. Despite losing, I loved sitting at the starting line and going as hard as I could when I heard the words “Attention, row.” I also started to see the effect work had on speed. We were still losing, but through hard work we were getting faster.

As I gained speed, I learned that the harder I worked, the faster I got. That’s one of the amazing things about rowing. You get out what you put in. My rowing career ended when I was 30 and I improved throughout my entire career. I attribute that to constantly finding new ways to gain speed and work harder. This gave me confidence that I could accomplish amazing things. That need to constantly improve and the confidence everything would work out was formed at William’s Wharf. One funny thing, as much as I really enjoyed getting faster individually, it never mattered unless the entire crew was getting faster. That’s where leadership comes in.

In my humble opinion, a true test of leadership is when you are not in charge of anyone. No sport prepares you for this better than rowing. I was always part of a crew in high school, meaning I did not row alone. I learned that if I could help my teammates get faster, I would get faster and we would win races. It was crazy. I didn’t really have to do anything extra, physically. All I had to do was figure out what made each person tick and maximize their potential. Introduce leadership. I’ve been fortunate enough to be in many leadership roles in rowing, college, the Navy and business. Everyday, I use the leadership lessons I learned in rowing and I truly believe rowing has made me a better leader.

When I headed off to college, neither of my parent’s had college degrees or had ever traveled outside the country. (NOTE: My Mom, through her scrappiness, has since earned her Bachelors and Masters Degrees) My father owns a seafood business and my Mom was pretty busy with four boys. Rowing opened doors I couldn’t have imagined, ever. At MHS and MRA, I traveled to Canada, for a race. It blew my mind. I was then recruited to the Naval Academy (USNA) and Cornell University. It blew my mind. I decided I wanted to go to USNA and was lucky enough to get in. I never would have gotten in without rowing. While rowing at USNA, I made everlasting friends, met my future wife and was fortunate enough to accomplish a few first times for me. I traveled to the West Coast for the first time. I now live there. Prior to that, the farthest west I’d ever been was Tennessee. I traveled to England. Prior to that, the only country I’d been to was Canada. You can see, without rowing, I probably never would have left Virginia.

When I graduated from USNA, I served on board a ship, USS FORD. After three and half years I decided I wanted to try to row for the US National Team. I attacked it the same way I did at MHS/MRA, I lined up and did everything I could to put my bow ball in front of the guy next to me. I made three US National Teams, racing in Poland, Switzerland, New Zealand and Slovenia. If not for rowing, I never would have traveled to those places.

Rowing has been such an important part of my life and it all started at William’s Wharf. There I learned who I was and was fortunate enough build off of my experiences to help me get to where I am now. It’s been awesome.

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