

## RETROPOLIS

# How the first all-Black rowing team went from pioneers to D.C. champions

By Kim O'Connell

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The morning of Saturday, May 2, 1964, dawned clear, bright and unseasonably crisp. Temperatures had reached only the mid-40s when rowers arrived along the Potomac River to prepare for the Washington Regatta, one of the city's most anticipated boating events. It was far better than the freezing pre-dawn practices they had endured earlier in the season, but the steady 15-mph headwind gave some rowers pause.

Other cities had better-known regattas but in the nation's capital, the Washington Regatta determined which collegiate crew was king. On that May morning, four eight-man rowing shells were lined up near the rocky Three Sisters Islands, north of the Key Bridge. All the usual crews were there — varsity teams from Georgetown, American and George Washington universities. Their boats were long and muscular, just like their athletes. All were White, and most of them had rowed in high school.

The fourth boat stood out. This was the fledgling crew from Howard, a historically Black university founded in Washington in 1867. Only in its fourth season, the Howard crew was the first all-Black competitive rowing team in American history. As newcomers to the sport, the Howard team had mostly put up defeats. Just a month earlier, the rowers had lost to Yale on the Housatonic River in Connecticut. But on this spring morning, they remained determined.

The 2,000-meter race began at the Three Sisters and continued under the Key Bridge, where the Potomac bends around Theodore Roosevelt Island. The finish line was set near Thompson Boat Center. In rowing, it's no small thing to take a heavy eight-man boat from a dead stop to race pace, so the first few strokes are key.

At 6-foot-4, Bernard Thoms was one of the tallest and strongest men in the Howard shell. Sitting in the middle of the boat — a section known as the “engine room,” where the powerhouse rowers are placed — Thoms was ready. At the signal, he pulled as hard as he could on the oar, and the blade promptly broke off.

It felt like another defeat for a team that had faced naysayers since its formation. In 1952, a Howard University graduate named Howland Ware had attended the famous Eastern Sprints Regatta, a tony event in Worcester, Mass., in which only Ivy League crews and other elite schools compete. Impressed by the sport's sleek, aesthetic beauty and synchronicity, he made it his mission to establish a crew team at his alma mater.

“Even if I have to pay for it myself,” Ware said at the time, “they will have a rowing team at Howard.”

He spent the next few years pressing university officials, who finally agreed to field a crew in the spring of 1961, largely because Ware ponied up \$10,000 of his own money to buy a boat and uniforms and agreed to drive the rowers to and from the river himself. Ware poached athletes from other campus sports to fill the first shell, including Howard Fulcher, Bill Beamer and Dennis Hightower, who went on to become the deputy commerce secretary under President Barack Obama. Ware also recruited a coach, Stuart Law, a White man who had rowed at Yale and was a law professor at George Washington University, to lead the neophyte team.

Law was, by all accounts, not that interested in civil rights. A 1964 Sports Illustrated article about the team called the coach “no crusader for racial equality,” adding that “his only interest in races is how to get his boys to the finish line first.”

Allen Nesbitt, who sat in the bow seat in the spring of '64, agrees with this assessment. When the team stopped at a rest area near Philadelphia on the way to a regatta, Nesbitt opted to walk to a nearby cafe. When he entered, “they looked at me like I was an elephant,” he recalls.

“The man said, ‘Boy, we don’t serve your kind in here,’” Nesbitt says. “I went back to the coach and said, ‘These guys wouldn’t serve me.’ And the coach said, ‘Look, Allen, I’m hired to take you to a race and win a race. I’m not hired to make a social statement. We aren’t going anywhere and we ain’t doing nothing.’ I had to comply. I had to swallow it.”

Support for the team was sometimes hard to come by on the Howard campus, too. “So far the first Negro rowing team in the nation has not evoked any wild enthusiasm by its performances,” a student editorialist wrote in the Hilltop, the university’s newspaper, in 1962.

It didn’t help that the Black experience with water had been fraught with racism and trauma. During the era of slavery, Black families were trafficked up and down rivers away from their loved ones. In the Jim Crow era, swimming pools were segregated, and countless Black children never learned to swim.

“Black people, generally speaking ... were water averse,” Thoms said in a 2022 interview. “Because a lot of things that happened around the water, particularly in the South, were not good for Black people.”

But the marches and demonstrations of the civil rights movement helped to embolden the rowers. Roland Daniels, a coxswain for the team from 1966 to 1968, says that when White crews stared or laughed at them, it only fueled his fire.

“I was pretty defiant,” he says. “My mother challenged me not to back down from anybody or anything. When I was on campus, I participated in a student uprising. So, I didn’t worry, really, what other teams thought about us.”

Winning had a way of silencing critics, too. In May 1964, after Thoms broke his oar at the start of the race, he felt sure that he’d doomed their chances. Thankfully, race officials postponed the heat until Thoms could secure a new oar.

For many athletes, the aborted start might have thrown them off their game. But the opposite happened. At the signal, the Howard boat shot out in front of the other competitors and stayed there. The rowers held a good line and crossed the finish at Thompson Boat Center with open water between them and the rest of the field. The Washington Post ran an overhead photograph of the team's commanding win on the front page of the Sports section the next day. "Underdog Howard bucked the odds," the paper reported, adding that the favorite, Georgetown, came in last, four boat lengths behind.

"I remember being so tired," Nesbitt says. "But I finished up strong. It was a highlight of my career."

Despite its success at the Washington Regatta, and other wins in the ensuing years, the Howard crew team succumbed to a current of indifference on campus, hanging up its oars for good in 1972. To this day, rowing is still dominated by White, affluent teams, although the sport's governing body, USRowing, and other entities are working to recognize and eliminate barriers to the sport. In 2021, St. Augustine's University, a historically Black university in North Carolina, launched the nation's first all-Black women's crew team.

In 2022, Unity Boat Club, a rowing club based at the Anacostia Community Boathouse in Washington that promotes diversity in rowing, acquired a new four-person racing shell that it named the Howard 64, after the groundbreaking team and its historic win. Nesbitt and Daniels attended the christening last summer.

This spring, four young rowers of color will race the Howard 64 at the San Diego Crew Classic. "During my own rowing career, I usually rowed in boats named after people who don't look like me," says Unity Boat Club President Brook Yimer, who is Black. "When you row in a boat and the name aligns with your story, you feel like you were meant to be there. You were meant to be in that boat. So that gives you that extra something to row stronger."

Thoms passed away in October 2022. A photo of the Howard 64 was one of the last texts he received. His obituary noted that rowing on the nation's first all-Black crew team was one of his proudest accomplishments.

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