

HARVARD-YALE REGATTA

Coach hasn't lost his touch

At 81, Gladstone full of gratitude as he leads Yale in event's return

GALES FERRY — Most mornings you'll find Steve Gladstone on the water. If you're close enough to the river banks, you'll hear him through his bullhorn, exhorting Yale's rowers to move a hand or a knuckle.

"His favorite is, 'let the in-board thumb dangle,' " senior Jack Morton said. "And you kind of say, 'Steve, you're 81 years old, you're 50 feet away from the boat, how can you see where my in-board thumb is? But he will get on you about it for an entire practice."

Gladstone spends most of his days on the Housatonic in Derby, where Yale has its main facilities, or the Thames in Ledyard, but he is no Old Man River. Tanned, fit, energetic and urbane, Yale's rowing coach is as engaged in his life's work as he ever was, maybe more so, with the Harvard-Yale Regatta returning after a three-year hiatus due to COVID. The grueling test of endurance, first staged in 1852, goes off Saturday at 3:45 p.m. under the Gold Star Bridge, finishing at Bartlett's Cove.

"Being back has given you such a powerful appreciation for what you missed," Gladstone said. "The operative word here is gratitude, gratitude to be back, to be engaged, and the athletes feel the same way."

Gladstone is considered the most successful coach in collegiate rowing history. Over the course of his 50-plus years in the sport he grew to love at Kent School in the late 1950s, he has won 14 national championships, three at Yale. He's developed an eye keen enough to change personnel, or even rearrange the seating, between races when he spots something that can be adjusted. He has also brought ideas on physical and mental preparation of the highest level.

"Perhaps it's a clichéd thing to say, but he knows how to get the best out of people," said junior Dan Williamson, who helped win a gold medal for New

Zealand at the last Olympics and one of three Olympians expected to be in Yale's boat Saturday. "Not just as an athlete, but as a person as well. He's worked with 18- to 23-year-olds for 50 years. I think it's pretty safe to say he's figured it out."

Gladstone's father, Henry, had become famous delivering the news in war and peacetime on WOR-AM in New York. Steve went to Kent to play football, and he was captain, but the rowing coach and math teacher, Thomas Dixon Walker, became his great influencer.

"He was sparse, he wasn't talkative," Gladstone said, "but you could feel a deep intensity emanated from him and you knew, not by his language, which was pretty harsh at times, that he loved you and wanted the best for you. He didn't want to please you, pleasing you was never part of his game plan nor has it ever been mine, but he wanted the best for you. I made pilgrimages to his house to see him until the day he died."

And here Gladstone had found his life's work.

"Once I was engaged in it, it was very, very compelling," he said. "It just captured me. It's basic, the directness of the competition, starting line, finish line, there is no spin, no BS, no timeouts. It's a contest in the truest form. And in a contest like this, very simply stated, there's going to be a breaker and a broken. Of course, competitive juices flow, but what comes in over time is gratitude that you have this calling, this passion to do what you do. That is the overwhelming piece as time goes on."

After rowing for Syracuse, graduating in 1964 with a degree in American Literature, Gladstone began coaching at Brown in 1966 and spent most of his career in two stints at Cal-Berkley where he was AD for a time. In 2010, he came to Yale, where the rowing program had fallen from national prominence. He was soon bringing in elite rowers from all over the world, winning championships and, most important, winning the Harvard-Yale Regatta. Harvard's varsity had won all but five between 1983 and 2014, but Yale hasn't lost the first varsity race, the main event, since.

"This contest is central to the Yale and Harvard cultures," Gladstone said. "You come back here after having won a national championship, but if they don't win this one, there's a hole — a big hole."

The regular college rowing season is over. Last week, Yale captured the trophy for overall supremacy at the IRA championships at Mercer Lake in New Jersey. This week, the Yale and Harvard rowers have been in their ancient encampments along the Thames, mulling over the race that is four times longer than the sprints that decide the national championships. Gladstone's

life's work is assuring his athletes emerge from the river Saturday, win or lose, holding themselves and their boatmates accountable.

“What I’ve observed over the years, top down, do this, do that, fear and coercion-type coaching doesn’t have real longevity,” Gladstone said. “The strongest bonds are when the athletes understand it is their game. When I came to Yale, clearly I understood the physical protocol and the biomechanics of the stroke, but if you don’t have deep devotion to this process, what difference does that make? They have to understand that what they get is what they give. By their experience, did it have a positive effect on their lives? Has it impacted part of their world view? That, to me, is the only legacy that has value. People talk about how many races you’ve won. That’s too bloody abstract.”

Yale’s rowers talk about the “life lessons” they’ve learned from Gladstone, which means they’re getting it. He’s still reaching them, and maybe that’s what keeps him a few strokes ahead of Father Time.

“He brings so much knowledge and experience that you can tell he has been around the sport for 50 years,” Morton said. “But in a physical sense, it’s shocking to watch him jump around and get excited about the same things we get excited about.”

“He’s certainly sets the standard on how to age,” senior Jack Lopas added.

Gladstone is known to admonish colleagues of a certain age that they can’t just retire, they have to have a plan. His plan, apparently, is to continue. For how long?

“How long is the good Lord going to keep me on the planet Earth?” he said. “I can’t imagine a life without coaching because it feeds me. It feeds me emotionally.”

Dom Amore can be reached at damore@courant.com