

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

## Adapting well to rowing

**City program for the disabled has a wide-ranging impact.**

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Scott Brown, by his own admission, was young and stupid when he lost both legs in an auto accident 21 years ago.

Now, his face seems fixed with a permanent smile as he readies himself for a row on the Schuylkill.

Laura Schwanger, with some assistance, is nearby, hoisting herself from her wheelchair into a singles scull at the dock of a nearly century-old tugboat house on the river's west bank.

"I'll be 50 in November, and look what I'm doing," Schwanger, who has cerebral palsy, said with a beaming smile.



***Laura Schwanger, of Elkins Park, will be representing the United States in the arms-only single event in the Paralympics in Beijing.***

Tracy Lee Tackett, the left side of her body weakened by cerebral palsy, jokes that at 38, she's the old one in her crew. Like Brown and Schwanger, Tackett is a member of the Philadelphia Rowing Program for the Disabled, something, she said, that has profoundly impacted all their lives.

"It's an opportunity for people who have physical limitations to be able to be active and competitive, which is great," she said. "That almost automatically improves self-confidence. Just as important in my mind, it allows people who don't have disabilities to go, 'Wow, people who have disabilities are incredibly capable.' "

Of course, some are more capable than others, which is why Brown, from Collingdale; Schwanger, from Elkins Park; and Tackett, from Phoenixville, are heading to Beijing for the Paralympics in September.

This is a landmark year for adaptive rowing - so-called because the equipment is adapted to rowers' disabilities. After years of persistent arm-twisting, most notably by Isabel Bohn, the PRPD founder and director, adaptive rowing will be included in the Paralympics for the first time.

"It gives me goose bumps just to think of it," said Karen Lewis, coach of the U.S. National Adaptive Team, who trains the rowers on the Schuylkill. "I know Isabel Bohn, and if she wants something, she's going to get it. She's a tough lady. Knowing her, I was pretty confident we'd eventually get it."

Bohn lords over PRPD like a proper matriarch. Born in Germany and now a resident of University City, she lost her left leg in a trolley accident when she was 11. Asked how she got involved in adaptive rowing, she recalled meeting a couple of guys from Philadelphia while taking a skiing lesson.

"They called me over and said, 'Hey, you're from Philly, you want to start rowing with us?' " she said. "So I started rowing, and I loved it. I guess you can say I was recruited."

That was in 1981. Ever since, Bohn made it her ambition to build PRPD into a national hub for adaptive rowing, which now has about 70 rowers with disabilities and just as many volunteers, mostly from the health-related fields. The program is run on a modest budget of about \$20,000 a year that comes mostly from grants.

"We had a waiting list for a number of years, but now we have enough volunteers to accommodate almost everyone," she said.

PRPD's growth has prompted Jamie Stack, Rutgers-Camden rowing coach and manager of the gorgeous two-year-old Camden County Boathouse, to start a program to accommodate South Jersey residents. It began July 7. Stack said the Camden County Rowing Association received an \$80,000 grant from the Rohrer Foundation to run the program for the first four years. He is being advised by Bohn and Lewis.

"We'll have two classifications," Stack said. "We'll have recreational and competitive, for those who just want to learn the sport and others who want to take it to the next level. Most of this summer will be to gear them toward the program and direction they're looking for. We're hoping to get high school kids involved."

PRPD runs from May through October, four days a week. A highlight is the Bayada Regatta, the world's oldest all-disabled regatta, which is held on the Schuylkill each September and attracts adaptive rowers from across the country.

"We've even had rowers come from Europe to participate," Bohn said.

Bohn became a member of the commission that oversees international rowing (FISA) and steadfastly presented her case for adaptive rowing as a Paralympic sport. She recruited the first adaptive team that represented the United States in 2002 in the world championships in Seville, Spain.

"I'm very proud because I was very involved in that," she said. "Once we got FISA behind it, they got national associations from other countries involved."

Bohn no longer rows, and she has given up her seat on the FISA commission, but her work is far from complete. She envisions the development of better equipment to eliminate some of the gerry-rigging that remains necessary, and she'd like a new boathouse to replace the old tugboat house.

"We have a site," she said with a smile. "All we need is a sugar daddy."

Bohn's serene nature offers a stark contrast to the bustle taking place around her. Brown and his rowing partner, Angela Madsen, ready themselves for a brisk row on a recent afternoon as they prepare to defend their national title in the trunk-arms double scull.

Brown, 41, is a five-time gold-medal winner. He and Madsen have pretty much dominated the event since 2003. They punched their ticket to Beijing with a first-place finish June 29 in the USRowing national championships at Lake Mercer in West Windsor, N.J. Now they're on a quest to win gold.

"This was pivotal in getting me back into mainstream society," Brown said of PRPD. "I went to school, got a degree, ended up getting married. This program has taken me to places I probably never would have seen. Ever. Spain, Italy, Japan, England, Germany, and now I'm going to Beijing.

PRPD re-acclimated me into my life. I'm seen for the person that I am, not for my legs that are missing."

Rowing uncontested, Schwanger will represent the United States in the arms-only single. She said she would likely stop competing in a year, but she will remain with PRPD.

"I'll be recruiting young chippies who can kick my butt," she said.

Tackett is a land-use planner for a private consulting firm in the city. She moved to Phoenixville from Oregon in 2002. She is on the legs-trunks-arms four with a coxswain. Unlike the fixed seat that must be used by Brown and Schwanger, her boat has the traditional sliding seat.



*"This was pivotal in getting me back into mainstream society," Scott Brown (back) said of the Philadelphia Rowing Program for the Disabled. He and Angela Madsen (front) are headed to Beijing.*

She sees irony in her situation. Tackett rowed at Western Washington University, where she said her disability went unnoticed.

"I have a mild form of cerebral palsy, so my disability can be easily hidden," she said. "I heard about PRPD when I came here in 2002. I actually wanted to volunteer to coach because my disability allows me to do more than most with disabilities. So I volunteered in the summer of 2002.

"Isabel was looking for more females to fill out the first adaptive-four boat. I said there's a chance I could qualify for it. She said, 'You? What do you mean?' It was sort of a fluke in some ways. Now that I'm sort of associated with a disability, I find some people treat me differently. You don't need to treat me any differently. I'm just as capable as I've always been. And we're going to Beijing. That's a big deal, and it's hard to believe."

Meanwhile, there's a bit of serendipity in the way Lewis got involved with PRPD. A graduate of Bryn Mawr College who rowed for the Vesper Boat Club, Lewis noticed some activity at the old tugboat house across the river from Boathouse Row.

"I strolled on over there one day when I was on my bike and said, 'Hey, what are you guys doing? Can I do it, too?' They said, 'Sure.' I get involved in a lot of things."

Now, Lewis can't imagine a coach with a job more fulfilling than hers.

"If you're wheelchair-bound in most everything you do, it's pretty nice to be out in a boat and not be in your chair," she said. "There's a freedom on the water. Yeah, to be able to compete and be successful is wonderful for anybody. Sometimes when you have a physical disability, you feel you've lost that. But you can get it back, and you can be whole again."