

This year is the first year ever that both the boys' and girls' rowing teams have traveled across the Atlantic to compete in the Henley Women's Regatta and the Henley Royal Regatta. These are the most prestigious rowing regattas in the world. For many rowers winning at Henley ranks with an Olympic medal. The Henley Royal Regatta started in 1839. Phillips Academy first competed in 1959 but has competed less than 10 times with the last being 2006. The Henley Women's Regatta was started in 1988 in response to the huge growth in women's rowing.

Phillips academy has only competed once in 2007. The regattas are held in a small town near London called Henley on Thames.

The school's criteria for attendance is that the senior varsity boats have to be the best eligible boats in New England plus there has to be volunteer support to financially sponsor the trip. This year the Phillips Academy girl's crew won the New England Championships and the boy's crew were second in the New England Championship to a boat that contained rowers too old to compete at Henley where they age limit high school rowers to under 19 years old.

So with the top two boats meeting the criteria for a post season trip and parents and past students prepared to help with the cost of the trip, the school agreed. The decision was to send one eight and one four for both boys and girls. Planning to position almost 30 athletes with boats and oars on a river 3000 miles away in a small number of weeks is a major challenge. We called up help from everyone we could find in the UK. A retired teacher living in the UK helped the team connect with a boat club in Henley that agreed to rent us boats and allow our crews to use the facilities of their boat for pre-regatta training.

The team signed up for a local regatta at Reading Town to have some English race experience prior to Henley. This regatta was about 10 miles upstream from Henley. Without a means to transport the boat it was decided to row the 10 miles upriver the day before the regatta.

The river journey included navigating 4 locks. Coach Hurley was supposed to cycle ahead to operate the lock gates as the boats passed through. Sadly he was waylaid by a herd of cows and the boat arrived at a lock without their lock operator. Local members of the public came to the rescue and closed and opened the lock gates.

The following day we competed in the Reading Amateur Regatta. These regattas consist of two boat races with the winner continuing to the next level. Each race was 1500 meters or about 5 minutes of flat out agony. Our girls' four made it to the final where they lost to Marlow RC, our girls' eight lost the semi-final to Reading University. Our boys' four lost in the heats to Canford School and our boys' eight lost in the semi-final to Eton College. An excellent effort that blew the jetlag completely away. After a nights rests they had to row the 10 miles back down river to Henley.

After this introduction to English rowing our girls focused on preparation for the Henley Women's Regatta. Henley is a small slumbering English town with eccentric river boats dotting the banks until the regattas participants start to arrive. Slowing more and more exotic river craft arrive on the banks. The grannies with their big handbags, along the main shopping streets are joined by tall striding bright faced eager girls who look like they could lift their boyfriends with one arm. The rowers are arriving in town. The restaurants that serve copious amounts of pasta are now crowded with these hungry visitors.

On the day of the regatta the banks of the river are packed with racks of boats and over 1500 competitors from all over the world. First hurdle for the Andover girls four was a time trial to reduce 19 entrants to 8 that would race towards the final. Our girls exceeded expectations by coming home in 4th place to earn a spot in the last eight for the quarterfinals. In the race against the Godolphin School the English school accelerated off the start hoping to crush the spirit of their overseas opponents. The Andover girls proved tough prey as they rowed hard back into the race and in the last 500 meters showed their gutsy strength as they pulled even and then into the lead just before the finish line.

Our eight had a slightly easier path. Our girls had a bye in the heats and then met Lady E Holles School in the quarter final. Our girls had a good start and commanded the race winning with open water.

Our four was schedule to meet Henley RC in the semi-final. Sadly one of our rowers had suffered an injury in the hard fought Quarterfinals and went on the water for the semi-finals but was in such pain that the coaches informed the official they we had to withdraw. The officials gave the boat the right to row down the course to cheers and applause for the assembled spectators all along the banks. Their opponent went on to win the final.

Our opponent in the eight semi-finals was Headington School. This boat contained 6 members of the UK junior national team. Headington took off from the start but our girls hung on to keep themselves in the race. Headington rowed with great style and strength but our boat mad them work for every inch of lead. At the finish there was about a boat length between the two shells. Headington School went on to win the final of the event.

We a celebratory dinner after the regatta and the girls ended their season with great pride in having made the semi-finals in both their events at the Henley Women's Regatta. The Organizers of the regatta thanked our girls for the spirited competition and hoped we would return soon.

The boys are still in Henley training for the Henley Royal Regatta from July 1st to July 5th.