

Essence Coaching

By Charles S. Stuart

We don't coach crew...we teach your daughter desire and personal leadership!

"Dad...this is Coach Cliff. Coach Cliff, this is my Dad." With that I met the young man who would be my daughter Julie's high school freshman crew coach. I didn't know anything about crew...other than it involves rowing a boat (a shell I came to learn). And, my "football player" mentality at first thought "Crew? Well...I guess it is a good way to keep Julie busy. But, what will she learn but 'row, row, row your boat?'" How wrong I was!

It didn't take long to see the difference in Julie. Her already "inbred" focus had begun to sharpen. She felt pride in her work ethic and her progress. But, the real impact of what she was learning from Coach Cliff didn't hit me until I spent the weekend in Philadelphia with the team at the Stotesbury Regatta.

For three days I watched Coach Cliff push, pull, herd and help as Julie and her boatmates dealt with their first "big city" experience, as well as their first "big time" regatta. What I saw made me into a believer. Julie seemed to change right before my eyes as I watched Coach Cliff talk not just about their technique or conditioning – but of their heart...showing them with the fire in his eyes that they could "get out early and dare the other boats to pass them...dare them!" Coach Cliff set an expectation that I thought, at first, was pretty high even though they were the State of Florida champions. Come in first? How? This was my little girl.

When race time came, I saw Julie and her boatmates change from little girls to "we can do it" athletes. In fact, as they took the water my thought was, "I pity the other girls who might get in the way." Through years of competitive athletics, I had seen nothing more exciting than that boat launch. It brought me to tears.

When they returned as victors in their heat, Coach Cliff called them together and spoke quietly of their effort and success. Then he said, "Tomorrow, you row for the championship. There is nothing more we need to say. You know the plan...get out front and dare them to pass you. Good job, girls!" A tingle went up my spine – not just from his words but from seeing Julie as she nodded in agreement...knowing she was able, capable and confident.

I wish the story ended with a victory in the championship – but it doesn't. They came in second. There was, however, a victory. Julie rowed 1,450 of the 1,500 meters with her feet out of her shoes.

In a crew boat (shell) the rowers' feet are held in place by shoes bolted to the boat. This helps them recover during each stroke as they pull against the shoes. But, Julie's shoes broke at the start and, rather than "give up", Julie had to hold her feet in the heel of the shoes with her legs and pull even harder with each stroke. To see someone work hard...so hard she falls from exhaustion...and cries from the emotional release of total commitment...is something to behold.

Silly me. I thought Coach Cliff was teaching crew. Little did I know that he is teaching life. Does it matter the cost (in time, inconvenience, money) to give a child this opportunity to learn and grow so much? Nope. Not hardly.

Charles S. Stuart

4260 Conway Place Circle • Orlando, Florida 32812 • 407.240.6569 • Charlie@CharlieStuart.com

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