

# Josh Gruenberg's Decision: The Passion of Crew

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At 6:30 on a frigid January morning, Lake Cachuma is just beginning to reflect the light of day. Hills fold into green valleys to the north. Mosquitoes socialize over the water's misty surface: There's good fishing here.

And also good rowing. Much better than coach Doug Perez ever thought before he left a successful program at San Diego State University to direct the efforts at UC Santa Barbara last spring. Six days a week, from late September through June, 100 rowers make the 40-minute drive from campus to work out here. Thwarted by windy afternoons and too many individual class schedules, the rowers are used to these early workouts, just as they are used to thrice-weekly weightlifting sessions and a couple of hours each week of running stadium stairs.

To be an oarsman is not only to be in the best physical shape of your life; it is also to learn the art of time well spent. One does not engage in the sport for anything so common as excitement or stardom. One's involvement is based on the desire to prove something to oneself. It is so physically grueling and time-consuming that university rowers do not worry about being cut from the team--they worry instead that they are merely too human to meet the sport's demands.

"A kid who's played American football in high school, no matter how tough he thinks he is, won't last in rowing, because it's too much work and there are no heroes," says Perez, as he starts up the engine of the small launch he uses to watch his team practice. He pulls a stocking cap down over his ears and zooms out onto the lake.

Today may be the coldest morning of the season, yet many a bare torso is visible among the crews, an indication of the effort they will expend over the next hour and a half. Under a moon slowly losing its battle with the sun, crew after crew--eights, fours and the odd pair and single--launch their needlelike craft onto the water. "They're 60 feet long, 2 feet wide and worthless for anything but going in a straight line," Perez says. "You can't turn them. You can't fish from them."

The crews delicately propel themselves into position for the day's workout. They seem not so much on the lake as simply a part of it. The wind picks up, kicking the water's surface into boat-rocking wavelets.

Perez lifts the megaphone to his lips. "Use this chop. Try 29 or 30 on this one, and keep your weight behind your blade." The rowers settle into an introductory pace. Soon their bodies are drenched in sweat.

Perez readies them for another "piece," or sprint, by announcing, "Three to build," and eight bodies slide into their curved-back positions, heads straight up, faces implacable. The rhythm-setting three strokes accomplished, Perez barks the crews into a lung-busting pace. "This is an endurance sport," Perez says as rowers sail by in a motion reminiscent, curiously, of both ballet dancers and blitzing linebackers. "After a certain level of fitness, you can do anything your mind lets you." He calls out another stroke rate, exhorting the oarsmen to the brink of exhaustion. The final piece finishes at a brisk 38 strokes per minute. The rowers hunch down into themselves, sucking wind. They can do anything their minds let them.

The ditch was 30 feet long, 2 feet wide and 4 feet deep, and by the time he was finished digging it, Joshua Gruenberg had made his decision. At the end of the most eventful summer of his life--a summer that began with the completion of a glorious junior-year racing season, including the crew's appearance at the Henley Regatta in England, and ended with his job on a construction crew--he would forsake a happy life at San Diego State University to finish his final year of school at UCSB.

"I was torn," Gruenberg says, "because my friends were in San Diego, and I liked my classes there." But his coach, Doug Perez, had moved from San Diego State to Santa Barbara the previous spring, to try to build a lackluster rowing team into the credibility he had attained at San Diego. "The difficult thing," Gruenberg says, "was that San Diego's rowing program was much better than Santa Barbara's, and as a senior I wanted to row with a winner. But I also knew that Doug Perez was a major reason San Diego State was a winner."

Gruenberg's transfer to UC Santa Barbara shocked most of his friends in San Diego, because so much of his life there--virtually all of his life there--had been built around the rigors of crew. A kid who had theretofore possessed unremarkable athletic skill, Gruenberg, as a freshman, had embraced the esoteric sport of rowing with a passion that surprised even those who knew him best.

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