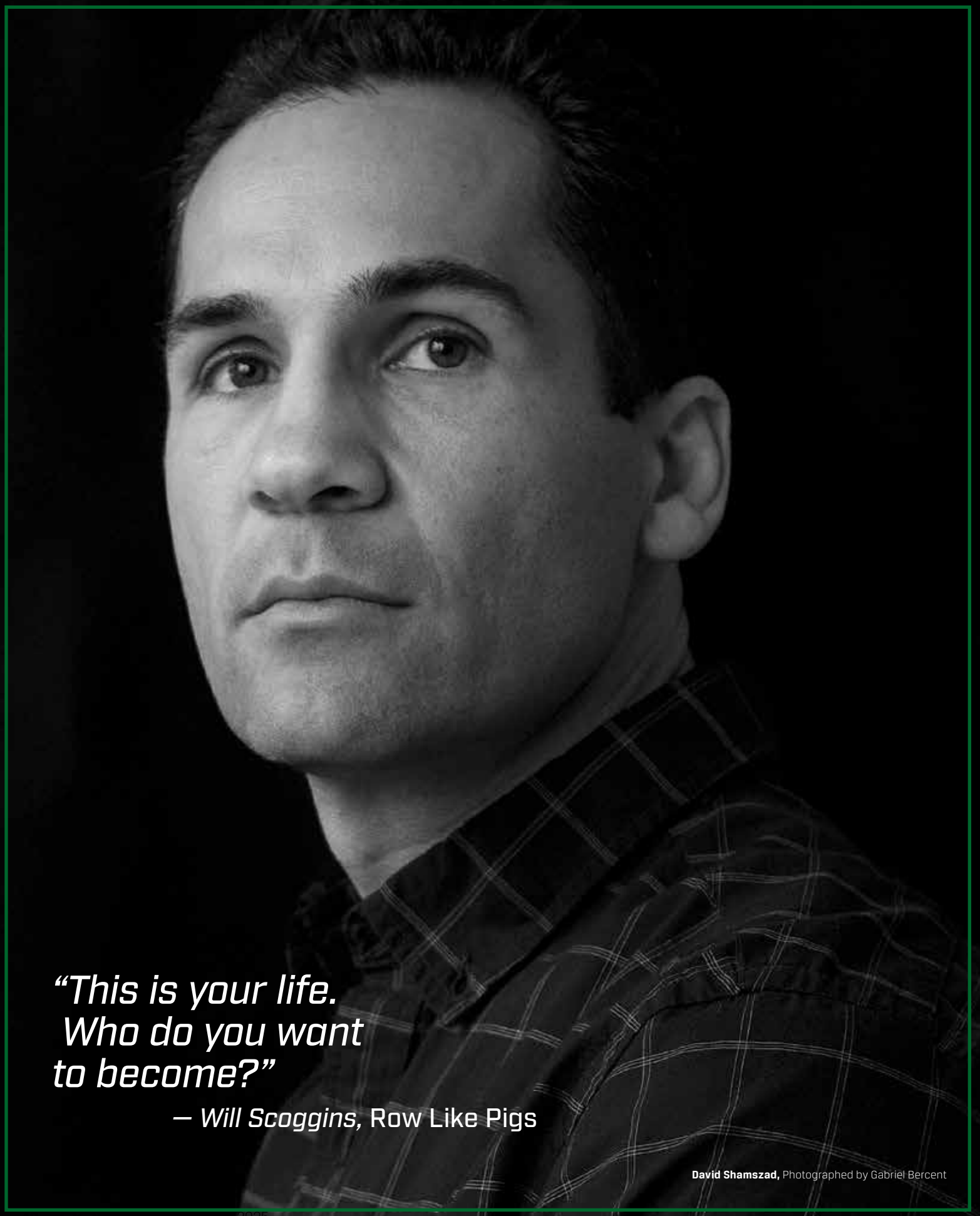


“This is your life. Who do you want to become?”

— Will Scoggins, Row Like Pigs

David Shamszad, Photographed by Gabriel Bercent

ROW LIKE PIGS

The raw documentary about the successful 2003 Dartmouth crew is a cult classic and perhaps the best film ever made about rowing. It's all that—and much more.

I had no plan at all to row when I got to Dartmouth. I thought maybe I'll try rugby. I walked down to the quad the first orientation day, and they had the two captains standing there with big old oars and they're like,"Hey, freshman, you're six-two. Come sign up."

The next day, I went. All we did was Will's Chief [a body circuit of calisthenics]. We did fucking Chiefs for 45 minutes. Nothing to do with rowing, no oars, nothing. And I knew immediately after the first day I loved this, because I just did something I never thought I could do. And I'm strong. Maybe I'm stronger than I thought I am. Maybe I'm more courageous than I thought I am. Maybe I'm tougher mentally than I thought that I could ever be.

And so I spent four years pursuing that. The "why" for me was not becoming the strongest physically but being the most courageous person I could every day. And that formed the identity I have now.

What I tell my staff at work and what I tell anyone I'm talking to: Life is all about choosing courage at every inflection point. I never thought when I walked on, I want to be captain, I want to have a six-minute 2K, I want to finish third at the Sprints. Like none of that stuff ran through my mind. It was just, "Holy shit, today I did something I never thought I could. What can I do tomorrow?"

— David Shamszad
Creator of *Row Like Pigs*

BY TOM MATLACK

Many cultures throughout history have staged male rites of passage during which boys become men through a walkabout or killing a lion with a spear or some other potentially fatal test. Coach Will Scoggins tapped into the same need among a group of 18- and 19-year-old college boys to prove, through enduring the fire of his hell, that they were men capable of greatness on the racecourse and in life.

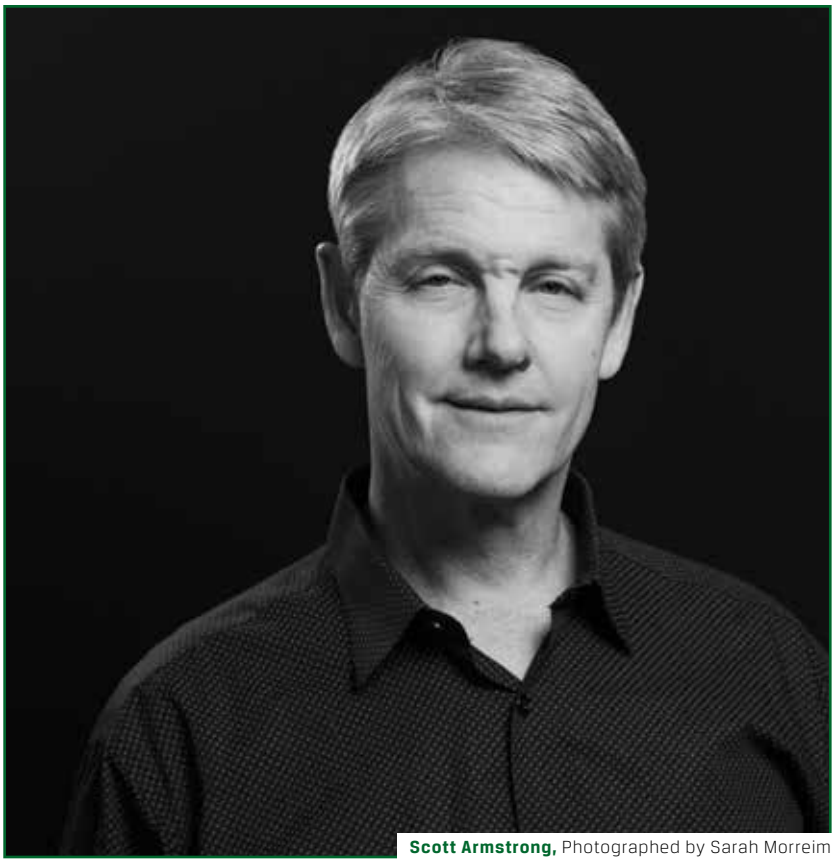
"I've committed my life to teaching young men and women about boats and oars, because it's the only thing that has ever made sense in my life," Scoggins said.

David Shamszad bought into that philosophy not just for the thing itself, the rowing, but for how nothing else in *his* life made sense, either. He bought into it to such an extent that in his junior year he made a film about it. *Row Like Pigs* began as a film-course assignment to make a two-minute video but has gone on to become a cult classic. Despite sweeping changes in the sport over the past 20 years, it is regarded by many as the best film ever made about rowing.

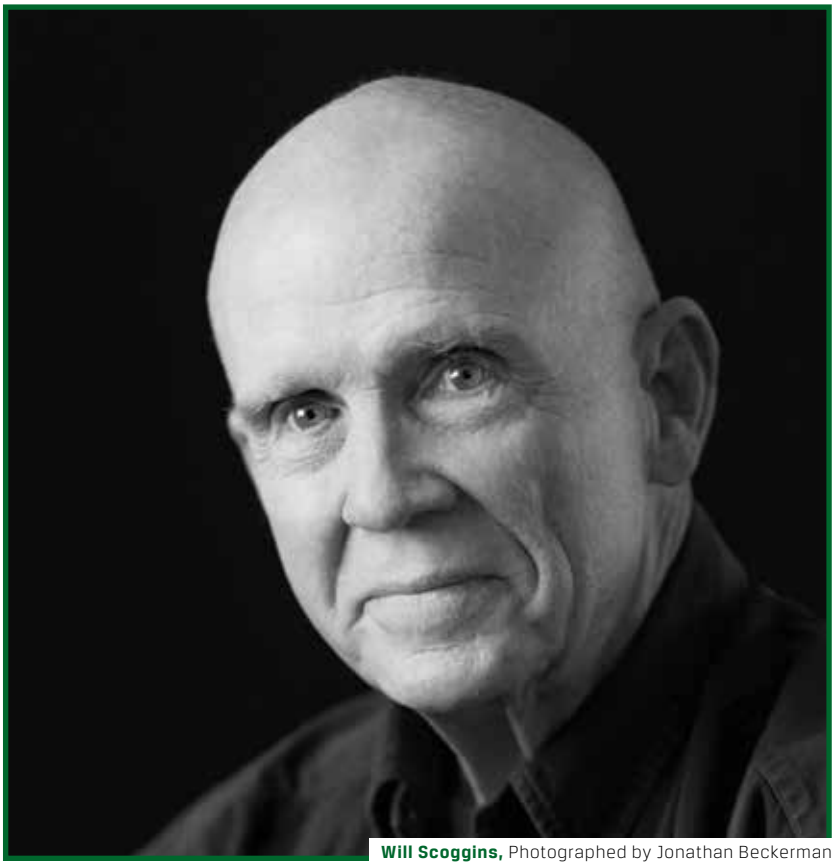
Hanover, N.H., at dawn on any given Saturday morning in January is an inhospitable place for rowing. It's an inhospitable place for pretty much anything—dark, cold, bleak. At 8 a.m, the boathouse bay is more like the godforsaken tundra—deep snow plowed into banks outside, boats out of the way, just frigid cement and icy metal machines built for suffering, testing, and divining the true nature of a man and a team.

In 2003, the Dartmouth men's crew engaged in a strange cult-like ritual called the Scoggins Circuit each Saturday morning during winter training.

This was a time when there was still freshman rowing and teams like Dartmouth were filled with walk-ons. Head coach Scott Armstrong lived too far away to come in on Saturday mornings, so freshman coach Will Scoggins had to improvise to



Scott Armstrong, Photographed by Sarah Morreim



Will Scoggins, Photographed by Jonathan Beckerman

provide an arena for terror, joy, and human advancement for both the freshman and varsity teams all at once.

It was so important that junior Shamszad would sleep on the floor of senior Tom Schenck's dorm room on Friday nights to ensure he was not tardy for the early-morning sessions. Others remember entering the cave at dawn on those cold Saturday mornings with high anxiety because they knew what they were in for.

This was not the science-driven training plan of 2025. There was no real method to this madness. Just the core understanding that fast boats are built on grit, trust, and mental toughness. Saturday mornings were not a time to improve the efficiency of the stroke. Rowing telemetry by Peach Innovations—sensors on oarlocks recording power curves for each stroke made by each individual oarsman—had not yet been invented. This was a time to expand the limits of the possible. Go to the red line and keep going. Then go more. And more yet.

The traditions included shouting "I love you" to the burpees, step-ups, and one-leg presses that caused maximum suffering.

"The thing you hated most was the thing we loved the most," recalled then-senior Jaime Velez, "until the day that as an athlete you could excel at the entire circuit—not just survive but crush each of those stations, still pushing until you're told to stop—and realize how destroyed you are after it's all over,"

The year before, something had been missing in Dartmouth rowing. In 2001, they won the The Ladies' Challenge Plate at Henley Royal Regatta, and in 2002 all but one rower returned for what promised to be one of the most talented teams in program history—only to get beat all year long.

"The boat never took off, just never had chemistry," Velez remembered. "The JV was having the time of its life beating the varsity every day in practice, which should never happen."

Half that boat had graduated. The remaining seniors now had to face a hard-charging group of sophomores seeking to take their place. The remaining seniors got together and tried to focus on developing group chemistry. But to be successful, they would need to find the elusive X factor lacking in the prior year's campaign. The Scoggins Circuit was a place to begin looking, testing, building not just physical strength but character as a squad.

To keep everyone moving, Scoggins had to have as many stations as rowers. The premise was easy: "Go as fucking hard as you can for a minute, then take 30 seconds to get to the next station and go as fucking hard as you can for another minute and keep going until the coach gets tired," Scoggins recalled.

Often, this meant going 45 minutes three times with five to 10 minutes of rest in between—or two hours and 15 minutes of hell.

The music selection was classic rock.

"They had AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" on repeat full volume," head coach Armstrong said. Another team favorite was Madonna's "Like a Prayer." Shamszad loved to dance to that while recovering between sets.

"It was loud in there," Scoggins said. "When guys were leg-pressing, you could see people start to cheat, pushing with their arms to push their knees down."

Cheating would get called out.

"Every guy got tested in there."

Many members of the team recall seeing in each other's eyes that they were fully bought in, going to the edge and well over it. Which changed them.

"You had coaches yelling and athletes yelling," Scoggins said.

Schenck was a leader in those sessions.

"I don't know that Schenck ever weighed 170 in his whole life," Scoggins said. "He should have been a lightweight but he was so fucking tough that he was on the first varsity for two years. He would flip off his teammates as he booted into the trash can. That shit is just great—puking, not taking shit from these guys. That's a big deal."

After the Scoggins Circuit, the team would drag itself to the dining commons, where everyone else was just waking up, and then straight back to bed for a few hours of sleep to recover from the insanity—and get ready for Monday's practice.

Row Like Pigs is a time capsule that captures the raw approach to training crews back then. As such, it stands in stark contrast to what the sport has become 22 years later.

The 2003 team was a different generation of athletes, coaches, and racing. Today's athletes have an infinite array of training aids: thousands of rowing videos, including every significant race; multi-episode high-production-value tutorials on national team practices; in-depth instructional videos that break down boats and races, and exhilarating coxswain recordings of big races. Every stroke they take in practice is videotaped and scrutinized.

"It's this underground film that plenty of people have said is the best film about rowing because it captures the energy, the intensity, the guts of college rowing," Coach Armstrong said.

Shamszad approached Armstrong at the beginning of the year and asked for permission to make the film. From that point on, the team got used to the camera being on constantly at every practice and every race. When Shamszad was rowing or working out, he would enlist a coxswain or injured oarsman riding in the launch to film.

"A friend of mine from Germany was visiting campus and took a lot of the footage in the film when it's snowing those heavy meaty snowflakes," senior Dirk Blum said.

"Dave was a kid who never rowed before," Armstrong said. "He was 6-2 and 185 pounds, no superb athlete, but he made top boats because he was tough, he was gritty, and he embraced the challenge."

"I remember seeing him in the library after all the shooting was over editing the final cut," a teammate remembered, "because he didn't have a computer strong enough at home."

His parents had given Shamszad the camera, and his teammates loaned him a few bucks to buy a hard drive, film, and the rest of the equipment he needed.

Freshman rowing at Dartmouth, and rowing in general, was a war of attrition. To be great, Scoggins demanded a willingness to throw all preconceived notions about limits out the window. To face your demons square in the eye, slay those motherfuckers, and keep on going.

Everything Scoggins did to coach the freshman and set the tone for the boathouse was built on a deep, intuitive understanding of the hero's journey throughout history, art, religion, and literature. And he drew on it all: Trojan warriors, Zen Buddhist monks, and rock-and-roll lyrics. He was as comfortable quoting the Rolling Stones as he was D.T. Suzuki.

His message was that in rowing, as in

life, we men are all trying to find our way home. There is no shortcut. Just courage. Only courage and the willingness to die on this stroke.

"Give everything, and you will receive everything," he promised.

Scoggins was not peddling a story to his athletes; he was instilling the story. It was a slow-acting depth charge in their souls. His win-loss record as a freshman coach at Dartmouth was not the point. He created great rowers and even better men.

Shamszad still laughs about the recruits who would come to Dartmouth for the day with their dads and go for a ride in the launch with Scoggins, who terrified both the recruit and dad.

"You could see it on their faces, 'No fucking way is my kid coming here!'"

Scoggins often talked for an hour before practice on Saturday mornings—not about rowing, not about how to get your blade in the water or release at the end of the stroke but about the existential meaning of rowing and life, quoting Suzuki and Jesus, among others, and asking his oarsmen not to shoot the arrow but become it.

It didn't work for some—in fact, for most.

Forty rowers came out for freshman rowing in the fall of 1999. By spring, there would be nine. Sophomore year, there would be six left in the class. Four of those six would be in the varsity eight their senior year, the 2003 varsity boat on which the film focuses—one in 10 of those who had begun the process.

When Will Scoggins looked into your soul, you had to have the guts not to look away. That took a long time for most people, even the toughest athletes.

If you were to line up the medalists from last year's Eastern Sprints or IRAs, you'd see mostly international oarsmen who have rowed for their respective countries for years, have trained scientifically at massive volumes, and who look like NBA power forwards, only more fit.

The guys at Dartmouth 20 years ago are from a different era. They are lean and long. What you see is not so much their massive muscles but the look in their eyes. They represent the soul of a sport that is more religion than recreation. Even among the contemporaries of their time, they were undersized, the underdogs who had to chop ice out of the Connecticut River

Jaime Valez, Photographed by Sean Riordan

Don Wyper, Photographed by Lenn Long

Tom Schenck, Photographed by Rob Akers

Dirk Blum, Photographed by Eric Burn

in northern New Hampshire while everyone else had been on the water for weeks.

Scott Armstrong, now the coach at the University of Minnesota, took over as head heavyweight coach at Dartmouth in 1992. In his very first year, he ran the table—going undefeated through the dual-racing season, winning the Eastern Sprints and IRAs and losing to Harvard at the Cincinnati national championship by three inches.

After that, things got a lot harder.

"He had all these Olympians that underperformed through the '90s," one former oarsman said. "Scott brought Will in with a very specific idea in mind. And it was a smart move. They were a perfect yin and yang."

Armstrong wanted tougher people and he knew first-hand the unique impact Scoggins could make because Scoggins had been his freshman coach when he rowed at Brown.

Armstrong was cerebral and restrained; Scoggins brought the crazy. Armstrong was the technician; Scoggins, the philosopher. Scoggins supplied the jet fuel; Scott just tried to fly the plane. The boathouse culture became Will's culture, not Armstrong's, which was exactly what Armstrong wanted. It was a culture that made 2003 possible.

"Scott's the one who taught you how to row," said Velez. "He was very even-keeled. If he got really excited, you knew he was excited. If he was pissed off, you really knew he was pissed off. He didn't fluctuate too much. You never wanted to let him down because of how hard he worked for our program to survive and make the most of all the resources we had."

"I had very good crews in 2001, 2002, and 2003," Armstrong said. "The difference was that all those crews were coached by Will Scoggins as freshmen. He was a superb freshman coach, especially in terms of molding young men to eat nails for breakfast and love it. When they came to the varsity, they were ready to rock. In 2003, we had a very good sophomore class, including a very good stroke.

"Dartmouth is a lot harder place to win than Harvard and Yale, Brown and Princeton," Armstrong reflected, echoing what many rowers have said about embracing the suck of the Scoggins Circuit, the ice, the harsh winters of New Hampshire.

"I've always debated if it is better to set expectations lower as a result. Is it better to

say, 'Guys, if we do well, we might make the top six this year' or is it better to say, 'I think you can win it all and I want you to go for it'? I always believed in the latter because when a group embraces that—gets excited about the big dream—they feed off each other, and that's when extraordinary things happen."

Deep down, Armstrong believed his oarsmen were young men coming into adulthood and looking for a foundation, a philosophy of life— "like this is what I am going to be," Armstrong said.

What the group in 2003 found at the boathouse was just that: "The idea that you can do anything if you work hard enough. You should never back down. When you face adversity, when things get hard, you double down, push even harder, and don't give up on yourself. That is what I love most about coaching college rowing."

In the film, Shamszad chooses to focus on three seniors—Dirk Blum, Jaime Valez, and Tom Schenck—and one sophomore, Don Wyper—central characters in making the varsity go in 2003. Schenck and Valez remain central characters in his life to this day.

One of the most unlikely was a very tall (6' 9"), very thin German named Dirk Blum. Freshman rowing was a rude awakening. Then, he fell in love with how Scott Armstrong ran the varsity program. And by his senior year he was in the engine room of the varsity boat. Looking back now, Blum thinks of rowing as "the most impactful period in my life in terms of developing as an adult."

When Jaime Velez, a freshman walk-on, arrived in 1999, he was profoundly unfit and lacked toughness, but by the time of *Row Like Pigs*, he goes to the CRASH-B Sprints and makes the final against legendary Harvard rowers like the Winklevoss twins and in his senior year establishes himself as one of the best individual collegiate rowers in the country.

Tom Schenck was the emotional center of the team, or at least of the 2003 senior class, in part because his junior year was "the most miserable experience in my life."

"The boat just never moved."

They would be doing battle-paddle, and "for the JV, it was easy, just paddling along. And for us, it was always like lifting weights. It just sucked. Everyone was mad at each other. Everyone knew it should

Melissa Moody, Photographed by Kevin Hedin

Row Like Pigs 2003

Row Like Pigs 2003

have been better. No one was happy in that boat."

After his miserable junior year, Schenck went to the U.S. National Team lightweight camp, where he did well but was cut. He came directly back to Dartmouth late that summer to continue training. A lot of his teammates were there already rowing.

"It was just a happy vibe," he recalled.

In the fall of 2002, the vibe continued.

"The whole fall, things went well. The boats were flying."

Don Wyper was the most talented oarsman in the 2003 boat and the leader of the insurgent sophomore class. He was a perfectionist—never satisfied, and always willing to let other people know it.

Wyper, who remembers the 2003 crew as a "special team," has kept *Row Like Pigs* alive by putting it on YouTube (from which it was removed temporarily because of copyright issues with the music) and posting it on Vimeo.

"The first time we got on the water as the varsity crew in 2003," Blum said, "the boat sang from the word *go*. For those of us who had experienced really bad rowing over our careers, we could sense the difference right away. We were like, 'OK now, this is working!'"

The rowers in the varsity boat figured out right away that they had one of the fastest starts in the country.

"We thought we could beat the national team for 150 meters," Wyper said. "We took a lot of pride in that."

The focus became building power and speed over the course of 2,000 meters and finishing as strong as they started.

Dartmouth had not beaten Brown since 1992, a decade-long losing streak in the early-season dual race. That race was regarded by all as the bellwether of a new trajectory for the team. In 2003, the losing streak came to an end. The Big Green got out to an early lead, held on, and never felt challenged seriously.

"Beating Brown was great," Schenck said. "Those were the little things that to us were huge because we had been a down-in-the-dumps program when I first got there."

Dartmouth was undefeated during the dual-racing season, except for a tough race on choppy water against a very strong Wisconsin team, as they headed into the year-end championships at the Eastern Sprints.

Between the heats and finals, Blum mused to the camera about the significance of the race ahead:

"I've never been to a grand final before. I'm already psyched to finally, for once, go out and get a chance to row with the big boys. But any kind of trip to the medal dock for me would be just about the biggest accomplishment of my life."

As a freshman, Blum, who hadn't been exposed to a culture of high performance before, suffered more than anyone else, and Scoggins, the freshman coach, was happy to push guys until they broke—or made it. Schenck, his sophomore roommate, was "honestly shocked [Blum] continued rowing because Dirk had been in tears many, many times freshman year."

Yet Blum did come back and, what's more, embraced the Scoggins culture that pervaded the boathouse. Under Armstrong's guidance, he learned how to row, move boats, and be tough and courageous. And here he was, on the cusp of the biggest accomplishment of his life because he came the furthest of anyone emotionally to get his shot at the awards dock. His friend Shamszad was there to capture on film what it all meant to him before the varsity went out to attempt to achieve greatness. That clip sets up everything that follows.

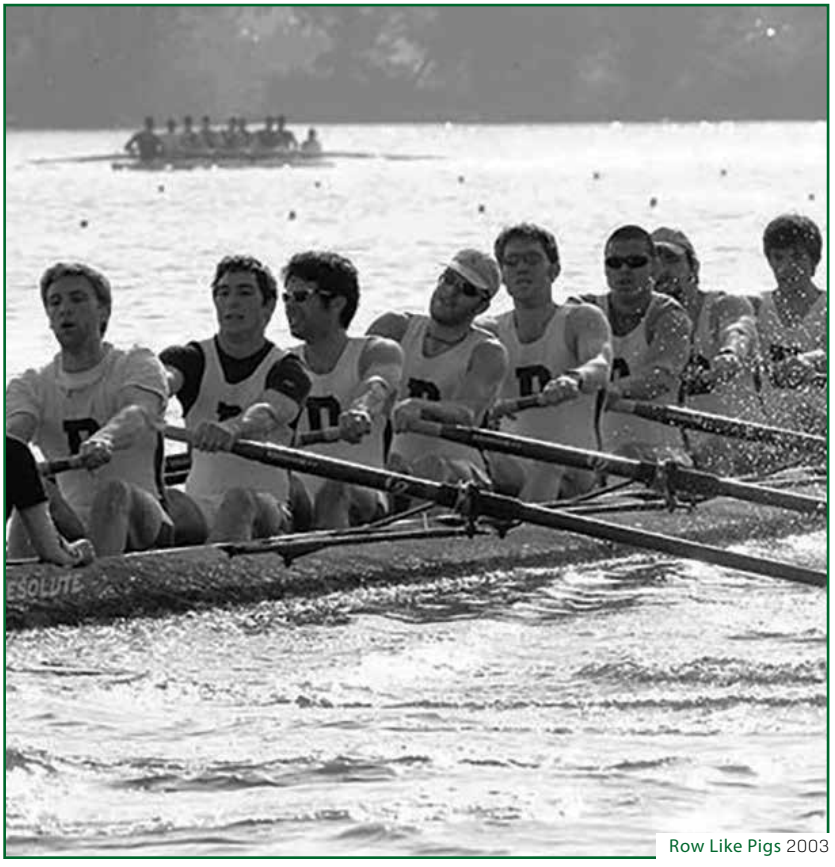
"We got to the thousand meters in third, and Harvard was gone, but Wisconsin was close, and we didn't feel like there was anybody behind us challenging us. It was a super-liberating feeling, pretty darn good with what we are already likely to accomplish. Let's go chase and see what outcome we can achieve."

"After making the grands, we were ready to just let it rip," senior coxswain Melissa Moody said. "We knew we belonged there. The sophomores we had at seven and stroke were two of the most poised rowers I ever was in a boat with. With them looking back at me, I was pretty damn confident we were going to have a great race. We went hard off the line as we had all season, had good rhythm, and when I saw the medal was in sight, I told the guys to take it up to a sprint early that last 500, and they responded."

"It all came together at the Sprints," Wyper said. "I gave everything I could possibly have given, and we had the best row we could have."

Paddling back to the dock, everyone in the boat was ecstatic. They had done the impossible.

Row Like Pigs 2003



Row Like Pigs 2003

"I remember Harvard looking at us a little side-eyed on the dock because we were so excited about our [bronze] medal, and I did not give a shit," Schenck said.

In the film, you watch these men celebrate on the awards dock, hugging each other, and it's hard not to cry, because you've seen how far they've come and how their love for each other prevailed in the end.

Scoggins addressed the seniors who lost to "fucking MIT" as freshmen and were now Sprints medalists. The circle was now complete. All those Scoggins Circuits had paid off. It didn't matter what you looked like or where you rowed. What mattered was your courage.

It gave Shamszad the perfect ending to *Row Like Pigs*. In the film, after the performance at Sprints, Shamszad has Schenck tell a joke about celibate priests that few viewers will understand, but the guys on the team still laugh at—you had to be there. Same goes for the film's title, taken from a riff on commitment by the tobacco-chewing Scoggins. The mystery only enhances the movie's appeal.

There's growing scientific evidence that the Will Scoggins approach to making rowers wasn't so crazy, even if it depended on moldable walk-on freshmen and would never happen now, when so many athletes are highly recruited and possess a deep knowledge of the sport and the latest training methods. College crews today train with the volume and sophistication of Olympic teams. None of them is doing the Scoggins Circuit. But maybe they should be.

Michael Easter, author of *The Comfort Crisis*, and Marcus Elliott, a sports medicine doctor who has worked with the New England Patriots and professional baseball and basketball players, cite numerous studies showing that toughness is not determined genetically but something that can be learned through exposure to adversity and profound discomfort. Indeed, physical limits often are more mental than physical. As an evolutionary adaptation, the mind shuts down the body to protect it well before the body reaches the limit of its capacity. Much athletic training is targeted at breaking the false governor in the mind.

Scoggins didn't need science to tell him that. Taking a page from Navy Seals and Army rangers, he designed his training plans to select athletes with the ability to endure and become great, training plans be damned.

"When you are two seats down with 20 strokes to go, it has nothing to do with muscle," Scoggins exhorted his rowers.

"Who wants it?"

In the end, *Row Like Pigs* would prove to be most important not to all the aspiring rowers who have watched and enjoyed it, or even to the teammates who were and continue to be his best friends, but to Shamszad himself. The message of the film—and what he learned making it and rowing for Scoggins and Armstrong—not only changed his life but also helped save it.

In 2003, when he made his movie, Shamszad was a junior who rowed on the JV. A year later, as a senior, he would make the IRA grand final in the varsity boat, the crowning achievement of his athletic career.

But within two years of graduating from Dartmouth, Shamszad's life began unraveling as bipolar disorder—maddening pendulum swings between despair and euphoria that he tried to keep secret—ravaged his mind. He spent weeks in a psychiatric hospital, where he was diagnosed and medicated, after a colleague at work pried away a knife from his wrist.

"It was a nightmare," Shamszad said. "Like being in a bad dream."

Shamszad told Schenck and his girlfriend, but no one else. He tried to keep going but suffered terribly for a decade, during which nothing worked, and he became increasingly desperate. As depression led him through hell, he used alcohol to ease the pain.

"I was losing my mind," Shamszad said. "Before they diagnosed me, I had never even heard of bipolar disorder."

"He kept trying to convince me to live in Vermont and train in a pair for the national team on our own," Schenck recalled, "like *Assault on Lake Casitas* style. He was looking for the purpose that rowing had offered, but neither he nor I did any rowing after college, since it was never really about the rowing anyhow. The point was the Scoggins Circuit."

Shamszad kept drinking with abandon until his early 30s, when on the verge of dying he finally "fucking woke up," got sober, and began dealing with his mental illness and alcoholism for the first time. He realizes now how fortunate he was; the fighting, arrests, and countless days and nights of depression and rage hadn't cut his life short before he had the chance to recover.

Even in his darkest days, when he had nowhere else to turn, when his life hung in the balance, Shamszad was able to draw on the lessons of his film, on his experiences with Will, Scott, Tom, Jaime, Dirk, Don, and the rest of the team. He knew he had it in him to make the change, to do the hardest thing he had ever attempted in his life. And that has made all the difference.

Without rowing and *Row Like Pigs*, Shamszad doubts he'd be alive today.

"The hardest thing I've ever done is recover, to learn how to live a healthy life—harder than any erg test or any professional pursuit. How did I learn to fight, to take a disciplined, courageous approach to mental health, to my addiction? I know I wouldn't be here right now without rowing."

As a walk-on, Shamszad had no idea how hard he could work, how hard he could challenge himself mentally.

"When you do something that hard that you never thought you could before, it changes you."

Today, Shamszad is a father, husband, and founder of a successful real-estate business. He's been sober for 13 years and recently began sharing his story with others.

"It is crazy to me now, but for the better part of two decades, even when I was sober and much better and building a cool life through tons of hard work, I just put all that in the rearview mirror out of a deeply ingrained sense of shame and a false belief about what male toughness means."

Shamszad views his story as a way to help people beyond the cult following for his rowing documentary.

Row Like Pigs isn't about rowing at all, Shamszad says. It's about realizing that all of us walk around with "limitations that are just in our own fucking head."

"The excitement is realizing that that's all it is and that there's a whole world out there you can participate in if you're willing to break through those limitations."

TOM MATLACK Is a mentor to men in business and life. He rowed for Will Scoggins at Wesleyan from 1985 to 87. His son, Cole, rows for Brown University.

SEE THE FILM AT: ROWLIKEPIGS.COM