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Jim Logan

A Boatload of Talent

Mayer Feldman knew squat about rowing when he went to a tryout for UC Santa Barbara's team. He wasn't even the "right" size for a rower. Teams prize tall athletes — well over 6 feet — and Feldman topped out at 5 feet 7.

"They weren't particularly interested in me," Feldman recalled. "I was that small guy nobody really wanted."

Fast-forward a couple of years. Feldman isn't just a member of UCSB's No. 1-ranked varsity eight, he's among the best in the country at his position. The junior physics major in the College of Creative Studies is a coxswain (pronounced *cox-in*), the person at the back of the boat who steers and directs the rowers during practices and races. His skill as a cox, as the position is often called, earned him an invitation to the USRowing Under 23 national team selection camp. Feldman is one of three coxes invited to the camp in Oklahoma City. Those selected for the team will compete at the 2017 World Rowing U23 Championships July 19-23 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

"I've been coaching for almost 30 years, and he's the best coxswain I've ever worked with," said Charley Sullivan, head coach of UCSB's men's rowing team.

Sullivan, who is in his first year at UCSB after two decades at the University Michigan, said that what separates Feldman from other coxswains is his understanding of the sport and ability to make adjustments in the boat on the fly. Technically demanding and physically punishing, rowing requires a crew to move as

one unit as powerfully and efficiently as possible. Feldman excels at getting his guys there, Sullivan said.

“When he takes a crew out, they get better,” the coach said. “He has a sense of the right things to say and the right things to focus on.”

For Feldman, who was one of 60 coxswains who applied to the U23 selection camp, rowing is a continuous challenge. A cox has to assess multiple factors — rhythm, technique, the physical and mental state of the crew — and make adjustments in the moment. It takes a special skill set, something Feldman discovered he had in spades.

“I really enjoy being the brains behind the brawn, getting all these guys doing the same thing at one time,” he said. “That’s what I love about the sport. I’m a physics major, and every day I do problems and problem sets that require me to think in new and different ways. So I’m able to really focus and think about the stroke and what could be possibly be going wrong.”

Sullivan noted that Feldman’s strengths go beyond diagnosing and fixing problems in the boat. “Mostly what I’ve noticed as a coach, and I noticed it right away, was I would make a comment about something or explain a technical change I wanted to make,” he said. “And he would immediately see not only the next step, he’d see the two and three and four steps beyond. He would see the implications of what I was saying, and he’d ask me very quickly, ‘So would that mean this and this?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, that’s exactly what it would mean.’ ”

Feldman’s contributions, along with Sullivan’s new training regimens, have led the Gauchos to the No. 1 spot in the American Collegiate Rowing Association poll. They will compete in the association’s national championship regatta Saturday, May 27, and Sunday, May 28, in Gainesville, Ga.

Update: The men’s varsity eight, with Feldman coxing, won the championship. The victory ended Michigan’s seven-year winning streak. UCSB’s women’s varsity eight also won. Additionally, the Gauchos took home titles in women’s single, men’s novice four-with, women’s novice eight, men’s novice eight and men’s varsity four-with.

Now in its 52nd year, rowing at UCSB is a club sport and part of the Department of Recreation. Unlike basketball or water polo, there are no scholarships for athletes.

“This is all on our own time and our own dedication to the sport,” Feldman noted.

At the U23 selection camp Feldman will be competing against athletes from intercollegiate powerhouses like the University of Washington (its men’s eight is ranked No. 1 in NCAA Division 1), Princeton and UC Berkeley.

“It was very cool to be invited,” he said. “Very, very excited to represent the school and what I’ve learned here. Hopefully we can show what club programs have to offer.”

As for what he expects of the camp: “It’ll be pretty much eat, sleep and row.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.