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The DNA of a Rower

Chris Kerber was one of those guys who attacked every workout, every race.



I've known Chris Kerber, the subject of Jen Whiting's excellent profile this issue, since 2002. But I've known who he was for much longer—we were on opposing national teams back in the 1990s; I raced for Canada, Kerber for the U.S.

For me, Kerber perfectly embodied the brashness of our American rivals. He was confident, self-assured, and—perhaps most annoying of all—very fast. On a U.S. lightweight team loaded with talent—Teti, Kamen, Schneider, among them—Kerber stood out. He held two world titles, in the light four and light eight, but just as impressive was his work ethic.

Kerber was one of those athletes you could tell attacked every workout, every race. And while he took some lumps during a long competitive career—who doesn't?—it only added to the deep reservoir of experience he could draw from at the starting line. Kerber continues to tap into that experience today as the varsity lightweight men's coach at Cornell.

Success is never a given in collegiate coaching, no matter one's pedigree. Often, in fact, what worked for you as an individual doesn't work in the launch. But with his success in Ithaca—two undefeated seasons and a boatload of coaching accolades—Kerber is an exception to that rule.

I've gotten to know Kerber in the years since our competitive careers ended, and it turns out he's nothing like the brash athlete I'd made him out to be. The respect I had for him, however, was not misplaced. "It's a little bit trite," says Kerber, "but when you dig down into the DNA of a rower, they know how to endure things." □

THE INNOVATOR

TWO-TIME WORLD CHAMPION CHRIS KERBER KNOWS HOW TO GO FAST. NOW AS LIGHTWEIGHT MEN'S COACH AT CORNELL, HE'S FIGURED OUT HOW TO MAKE OTHERS GO FAST TOO.

STORY BY Jen WHITING
PHOTOS BY Patrick SHANAHAN &
SPORTGRAPHICS.COM





PHOTO: PATRICK SHANAHAN

It's the norm in rowing. You've felt it in the equipment that's evolved during your career as a rower. You've watched it come from your coach as she changed the patterns of the workouts during an early-morning practice. You've witnessed it at regattas, as timing tents and data and real-time stats have become commonplace. The sport wouldn't grow, and records wouldn't be broken, without it: innovation.

It was this word that kept coming back to me throughout my time talking with Chris Kerber, the Cornell varsity lightweight men's coach. Maybe it's because a crew that's capped at an average weight of 155 pounds has to be innovative to eke out every ounce of competitiveness. Or maybe it's because that's just how Chris Kerber thinks.

In the past two years, Kerber has led his Big Red lightweight men's crew to undefeated seasons, including two national championships, back-to-back Ivy League championships, and back-to-back EARC Sprints titles.

While his crews were dominating on the water, he was quietly earning accolades as the IRA Coach of the Year (2014 and 2015), EARC Lightweight Coach of the Year (2014 and 2015), and Ivy League Lightweight Coach of the Year (2015). What is it that has made Kerber so effective at coaching

at the Henley Royal Regatta, the Pan American Games, and the U.S. national championships.

After his retirement from competitive rowing in 2000, Kerber joined the crew of rowers, coaches, and event organizers preparing for the first World Rowing Cup in the United States, at Mercer Lake, just outside of Princeton, New Jersey. Says Kerber, "It was an exciting time as we transformed this training destination [the Finn Caspersen Rowing Center] into a world-class racing venue. I worked alongside many of my retired and semi-retired teammates and put in hundreds of hours with FISA officials and visiting athletes."

Kerber and the preparation crew installed a new starting platform, set up timing stations, floated and anchored course markers, and built boat racks. "When you have that many people working on a project, it's amazing. I worked alongside Fred Schoch of the Head of the Charles, who was brought in as an event consultant." Schoch has served as executive director of the Charles since 1991. "Fred must have recognized my 'crash-helmet' style work ethic at the time and hired me to come join his Head of the Charles team two years later."

As we talk, I find myself waiting for Kerber to dive into his experiences as a coach, but he doesn't, not now, or at any point until we get to the job offer he received from Cornell in 2008. What he tells me, instead, is how he spent four years as the assistant director of the Head of the Charles Regatta, honing his skills as an

administrator, event planner, and organizer.

"The post-9/11 and early Iraq war era were some of the most financially challenging years at the Charles. And this, I would say, forced us to look at the regatta differently. In the end, this created some great innovations and rewarding outcomes as far as 'production value.'"

I stop Kerber and ask for an example. He cites the creation of Reunion Village, the enormous viewing and gathering tent positioned right at the crux of the race,

which allows connections to be formed between parents and alumni.

Kerber's memory of his time at the Head of the Charles is peppered with a clear spark of enthusiasm, as if his "crash-helmet" work ethic can't be satisfied without huge challenges. "When you hire a rower, you're not hiring them to put in hours. You're hiring them to put energy into a project, to put themselves into it." He pauses for a moment. "The work environment [at the Charles] aligned with what I liked: rowing and working—hard and creatively—to achieve results."

"I think it all comes down to doing something you're passionate about—ask why (or why not) and take action. Start with the goal in mind, allow passion to overcome fatigue, and be willing to figure things out along the way."

"Allow passion to overcome fatigue?" I ask.

Again, he returns to his time as an athlete. "When you're striving for a goal, you don't feel yourself fatiguing. Or maybe you do, but you know how to put it to the side." Kerber moves to the next chapter of his career to keep the explanation going.

"After the Charles, my wife and I moved to Portland, Maine." Kerber spent the next several years in what he calls a "lean-and-mean marketing firm," working directly with clients on sponsorship and event management. "I took my Head of the Charles skills on the road with me. Every colleague I had there was an athlete. That was an exciting time. The amount of energy that we poured into a client, the integration of our own energy, that's what made it work."

It is only now, halfway into our conversation, that I begin to see why Kerber was uniquely qualified for his coaching position when he took it eight years ago, and why he has been so successful. It wasn't because he had already coached lightweight men's crew, because he hadn't. It wasn't just because he was an elite rower himself. Kerber's ability to pour energy into a project, to lead others while encouraging them to contribute, and to bring an event to its starting moment—with every detail and relationship and supporter taken care of—perfectly positioned him to bring a crew of 50 student-athletes to the height of their athletic abilities.

Cornell University sits atop a hill overlooking Cayuga Lake, one of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. Leading into the lake is Cayuga Inlet, which has a

"Our program is successful because we demand accountability from each other and we put the best possible support systems in place to help our athletes be successful."

—CHRIS KERBER

lightweight men? As we talked about this, I realized that Kerber's story—and the answer to my question—started decades ago, as most successful careers do.

Kerber rowed as an undergraduate at Temple University, earning four years of medals at the Dad Vail Regatta on Temple's home course, the Schuylkill River. After college, he spent seven years rowing for the U.S. national team, in the lightweight four, eight, and quad. He was twice a world champion and won numerous medals



PHOTO: SPORTGRAPHICS.COM

Previous page: Coach Kerber during practice.
Above: The Cornell men's lightweight eight.

4,000-meter rowable waterway. Cornell's boathouse sits on the northern shore of the inlet and houses the three Cornell rowing teams: the men's heavyweight and women's and men's lightweight squads. I ask Kerber if he thinks there's something about Cornell's program that is a natural fit for his coaching style.

"I don't think I have a particular style of coaching that is too different from my peers. I do think the environment of athlete development we create for our race-day opportunities is particular to the Cornell crews."

As I take notes, something sticks in my mind, catching my attention. I look back over his quote. "...our race-day opportunities..." There it is again, that sense Kerber has of managing an event as a total package, prepared for the best experience an attendee—or in this case, an athlete—can have. As Kerber explains his coaching approach, and how he works with student athletes who need to continually manage their weight when in season, I can see how his management skills play a large role in his coaching.

"In the last eight years we've tried many things. As a consequence, we've hit on a system of doing things here that works

for the type of student-athlete we attract and develop. Also, with the boathouse operating as a single unit, the three teams provide a wealth of resources, critical thinking and innovative training and testing opportunities that enable us to support each other."

Kerber explains how his athletes respond to the expectations of two back-to-back undefeated seasons. "Expectations are higher, new standards are set, and the new athletes in the leadership roles take on, and even relish in, the physical and mental challenges. Every year we figure out something new, teach or train differently. We tweak things a bit to keep it stimulating for us."

I ask him if he's the same coach he was before the success of the past two seasons. "I don't think I could say I'm the same coach, no." He collects his thoughts. "The athletes' and team's demands are different. You tweak something—your approach, the words you're using, the relationships you have with others. It's maturity, that's all."

Our conversation grows silent for a moment and I broach the subject I've been wanting to ask all along: How do you innovate enough to achieve that extra bit of speed from a fixed amount of body mass? At



the highest level, when every crew you're racing against weighs the same as yours, how do you get those extra inches on the course?

"I've seen a lot," he says. "I raced for nearly a decade as a lightweight. My experience in lightweight rowing, combined

with the resources that an athletic department at a world-class university can provide, creates a very powerful set of tools. There are no shenanigans, there's nothing emotional with me when it comes to weight management. Our program is successful because we demand accountability from

each other and we put the best possible support systems in place to help our athletes be successful."

I probe for examples of the support systems he's talking about. "We have a really, really good nutritionist—Clint Wattenberg—that the guys identify with. That's important. Clint has a foot in our health services department that creates a synergy for body mass efficiency management. He's at the nexus of supporting not only the athletes but the coaches. Clint was an All-American wrestler. If anyone knows about weight management, it's an All-American wrestler."

Kerber goes on, "Another example is our chocolate milk machine." Kerber explains how the Cornell Dairy supplies chocolate milk, made from the cows just two miles away, to many of the athletic teams at the university. "Having a dairy

"I believe our rowers have always known of my successes as an athlete, but it wasn't until recently that I was truly able to communicate and align what I learned in my years on the national team to my student-athletes."

—CHRIS KERBER



Left: Cornell's lightweight eight. **Right:** The men's lightweight eight celebrates their win by throwing Coach Kerber into the lake.



on-site made it really, really simple to pull that off. That's a system fueling our athletes, that's the innovation behind it. When we started talking about this with them, they didn't make chocolate milk in the volume we needed, but now they do.

"I don't have all the answers," he says. "I have a very no-nonsense attitude toward this. I try to foster that type of approach."

As the morning light changes, I can sense Kerber is eager to get back to his team, but I put one more question on the table, "Is your success as a rower known by your athletes?" I ask.

"I believe our rowers have always known of my successes as an athlete, but it wasn't until recently that I was truly able to communicate and align what I learned in my years on the national team to my student-athletes.

"I tell a lot of stories. I always felt I

was an average athlete, and if Dr. Fritz Hagerman [a physiologist who tested and consulted with every Olympic crew between 1972 and 2012] were still alive he would back me up with all of my average VO₂ numbers. I did have a number of great successes in the big arena of rowing, for sure. But I talk more about the failures, the missed opportunities or maligned attitudes, how to navigate around those, and how to draw lessons from the associated outcomes. But mostly it's about how these rowing lessons and metaphors apply quite succinctly to life, relationships, and careers after collegiate rowing ends."

Kerber stays with the conversation for one more beat, making sure he's said what he needs to. "It's a little bit trite, but when you dig down into the DNA of a rower, they know how to endure things." ■