

Fall 1973

GIRLS FIRST BOAT (0-I)

Bow	Marcia Curtis "Misha" Prudden '74
2	Charmion Perry Bengston '74
3	Patricia Hunt '74
4	Heidi Ann Dorsel '74 (Co-Captain)
5	Kimball Clayton Torrey '74 (Co-Captain)
6	Valerie Marsh '77
7	Renn Qualls Beyer '76
Stroke	Devon Sinclair Ainsworth '76
Coxswain	Diana Lynne DeMarco '75



Lizanne Thatcher Sutherland '76, Nicole Van Leighton '76, Bengston, Hunt, Beyer, Marsh, Torrey, Dorsel, Prudden,

First Boat Shell: *Rothermere II*: (Pocock, 1967)

Coach: William Hartwell Perry Jr.

Assistant Coach: Stewart Gray MacDonald Jr.

Manager/Launch Driver: Mark Calder McWhinney '75

Manager: Mayo Carrington Brown '74

Yale Freshman Women ahead of Kent (disqualified after an out-of-boat crab)



The Women’s Movement would spark one of the greatest social upheavals of the twentieth century, and one cannot possibly underestimate the sea change that introducing Girls Crew in particular represented for Kent School. From its very beginning, rowing at Kent had always been an all-male bastion.

As an example . . . **William Boulton Bates Jr. ’55**, 1955 First Boat 4-oar, the son and namesake of 1929 First Boat 5-oar **William Boulton Bates ’29**: “In the 1920s, my grandfather and my grandmother would drive up from Morristown, New Jersey, to visit my father . . . and my grandmother had been a suffragette, but she, like all other women, was not allowed to get out of the car and see her two sons and her two nephews—*couldn’t get out of the car!*—by order of Father Sill.”

The Kent Girls School had begun operations in 1960, but it had intentionally been situated geographically separate, miles north up the steep Skiff Mountain Road.

The two schools were still almost entirely separate in the fall of 1973.

But by this time, the call for girls rowing from alumni, alumnae, trustees, staff, and from the girls themselves and their parents had become impossible to ignore. The order to act came from the highest level of the school.

Mark Calder McWhinney ’75:

It is no secret that Head Rowing Coach Hart Perry had

resisted the inevitable for years—even the Kent News called his attitude “chauvinistic and skeptical”—but with women’s rowing already on the 1976 Olympic schedule, the cultural tide soon swept the school along and swept Hart’s qualms aside, and I think it is safe to say that he would be fully on board by the end of the decade.

I had hurt my knee in hockey and could no longer play interscholastic soccer, so I was thrilled when Hart asked me, a Fifth Form boy, to be his manager / launch driver for the girls during their first season.

Under Hart’s supervision, the girls were allowed to do their rowing thing only in the fall when the Kent boys didn’t row. The first practice took place at 4:05 p.m. on September 13, 1973, on the Girls School Campus Pond on top of Skiff Mountain, a metaphorical world away from the boys’ boathouse on the Housatonic.

Lizanne Thatcher “Tiz” Sutherland ’76: “In the big picture of the first years of the girls program, *I believe that it was the girls themselves who played a role in winning Hart over!* Our increasingly serious dedication and focus, our coming to love the sport as much as he did, I think that made a huge difference. We fed off of him . . . but he fed off of us, too.”

Coverage by the *Kent News* would be minimal that first fall. **Kimball Clayton Torrey ’74** and **Heidi Ann Dorsel ’74** acted as spokespersons and were recognized as co-captains by their teammates and by Hart, but not by the school.

However, the program was mandated to be serious from the get-go, with an anticipated four-race fall schedule in future years against Yale, Middletown High School, Roosevelt High School, and the Head of the Charles. Twenty-one candidates showed up on that first day, and the progression for 1973 would be from wherries on the pond into the tank in the basement of the Science Building on the boys campus and finally into eights on



Hart coaching from the shore of the pond

the Housatonic.

Mark: “In the beginning, girls rowing was officially classified as the ‘Girls’ Boating Club,’ and Hart would soon have them rowing out of the Old [Third] Boathouse [see 1923] on Schaghticoke Road using very old, very heavy shells. One advantage was these were easier to balance. The *major* disadvantage was that it took sixteen girls to carry them the 100 or so yards from the Old Boathouse to the dock where Macedonia Brook flows into the Housatonic.”

Tiz in 2020, while she was coaching the Westover School girls crew: “I do remember the immense weight of those old often-patched and repaired boats. We all came to the conclusion that they gave us the worst boats because they didn’t think we’d be smart enough not to put our feet through the bottom. The only thing I was embarrassed about was that it took so many of us to carry them. I do smile about that whenever I watch my own rowers today carrying our little four. If I see them laboring, I tell them, ‘You have *no idea!*’ ”



The first day in eights

Torrey and **Dorsel** in the *Kent News*, describing the first day in eights and what followed:

With spectators cheering us on, we greased up our oars, rolled up our sleeves, and trudged down to the water’s edge with an “eight-woman shell” balanced precariously on our shoulders. When two boats had been launched, Mr. Perry and assistant coach Mark McWhinney instructed us as we made what seemed to be a futile attempt at getting it together.

After emerging from the Housie discouraged and brow-beaten, we were surprised with the encouragement that ensued. For the next three weeks, Mr. Perry was engaged in a constant effort to find the right combination of girls for the First Boat. We had a race scheduled with the Yale Freshman Girls’ Crew . . .

Meanwhile, we were being mocked and ridiculed by many of the unbelieving male faculty (along with the majority of the young boys at the B.S.). They were sure we were going to be “blown off the water” by Yale. And much as we hate to admit it, they were right . . .

We lined up for the 1000m race, and with the sound of the familiar Êtes-vous prêt? Partez! we were off! Our First Boat won the start as we pulled out at 38 strokes per minute, remarkable for an inexperienced boat. Five hundred meters into the race, our First Boat suffered a setback as our stroke “caught a crab” and decided to go for a quick dip underneath the rigger. Although not hurt, she emerged from the river quite shaken up and cold. Yale went on to win the race.

And so Kent Girls Crew was aptly “christened” and proceeded on a trajectory which would reap National Championships and several appearances at Henley well before the Kent Rowing Centenary year of 2022.

First Boat 5-oar and Co-Captain **Heidi Dorsel:**

I am not sure anyone took us too seriously. We were just very excited to be part of something new! The entire team was known for a lot of laughs. Thankfully, Hart Perry kept his sense of humor because we had no idea what we were doing.

If Mr. Perry was not happy that he was forced to start a girls’ team, we never sensed it. He was great to all of us. I do remember that he wrote a heartfelt individual note to each member of the team at the end of the season.

Obviously, I am a big fan.

Hart had already recruited two-time Olympian **Stewart Gray MacDonald** in September 1973 to join his boys rowing staff. A graduate of Belmont Hill School and the University of Wisconsin, Stewart had been coxswain of the 1968 Olympic Coxed-Pair (5th) and the 1972 Olympic Selection Camp Coxed-Four (5th).

MacDonald:

I recall that Hart was totally committed to the girls that first fall. His heart was in the sport, male or female, skilled or not so much. He cared because that's just who he was.

He gave that first band of girls absolutely everything that I would see him give the boys in the spring. He would grumble to me occasionally, but I now know that it was more theatrical than genuine. His only occasional resentment was not that girls were now involved in the sport at Kent; it was that he had been ordered to make it happen.

*In the Athletic Department order of things, KSBC was more than rowing, more than sport. That is why Hart wanted the girls to have their own separate identity as **Kent Girls Boat Club, KGBC**, with a blade design distinct from that of KSBC.*

First Boat 4-oar and Co-Captain **Kim Torrey** was also captain of the softball team. Her father had served for decades as the Hotchkiss School boys' ice hockey coach, and she had grown up on the Hotchkiss campus, all boys at the time.

Marcia Lawrence '76 wrote a slightly fictionalized recounting of the girls' first fall rowing seasons, and it was published in the *Kent News* on June 11, 1975:

I was privileged to call Hart Perry "uncle." He and my dad went back to the 1950s when they met at Dartmouth College.

My attendance at Kent was a key turning point in my life, and Uncle Pep shared much of it with me. He was a safe port in any teenaged storm. His booming voice and twinkling eye were comforts to me, an insecure girl far from home.

Uncle Pep loved rowing, and I loved Uncle Pep, so when he invited the girls of Kent to form a crew, I tried out for the team. I survived as a member of that team and thrived at Kent.

I can still hear him at daily practices. We'd launch our shell, get out into the Housatonic current, and wait. His voice would rumble out in that age-old call, sort of singsong, "Balance the boat!"

. . . pause . . .

"Balance the boat."

. . . pause . . .

And when we were balanced, I waited for it, that unique, booming, soft, powerful, controlled, almost caressing command, so full of joy and confidence:

"Here we go, Kent . . ."

And we'd plunge in our oars and take the first bite of the river for that day's practice.

I love you, Uncle Pep, and I'll never forget all that you did for me.

