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Oil tanker managers get satisfaction from simple rowing shells

You think you have it rough in the morning, rolling out of bed and sleepwalking into the bathroom to get ready for work?

Try bouncing out of bed before dawn and joining six or seven of your co-workers in a vigorous rowing session on the Norwalk River on a nippy spring morning.

That's exactly what about a dozen employees of Heidmar Inc. in Darien have been doing, learning that employees who row together also pull together in the workplace.

For them, the early morning exercise, under the watchful eye of Yan Vengerovskiy, owner of Water Sports Center in Norwalk, has become something to anticipate, akin to an after-work golf league.

Rowing provides other benefits, too, including healthy, strenuous exercise and practice at team interaction.

"It's a great exercise. You go to work and you feel great," says Per Heidenreich, chairman and chief executive officer of Heidmar, who has been rowing for six years, including competitively in regional events. "I'm in a better physical state than I've been in 20 or 30 years."

Heidenreich was the prime moving behind the effort, and seeing how he has benefited, many of his employees have followed him to the river. Some participate two or three days a week, while others come every workday morning.

The Heidmar employees are improving in their rowing techniques and learning to work together, says Vengerovskiy, who rowed in his native Ukraine before coming to the United States in 1992.

He watched them closely early Wednesday morning, following upstream in his little homemade dinghy as they rowed under the railroad bridge near his Goldstein Place dock. It was perfect rowing weather: calm, cool and cloudy with barely a ripple on the river. In all, they rowed more than 5 miles.

Vengerovskiy used his megaphone to coach his charges as they plied the river in the sleek yellow shell, "X-Factor."

"John, keep your balance please," he shouted in an encouraging tone, directing his attention to John Logan, rowing in the bow of the eight-person shell. Logan, who has the job of steering the craft with his feet, is the human resources manager and office administrator at Heidmar.

The tone of voice Vengerovskiy uses may be somewhat different than the tone he employs when coaching the New Canaan High School rowing team, which is heading to a national competition next month.

"When these guys started, they couldn't do anything. They weren't flexible. Now, John is a dedicated rower," Vengerovskiy said, still closely watching the shell's progress past the mucky banks, and industrial sites, small marinas and condominiums.

It was low tide, and the shell ran aground near the east bank. The crew worked together to push free before heading back to the dock.

"A little longer reach. Check your elbows at the end," yelled Vengerovskiy, continuing to coach even as the shell returned.

Removing the 54-foot shell from the water is a team effort, and everyone takes part.

Heidmar's Laura Houser, the lone woman in the boat, enjoyed the vigorous workout.

"It's hard. It's really hard. It takes more coordination than I thought. I started last year. I like being out on the water, and it's fun," said Houser, the company's assistant controller.

She's a veteran compared with Ranbir Thukral, a systems analyst, who has been rowing only two months.

"It's a good experience. It's a heavenly feeling being out early in the morning. It's good exercise," said Thukral, who rows two days a week. "It's a team activity, and it helps at work."

Logan, who started rowing in April 2001, recalled enduring some snowy mornings on the river.

"There are days I wonder why I'm out there, but I really enjoy being out in the early morning and getting exercise. I try to get out there four days a week," he said.

X-Factor is one of 40 shells that Vengerovskiy has accumulated since he started his business in 1996. The Maritime Rowing Club, which the center operates, has 50 members. Several are family members who row as teams.

"There are no superstars in rowing. It's the team," Vengerovskiy said.

Privately owned Heidmar Inc. was formed earlier this year to oversee subsidiaries and manage strategic growth. Heidmar's Heidenreich Marine unit manages oil tankers.

Heidmar, which has offices in the United States, England, Singapore and Venezuela, employs 65 people, about 40 of whom work at the Heidenreich Marine headquarters in Darien.

Heidenreich operates a global fleet of 50 tankers in the 35,000- to 70,000-ton range, which deliver oil products and crude oil to refineries, distributors, bunker suppliers and power stations worldwide