Remarks at the 150th Yale-Harvard boat race dinner
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Thank you, Steve, for the opportunity to address such a distinguished audience on such a propitious occasion – as to which, one might ask what it means to call tomorrow’s contest the 150th Harvard-Yale regatta, but I would refer you to your race program for a lengthier consideration of that conundrum. We have more important matters to consider this evening.

First, while my main message relates to the core principles of rowing, I want to note a recent development that should give all of us some pause. We would not have come together tonight in this manner if we were not recognizing a historic rowing occasion. A year ago, had you gathered to see this race, and had you wanted to get some sense of the extraordinary history of this sport, you could have ventured no further than ten miles down the road to Mystic Seaport, which for several years hosted the National Rowing Hall of Fame and rowing history exhibitions. That space is no longer available to us, and the plaques, images and memorabilia of the Rowing Hall of Fame, of which a number of you are members, are scattered in several storage facilities around New England. There is now no venue in the United States that offers an overview of rowing’s remarkable story, a significant element of which is the saga of the oldest intercollegiate athletic contest in the US, the rowing rivalry between Yale and Harvard dating back to 1852. While the search for an appropriate home to preserve and celebrate rowing history continues, we could use more ideas and more support. Anyone interested in joining in this undertaking should contact Charlie Hamlin, Bill Miller or me to continue that discussion. But now to the matter at hand.

Tomorrow, members of the Harvard and Yale crews launch again on the Thames to engage in what has become a time-honored display - and test - of elements of character and courage not equaled by the demands of any other team sport. The following story demonstrates the unique essence of rowing, not only reflecting its origins that antedate those of any other team sport, but also showing how this classic team activity, born of life-and-death struggles, fundamentally differs from all other team sports, whose existence is based, and thrives upon, the much more popular, but much more frivolous, draws of individual spectacle and mass entertainment.

Come with me to a time that only Steve Gladstone, or Steve Brooks or I could remember. The year is 429 BC. As the twenty fastest Spartan triremes pursue the eleven remaining Athenian vessels towards the town of Naupactus in the Gulf of Corinth, the outcome of the battle seems certain. His fleet already routed by superior numbers earlier in the day, the Athenian admiral Phormio trails his surviving warships as they row desperately for haven in the protected port, where, even if they find refuge, they face being trapped by a Spartan blockade. The lead enemy vessel, carrying the Spartan commander and flush with well-earned confidence, is slowly overtaking Phormio’s battle-weary crew; whether the Athenian leader can even reach safety is in doubt.

Then, as he nears his dubious sanctuary, inspiration strikes. Seeing a large merchant vessel moored ahead outside the port, Phormio speeds toward it, followed eagerly by his pursuers a few hundred yards behind. As he approaches it, the Athenian orders a racing turn around the cargo ship. His vision of his quarry obscured by the bulk of the merchantman, the Spartan commander forges resolutely ahead in pursuit of his prey. One can only imagine the Spartan’s shock and horror when he first, but too late, sees Phormio’s circling flagship emerge at full speed from behind the anchored hull, its great bronze ram aimed squarely on a collision course with the Spartan’s flank.

Rowing for their city, their lives, their children and their wives, the Athenian oarsmen drive their heavy cast bronze beak into the enemy vessel at the waterline, shattering timbers, limbs and souls, and reducing the Spartan flagship to a crippled hulk. Overwhelmed by humiliation at his sudden disgrace, the Spartan admiral, so confident of victory only moments before, falls upon his sword. Their flagship destroyed and their commander dead, the Spartan fleet dissolve into a confused mass. Seeing the chaos being wreaked behind them, the fleeing Athenian triremes turn to the attack, dispersing the leaderless
Spartan squadron. The dark blue waters of the Gulf of Corinth mix with the crimson gore of Spartan dead, and, once again, Athens has been saved by the skill, courage and tenacity of her oarsmen.

And how does that relate to boat-racing today? When you are fully engaged in the activity of rowing, when you are dedicated heart and soul to moving your boat as fast as you can, you are doing, essentially, exactly the same thing these Athenian oarsmen were doing 2500 years ago. One may debate whether the stakes were then higher, but, tomorrow’s athletes have the choice, the ability and the obligation – a duty owed to themselves, their teammates, their coaches, their schools, and all those who support them on their journey - to pull their oars as hard as those Athenians pulled theirs at Naupactus.

This is what lies at the core of rowing, the first modern sport, and makes it different from all the other team sports which are games. There’s nothing wrong with games. Games have players and fans numbering in the hundreds of millions. Why? Because each of baseball, football, soccer and basketball, and every other team sport is, in its origins and appearance, play, and rowing is, in its roots and essence, unvarnished hard work. Game sports have many more participants and fans than rowing, but that is because of the fundamental difference between games and rowing. Each of the games can and do develop qualities that enrich the life of the athlete, but the core of their appeal is the entertainment factor, for both players and spectators, and entertainment always trumps work when you’re looking for fun.

Each of the games that we’ve mentioned originated in children’s activities that were taken up by adults for exercise, initially for fun, and for leisure time entertainment, and then for the commercial exploitation of the entrepreneur, feeding the insatiable bread-and-circuses addictions of the inebriated masses with the mindless sparkle of titillating gamesmanship. Games showcase an individual’s athletic skills, and the more skilled the individual athlete at throwing, hitting, catching, passing, running, dribbling, kicking, or shooting, the more fame, and, perhaps, fortune, he or she can demand. That these game sports could be crip’d, cabin’d and confin’d [Shakespearean allusion] in arenas to which spectators could gain entrance only by paying a fee gave rise to an increasingly profitable pyramid of sporting empires, ranging from the sales of equipment and fan memorabilia to the ownership of teams and the revenues generated by broadcast fees and licenses.

It is that fan base that provides the overwhelming support for these games. Why? Because games are entertaining. It is a perfectly natural objective to want to be entertained. There is nothing wrong with watching great athletes perform extraordinary individual feats, or with cheering for a favorite team. But how do we know this is all just for fun? The games have their dark side, in which acts that would not be tolerated in real life are encouraged in games. Stealing? We praise game athletes for stealing balls and bases. Faking? We laud those who can exercise sleight of hand to “fake out” the opposition. One of our favorite scoring plays is the “quarterback sneak.” Are stealing, faking and sneaking acts that we honor in real life? Absolutely not. But they are ok if it’s only a game.

But if your criteria for choosing a team sport values above all the work that it takes to excel in it, and the disciplines and virtues that attach to that sort of activity, and absolute trust and dependence upon your teammates, and how it can provide, more than any other sport, the ideal training and testing ground for life’s challenges, you cannot beat rowing. Period. No argument. Because, in its essence, rowing is, more than any other team sport, more about hard work and teamwork than anything else.

Rowing is not, and has never been, a game. Rowing was not designed to be entertaining. Rowing was brutally hard life and death work before it was ever a sport, and, even as it became a sport, it lost none of that quality. Rowing has been an integral part of vital human activity since before recorded history. It moved and defended empires for over two millennia, and provided the critical power for naval mobility in some venues as late as the early nineteenth century. Wherever winds, tides and currents conspired to defeat the use of the sail, whether across rivers, lakes, harbors, bays or oceans, until the advent of the steam engine and the internal combustion engine, rowing provided one of the prime means of transport for people and goods in the pre-Industrial Age. It was the mainstay of the waterman who ferried passengers across rivers, and the lighterman who off-loaded cargo ships at anchor.

Whether fishermen with nets, or hunters with harpoons, rowing was also the means of livelihood for those who harvested the seas. From the story of Jesus on the Sea of Galilee to Moby Dick, the hard life of the oarsman has been a staple of western culture and literacy. And for those in peril on the sea, well
into the twentieth century, no sight could be as welcome as an oared lifeboat butting through breaking waves to rescue a shipwrecked crew.

The course of a race does not ask any individual to distinguish himself or herself by exploits of singular athleticism. Indeed, it demands that each rower submit to the whole of the endeavor with a shared effort and unity of action unseen in any other athletic contest. What is at the heart of this sport so steeped in work? This legacy of working men demands the unremitting dedication of body and heart in a way required by no other team sport. The seeming ease of the rower is an illusion compounded by the extraordinary grace and efficiency of motion of a good crew. In fact, rowing requires the most intense continuous expenditure of whole body effort and endurance in athletics.

Added to the repetitive full pressure use of every major muscle group, and the heroic testing of aerobic, lactic and psychological limits, is the need to perform in perfect synchronicity with every teammate on every stroke, to be exquisitely aware of the boat’s pace and timing, to adjust one’s blade and stroke to the vagaries of wind and wave, and to do all this while perched on a moving seat in a craft that may be rocking from side to side. In no game team sport is nature itself – the forces of wind, water, current and tide - so formidable a presence. And during a race there is no relief: there are no time outs, or halves, or quarters, or innings; there are no refreshing drinks or substitutions; no one wipes the race course to get rid of the dampness. For better or worse, there is no coaching, and, all too often, few spectators, and even less cheering or publicity. Few athletes from other sports could – or would – perform the work of a rower.

It makes you wonder why anyone would row. There may be as many reasons as there are rowers. Certainly, there is great appeal in achieving the extraordinary moment when the boat reaches perfect harmony and seems to flow effortlessly. Or in the setting of lake or river, in the morning fog, in the twilight or moving over a soft blanket of late spring snow. Or in the unparalleled sense of team-ness given by eight rowers racing together in sweaty anonymity to reach the same goal. These are some of the joys unique to rowing.

But when you know rowing, you also know what you get in an athlete who goes out for crew – a hard working, courageous, enduring, dedicated, selfless, team player. It is telling to me that, at the dawn of organized athletics, when a Yale junior initiated intercollegiate contests in the US by issuing a challenge to a Harvard junior “to test the superiority of the oarsmen of the two colleges”, rowing was the sport of choice. A century and a half later, who appreciates the gifts of rowing more than anyone else? The parents of adolescent rowers are among the most fanatic of fans, because they see first hand the miracles that this athletic discipline works upon their darling emotionally and hormonally combustible spawn. And while few of us have had to overcome the challenges faced by Joe Rantz as described in The Boys in the Boat, the book’s popularity no doubt reflects to some degree a recognition by its readers of the life-enhancing values instilled by rowing.

Finally, though, it is those who have rowed, and who may cherish bonds with teammates and coaches as highly as almost any other relationship in their lives, who know and appreciate what rowing did to make them who they are. Whether it’s the endurance needed to spend an all-nighter in a business negotiation, or watching over a sick child, or pleasing a deserving spouse, rowers know that the lessons learned and strengths gained on the water can pay dividends for a lifetime. And if you doubt this … just ask them. If faculties and athletic departments had a clue about the real value of the real lessons that can be taught by sport that real people need to learn about real life, every student would be required to learn to row.

As we leave one another tonight, our thoughts, our hopes and our prayers are connected to each of those young people who faces a trial tomorrow that is both legendarily public and intensely private. Rest assured that each of them will be fired by the same fierceness, resolve and confidence that carried the day for those Athenians 2500 years ago. So, ladies and gentlemen, starboards, ports and coxswains, coaches, administrators, and camp followers at large, I ask that you raise your glasses to two great universities, and to those who represent them tomorrow in the ultimate demonstration of individual and team character. To the Yale-Harvard Boat Race! Hip, hip, hurrah! Hip, hip, hurrah! Hip, hip, hurrah! Hip, hip, hurrah!

Thank you.
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