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Title:

UIUC Women's Crew: Origins, History, and Progress

About the Author:

I have been doing gymnastics since I was three years old. Before a few years ago, I had never gotten a type of serious injury. However, during my junior year in high school, I tore my ACL during a meet. I underwent reconstructive surgery and was not allowed to do any sports for six months. During that time however, I went to physical therapy three times a week to regain my flexibility in the knee joint and strengthen my quadriceps. I began to do gymnastics again after I got clearance from the doctor but things still did not feel right. I was forced to go back to my doctor and undergo numerous tests to try and determine the source of my pain. After all of the tests were inconclusive, my doctor finally decided to perform surgery a second time and hopefully detect the problem. He found that the new ACL I had received a year earlier had frayed and was caught in the joint. I was therefore required to have a second ACL surgery and go through the entire healing process again. I have never been able to return to doing gymnastics. I think that I may want to study how sports injuries impact the lives of athletes not only physically, but also emotionally. It may be difficult to separate my own experiences with those of other athletes however. I will need to become just an observer if I choose this as my topic and try not to relate it to how I was feeling in similar situations as theirs.

I think I might also want to discover family relationships for my project. I have four sisters ranging from the ages of twenty two to twelve. I am the closest with my sister that is a year and a half older than me and my twin sister. When we were younger we fought a lot, but as we have grown up we have gotten a lot closer. Although my older sister does not go to U of I, we still talk on a regular basis. My twin goes here and we live on the same floor so we see each other all the time. I think that it would be really interesting to study other families and see how their relationships are different from those that I have with my sisters. I would also want to learn how their relationships have changed since they have moved away from home.

After learning what ethnographic research requires, I decided that I want to steer my project away from sports injury and family relationships. I have a friend that is on the rowing team at the University of Iowa and another friend on the rowing team here at the University of Illinois. Crew really interests me because I am unfamiliar with what the sport requires of the athletes and how it is conducted. Rowing is one of the oldest sports, but I feel like many people are unaware of its existence on college campuses. Before my friend was on the team here, I did not even know that we had a team. I want to find how long they have been on campus and how the team practices. I also want to find out their goals for the future.

Keywords:

crew, rowing, women, college athlete, NCAA

Abstract:

For my research project, I wanted to learn more about the women's crew team here at the University of Illinois. I attempted to find the history of the sport on campus, the present established program, and future goals that they have. The only history that I could find in the Student Life and Culture Program was one advertisement from 1981 that was attempting to recruit athletes for the men's crew team. Since I couldn't find anything in the university, I decided to study a brief history of rowing and how it came to become a sport on college campuses. After finding the history, I interviewed one of the athletes on the women's crew team and the coach of the team. Also, I observed one of the team's practices. Because it is the winter season, the team works out at the ARC and is unable to do any training on the water.

Initial Exercises:

I think that the most interesting and controversial topic that we have studied in class thus far has been the film *In Whose Honor: Indian Mascots and Nicknames in Sports*. I believe that this issue intrigued me so much because it directly connects to my life. The footage from the film was from University of Illinois basketball games and sites on campus that I was able to recognize. Before watching the film I knew that the chief had been removed as the mascot for U of I because it was racist and insensitive towards Native Americans, but I didn't know the real story behind it. I think that it is important to study the past to realize how things have developed for us living in the present.

By coincidence, one of my friends asked me if I wanted to go to a safe the chief meeting. Once she asked this question, a huge debate began over why chief illiniwek should be reinstated as the mascot. The same pieces of evidence were brought up in the movie by supporters of the chief and many of my friends. She said that as a university, we are by no means making fun of Native Americans by having one as our mascot. Instead, she claimed that we are honoring their heritage and traditions by supporting the chief at all of the home football and basketball games. She also said that the dance performed by the chief was purely authentic and real. I found it very interesting to sit back and listen while others debated about the chief and his authenticity. The film we watched was at least ten years old, but the same subject continues to be a hot topic among students and supporters alike.

I have several topics that I might be interested in studying further this semester. The first would be related to sports and injury. I would be interested in studying how athletes on a collegiate level are able to recuperate physically, emotionally, and mentally from a sports injury. The injuries could range from a short term, acute injury such as spraining an ankle where the athlete is only out for a couple of days to long term injuries that require surgery and take several months to heal. The psychology that is involved in sports is really interesting to me. It would also be fascinating to study the athlete's fellow team members' emotions after the injury occurred. Would the other starting players feel the same as the player that fills the injured athlete's spot? Would the team support the injured athlete during their recuperating process or pressure him to return to the game before he is completely healed? Does the injured athlete still feel a part of the

team even when they can't play? Finding answers to these questions will help me gain insight into emotional side of athletics. However, it may be difficult to get access to the athletes to observe and ask them questions.

Another topic that I may be interested in studying does not relate to sports. I think that it would be really interesting to study the interaction between siblings that both attend the University of Illinois. I could interview the different opinions of the older and younger siblings and determine why each of them decided to go to this particular university and if they had an influence on each other's decision. It might also be interesting to see how the siblings interact with each other while both at school. Do they hang out together during their free time? What do they do if they are both at the same party? Does the older sibling act as a parental figure towards the younger sibling? Is the relationship different depending on the gender of both of the siblings? These questions are just the beginning of many that I could possibly ask the subjects.

I really liked the way that Susan Brownell discussed her interactions with the Chinese athletes as she was competing for their national track team. It was very interesting to see how involved the athletes are not only in their sports, but also in bringing pride to their country. Also, I never knew that Chinese sports were not only about winning, but also about respect for others competing and their country. As I was reading this article however, I was wondering if Brownell informed her subjects that she was studying them for ethnographic research. I was unsure whether she went to the university in Beijing and participated in the track and field team for the betterment of herself and wrote the book as an afterthought, or went into the situation knowing that she was going to study her fellow teammates. I think that it would be unethical if she got really close with all of the athletes just to tell the world how the Chinese government train and treat their athletes. Brownell got really good testimony and evidence by becoming good friends with her fellow teammate. If you do this, it will make them more likely to open up to you and tell you information that is helpful towards your research. Reading this article was especially interesting because the Beijing Olympic Games just concluded. Brownell's article lets us get a glimpse inside the inner workings of Chinese athletes.

I also thought that Ian Borden's article was very interesting. When I was reading it however, I was unaware of the reasons why he was studying skateboard culture. He did not put any of himself into the research or paper so the reader did not know anything about him. I would have liked the reading more if he told the reader why he was so fascinated by this subject. Doing this would have also made a personal connection between the author and reader. Besides that, I felt that the paper was very well done. Borden used a lot of evidence to prove his point. He talked to many different skateboarders to get testimony and cited all of his evidence. His ethnography process was to follow the skateboarding culture in a chronological order. For me, this worked because it was easy for me to understand and follow. It was really interesting to see how the sport has evolved throughout the last three decades. I was unaware that skating was popular back in the 1970's. I thought that it had just recently become popular in the 1990's and 2000's with the introduction of skaters like Tony Hawk. The reading also helped me understand the mindset of skaters and how they can make anything into a place to skate. A couple of my friends skateboard and do crazy things and are always getting hurt. After reading this article I can kind of understand why they take the risks that they do. Borden was able to bring people's attention to a sport that has been overlooked by society for decades.

Question:

When was the women's crew team established at the University of Illinois?

How do the athletes manage their time between the sport and their studies?

Why did the members of the team become interested in the sport?

How many other students on campus are aware that we have a crew team?

What are the physical aspects needed to become a successful crew athlete?

Plan:

Initially, I want to research the sport of crew and discover its history. Coming from the suburbs of Chicago, the sport is not very popular so I am not familiar with it. Once I begin to understand the fundamental aspects of the sport, I want to research how the crew team first became established at the university. It will be interesting to learn how long the teams here have been organized and how their competitiveness has changed throughout the years. I also want to discover how many students on campus actually know that we have a crew team.

Following my initial research, I want to see if it is possible to actually go with the women's crew team to their practice site and observe one of their workouts. One of my friends is on the team so I am going to contact the coach and try and set up a day where I can come observe. I think that doing this field research will help me understand the sport more by seeing the athletes in their element. I will also get to experience what it feels like to get up at 4 am to go to practice then go through a day of classes. Actually experiencing this for myself will allow me to understand the life of a U of I crew athlete.

Data:

As I was exploring the UIUC library site, I found a lot of really great journals and magazines that will be able to help me in my research. However, there are so many medical journals that it may be difficult to find the ones that will be helpful to me for this particular ethnographic study. Through my research however, I found three that relate to my subject of sports injuries:

1. The Journal of orthopaedic and sports physical therapy
2. The American journal of sports medicine
3. Physical Therapy in Sport

The above information was collected before I redefined my topic. They coincide with my earlier topic on sports injuries. The rest of the data is related to my final topic about the women's rowing team at the university.

I attached my interview questions and the answers that the women's rowing coach and one of the athletes gave. The coach's interview is the first attached document, and the athlete's interview is the second attached document.

The only information on crew or rowing teams here on campus in the Student Life and Culture Program was one advertisement that is attempting to recruit men for the team. The poster was documented on August 26, 1981, and essentially says that the crew team likes to party. The ad reads:

Crew

The Sport of Preps

“No one can row crew and study and party: guess what has to go.” With this in mind, we founded Crew Illini. In only one short year we are #4 in the Big 10 and we are still looking for our first shell. How did we do it? “Drinking” was the key to our success.

This semester we are looking for a few good rowers, preferably from Holy Spirit in New Jersey to carry on the Crew Illini tradition. We are also looking for lots of prep women to cheer us on to victory and to attain that goal of #1 in the Big 10.

The team really focuses on drinking and partying, but reached #4 in the Big 10 only after one year. However, there is not men's rowing in the Big 10 or NCAA Division I currently. I was unable to find any records that confirm the information in the advertisement. Because I was unable to find any history of crew at the University of Illinois, I decided to research the history of the sport as a whole and how it came to the United States and more importantly college campuses. I found that rowing is the oldest organized sport in the world and can be dated back to the ancient Egyptians in 1430 B.C. Initially, rowing was used by the working class to transport goods and people from one place to another. However, humans are competitive by nature and the process originally used to transport goods eventually became a sport. Rowing competitions date back to the fifteen hundreds, but the first documented race occurred in London in 1716. Eventually, the sport moved to the United States in 1843 and the first collegiate sport in the country was rowing at Yale. The sport grew very quickly and by 1875 thirteen eastern schools had teams. However, the colleges only had men's teams, and not women's. In 1877 Wellesly College had the first women's crew team in the United States. The sport continued to grow among women and the National Women's Rowing Association was established in 1962. Currently, women's crew is the fastest growing NCAA team sport.

Discuss:

After studying a brief history of the sport of crew, I began to learn about the present rowing team at the University of Illinois. I learned a lot of information about the team after interviewing the coach of the women's team and one of the athletes on the team. The rowing team here on campus is currently a registered student organization and started just a few years ago. Fall of 2006 to spring of 2007 was the first year of the program. The coaching staff is currently working

on the necessary paperwork to make crew a club sport, and their ultimate goal is to get the team to the NCAA Division I. There are twenty girls on the team this season and they break into three different boats: eight open weight, eight light weight, and the remaining four in a four person boat. The team practices on Homer Lake (fifteen miles east of Champaign) four times a week and has two land practices a week during the fall and spring season. The practice starts at 5:15 a.m., but they usually leave campus around 4:55 a.m. A typical practice consists of a fifteen minute warm up and sprints for about forty minutes.

The races that the girls compete in are called regattas. In the fall they compete in about four regattas, and four to five in the spring. Spring is the real collegiate rowing season however. This fall the team raced in the following races: the 2008 Head of the Eagle in Indianapolis, IN; the North Shore Channel Challenge in Skokie, IL; the Washington University Parents' Day Regatta in St. Louis, Missouri; and the 2008 Head of the Rock Regatta in Rockford IL. The team has placed really well in the novice events, which means that they have been rowing for less than one year. However, most of the teams that they currently race against are at the varsity or well established club level. Some of the schools include Washington University, Notre Dame, University of Michigan, Michigan State, Northwestern, St. Louis, University of Chicago, and the University of Iowa.

Although the crew program is still very young at the University of Illinois, it shows great promise for success in the future. The coaching staff is very excited and committed to the progress of the team, and the athletes are just as invested. Rowing at the collegiate level takes a lot of time and hard work, but has shown a lot of reward in the athletes' lives at the university. Hopefully the team will be able to reach their goal of becoming a club team, and eventually a NCAA Division I sport. By documenting the beginnings of the sport on campus, future generations will be able to discover how the team was established and how it has evolved over time at this university.

EUI Links:

Initially, I wanted to do my project on sports injuries or sports psychology. However, through learning more about ethnography and what it means I have found that these topics will not work with this type of field research. I am now considering doing my project on the university's club sports teams and how much of a time commitment they can be compared to the division one athletics. More specifically, I want to study the girls' crew (rowing) team and learn how they juggle their classes, practices, traveling to meets, and recreation.

I was unable to find a lot of topics posted on the EUI topics website that was related to my particular subject. Under the university and community section I did find a little paragraph on student life. It brought up the fact that as a university, we have broadened our activities in order to fill student's needs. It just briefly mentioned sports on campus. However, the section did make an interesting statement saying that many students would agree that it is impossible to separate their academic and social lives while here on campus.

http://www.eui.uiuc.edu/methods_topics_t6.html

I found a couple of projects in IDEALS that relate to my potential project:

There was a project started in 2006 that asked the question: Does fitness bring people together? This project focused more on students that regularly go to CRCE or the ARC to work out, but I believe that the same logic and ideals can be brought to sports teams. I think that it would be interesting to find how the rowing team interacts with each other both during practices and during meets. There are so many different levels of experience on the team that it would be fascinating to see how everyone on the team treats each other and whether that depends on how experienced or talented you are at the sport. <http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/1851>

Another project dealt with the perception of athletes on campus. Their argument was that the players are celebrated and glorified throughout the community which forms a hierarchy. This article mainly focused on the “money athletes” such as football and basketball players that receive most of the media and public attention. I wanted to focus more on the low key sports, so this project might not be able to help me as much. However, it does discuss how athletes are perceived which is a topic that I may be interested in pursuing further. <http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/8752>

The last article that I found I think will be the most useful to me during my research. The project is entitled: “Intramural Beginnings”. The study reviews major developments in the intramural program over the years including the number of registered teams, major competitions, and expansions of facilities. Since the rowing team was only formed about four years ago and just started becoming competitive this year, I think that I will be able to add on to the research that has already been done regarding this topic. <http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/1868>

Reflect:

As I stated in the beginning of this process, I had no idea what ethnographic research required and everything that I was going to accomplish this semester. I believed that it was just going to be like any other research process, where you do research primarily in the library and do not get connected to the information. However, I learned through the readings provided in class and film clips shown how the ethnographic process works. First, I did do some initial research in order to gain a better understanding of the particular subject I chose. Doing this project allowed me to discover the Student Life and Culture Achieves on campus. If I ever need to find any information about the history of the University of Illinois again, I now know where I can find it. Following my research about rowing, I got into the true ethnographic research. I got very involved in my research and my subjects. I interviewed an athlete on the team and the coach as well. This allowed me to get to know some of the people that make up the rowing team on campus. After doing this, I participated in one of the practices. Taking part in the practice allowed me to feel how a true crew athlete lives their life, from waking up at 5:00 am for practice to going through an entire day of classes. Doing this ethnographic research project gave me the opportunity to learn a new type of research technique and connect with my topic.

Recommendations:

I hope that students will wish to pursue the topic of women’s rowing at the University of Illinois in the coming years after viewing my particular EUI project. I feel very lucky that I was able to

document the beginning years of this growing club sport for future generations to view. It is necessary for the university to continue archiving the rowing team's development of the sport on campus and their results from the races. It is my hope that the coaches will also take initiative to send in their results to the university so that they can be viewed by students and faculty. I began documenting the University of Illinois women's rowing team, and hope that it aids others in the future with whatever type of research they may choose to pursue about our great university.