The Philadelphia Inquirer (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) · Fri, May 9, 1997 · Main Edition · Page 155
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For last time, family returns rower to his beloved river

ROWER from B1

missing the gold by one second — they announced the marriage and moved in together.

He worked at First Pennsylvania, she at Fidelity Bank. After work, they would walk from Center City to Boathouse Row.

So he could coach.

And she could sit by the river and wait.

Through the years, Bayer coached high school oarsmen from Penn Charter, Northeast Catholic and Phillips Exeter Academy; Drexel University rowers; and members of the Pennsylvania Barge Club.

Ten years of that was enough for his wife, who was an athletic woman. She had been bugging him to let her row and he had been putting her off.

Then, she saw Lovey Kohut push off in a single.

"My eyes bulged," Mrs. Bayer said.

"Who was that girl?" she demanded.

Her husband dismissed it. It was the boyfriend's boat.

Didn't matter.

Ernestine Bayer now knew that girls *did* row. She looked up Kohut and together they pulled in nearly 50 young women, collected dues, and rented a clubhouse on the river.

That was the start of the Philadelphia Girls Rowing Club.

"There were men who would not even speak to us," said Mrs. Bayer, the club's first president. "They would not even speak to *him*."

But once she was on the river, her husband didn't try to stop her and even coached the girls' club at times.

Still, it wasn't easy, Mrs. Bayer said.

For a long time.

Barbara DePena Hoe of Chestnut Hill said women still lacked support — and the equipment to compete — when she rowed with the girls' club in the late '60s.

They needed Ernie Bayer.

He was their coach and when they came up short on shells or oars, "he was calling up favors. ... He was very plugged in. ... He was really able to call his friends."

Bayer's appeals were "very quiet; it was very subtle," Hoe said.

Coach Bayer was soft-spoken and gentle, she said. He trusted hard work, believing there were no shortcuts to winning.

"We went out to Seattle, Washington, in '66 and just blew them away," Hoe said of the club's trip to the national women's championships.

Tina Bayer, as his daughter is now known, said her father was a "fine-arts coach. ... He saw things other coaches didn't see."

The youngest Bayer, who rowed for the girls' club along with Hoe, said her father would study a boat, rearrange its oarsmen — and shave seconds off the crew's time.

By the time he died, Bayer had held every post in the U.S. Rowing Association, serving 45 years as treasurer for the organization, which governs American rowing. He was commodore of the Schuylkill Navy, a confederation of clubs on Boathouse Row, and acted as an official and team manager at various international competitions. For 31 years, he was the chief referee at the Dad Vail Regatta.

"He never talked about what he wanted us to do when he died," Tina Bayer said. She and her mother decided he belonged with the river.

"Wouldn't it be fun to take Dad for one last row?" the youngest Bayer said.

Right after the Dad Vail.

When he left the regatta, he had received a silver bowl inscribed this way: Dad Vail Regatta Chief Referee, 1954-1985, Ernest Bayer.

At 6 p.m. tomorrow, the two remaining Ernies will carry the bowl with them as they push off from the University Barge Club for "just a little paddle, not a long row," his daughter said.

With a flotilla behind, mother and daughter will glide along Boathouse Row, dip their fingers into the silver bowl and send Ernie Bayer home.

Philadelphia Online

■ For online information on rowing in Philadelphia, visit Boathouse Row, http://www.phillynews.com/packages/boat/

In this 1927 photo of the Pennsylvania Barge Club, taken in front of the Art Museum, Ernest Bayer is second from right.

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