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## All oars in the water

By [Cynthia Billhartz Gregorian](#)ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH  
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St. Louis Rowing Club members pull in unison on their skulling craft during rowing practice at Creve Coeur Lake last week. (Karen Elshout/P-D)

legs take seats in the others.

The 32 crew members will spend the next two hours in the middle of Creve Coeur Lake, running through drills with few brief recovery breaks.

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The teens file out of the boathouse in lines of four and eight, hauling long, skinny, fiberglass racing shells above their heads. As each boat reaches the dock, the high school varsity members of the St. Louis Rowing Club position themselves parallel to the water and wait for the coxswain to bellow: "Up ... side step it ... over heads ... and roll it down."

Splash!

One by one, the five racing shells turn right side up on the water, and the young athletes climb into them. Shirtless boys with skinny torsos and sinewy arms settle into two of the shells; ponytailed girls with golden skin and toned

The air is thick and sticky; the sun is blistering. But Cameron Klotz, 16, a junior at Vianney High School, explains later that, when he rows, he's concentrating so hard on the task at hand that he doesn't notice much outside the boat.

"You really have to focus on breathing a lot," he says. "That's my biggest focus during a 2,000-meter race. After 600 meters you're in oxygen deprivation and, if you don't control that, you're up a creek without a paddle."

Welcome to the ultracompetitive mind-set of the high school varsity members of the St. Louis Rowing Club. It's been this way since a quiet and intense head coach

named Tim Franck arrived on the scene two years ago.

Last fall, Franck, 31, coached his junior teams to eight gold, four silver and two bronze medals at three regional regattas. This spring, they followed up with 21 more gold medals, nine silver and nine bronze at four more regional events.

According to one club member, that's more hardware than the club has earned in any other year.

On this muggy afternoon, Franck rides in a motor boat near the varsity girls teams calling instructions through a bullhorn. There are two eight-woman and one four-woman racing shells on the water, each with a coxswain sitting in the stern, steering and calling out instructions and encouragement.

Franck is polite, soft-spoken but no-nonsense.

"OK, when you're ready, we'll pick it up by sixes," he says through the bullhorn. (Six girls row as two hold a paddle above the water on each side of the shell.)

"It helps to have two people setting up the boat to make it more stable," Franck says.

### By the numbers

20: Local high schools represented by rowers

32: Female rowers

12: Male rowers

2: Male coxswains

4: Female coxswains

3: Coaches

12: Hours of practice per week

110: Optimal weight for a female coxswain

120: Optimal weight for a male coxswain

29: Gold medals earned at seven regional regattas during fall 2006 and spring 2007

13: Silver medals

11: Bronze medals

3,000 to 4,000: Calories burned a day

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When Chuck Schagrin, a longtime member of the club, took over as its president three years ago, his first duty was to find a new head coach. In the six or seven years before that, several coaches had come and gone, membership had waned and the team's performances were mediocre, at best.

Schagrin did a national coaching search and found Franck, an assistant coach with the Cincinnati Junior Rowing club.

"Underneath that cool exterior, there's a lot of passion," says Schagrin. "He has a style of management that allows him to connect with the kids. There's very little joking around, and he has high expectations, but he relates to the rowers and motivates them. They're out there to do it for themselves, but they're out there working to please Tim as well."

Franck, in turn, says he learned a lot from the coaches at the Cincinnati club, which has been, in his estimation, the best high school club in the nation for the past decade.

"I kind of knew the formula for success in terms of recruiting, coaching style, training methods and in terms of creating a certain mind-set and atmosphere that's focused on competition and winning," he says. "I tried to bring that here."

Franck also has wowed observers with his recruiting skills, especially because getting a foot in the door at some local high schools can be a challenge.

"A number of athletic directors are hesitant to let students join clubs outside their own," Schagrin says. "They want the talented athletes for their programs. A lot of administrators don't realize what it can do for their students as far as entree to universities and scholarships. But Tim is very quietly persistent."

Franck won't take all the credit for the junior club's newfound success. He has help, he says. His novice coaches, Rudy Ryback and Tim Pineau, for instance, not only coach but work at "getting the kids to have fun with it, which allows them to keep coming back and get better and faster and stronger."

He also points to junior varsity assistant coaches Karen Brandt and Jeff Hoffman.

Hoffman, 27, coaches the boys varsity teams and is following them in another motorized boat.

Between bullhorn instructions, Hoffman explains the technical aspects of rowing, the shifting landscape and soil erosion of Creve Coeur Lake (he has a master's degree in geology) and his strategy for getting the rowers back in shape after summer break. He's a talkative, amiable sort.

"These guys have had various amounts of rowing over the summer," Hoffman says. "Some guys haven't rowed for three months, some did summer row camps, and one was injured and hasn't rowed for eight months."

And then there's Cameron, he says. Cameron, who is 6 feet 6 inches tall and weighs 175 pounds, quit the football and basketball teams at Vianney to focus on rowing. He has since made the U.S. Rowing Junior National team and competed at the Junior World Rowing Championships in Beijing over the summer. On top of that, he and Jeffery Powers, a former teammate, won bronze in the 2,000-meter boys double skulls event at the U.S. Rowing National Youth Championship in Cincinnati.

As the strongest rower, Cameron is usually the stroke of his four-man vessel, which means he sits in front of the other rowers and sets the pace. But Hoffman is giving Cameron a break during these drills and letting Mark Meirink act as the stroke.

Cameron says he likes how Hoffman came to St. Louis and picked up Franck's coaching method and ran with it.

"Jeff's a really intelligent guy, and he's great with rigging, which is when it comes to the spread and length of a person relative to the oar," says Cameron. "He also knows what to say and when to say it. If you don't know what he's saying the first time, he'll come up with other ways on the spur of the moment. And he's so motivational that you don't want to disappoint him."

Of course, the coaches and Schagrin say most of the success rests with the young rowers. They are, after all, participating in one of the most grueling sports. They practice two hours a day, six days a week and burn through an estimated 20,000 calories a week.

And in addition to all of the medals and Cameron's successes, Emily Gass, 17, a senior at Cor Jesu was invited earlier this year to try out for the U.S. Rowing Junior National Team, and Melissa Sloan, 17, a senior at Nerinx Hall was invited to attend the U.S. Rowing Junior development camp.

"We give all our rowers an enormous amount of credit," Schagrin says. "They're in high school, so they have a lot of other social opportunities. And this takes a lot of time, a lot of physical effort. There are so many other things they could be doing, and they have chosen this."

Franck agrees.

"We can tell them what to do and what it takes to achieve the goals we set for them. But they're the ones who have to execute and do the hard work necessary to get there."

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