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# Husky Power

*Michael Callahan and the University of Washington*

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t was all to be decided on Lake Mercer. The faintest hint of a crosswind played delicately on the water as the sun watched, suffocated by a white sky. Six boats sat out on the water, dwarfed not only by the setting but by the magnitude of the challenge ahead of them. They readied their oars, whispering time-worn murmurs of encouragement. As the starter blared out the names of the

competing Universities, the contrast between the dispassion of the announcer and the gravity of the event was at once evident. Attention. A sharp intake of breath; silence from the coxswains. It was all to be decided on Lake Mercer.

No crew in the history of the IRA regatta has won the Varsity Eight title, the premier event of the regatta, five times in a row. This is perhaps testament to the intensely competitive nature of the collegiate rowing system – it's rare to see one University show total domination for more than a couple of years at a time.

This is, however exactly the feat that the University of Washington's Crew – the 'Huskies' – set out to achieve at the start of this year. The nickname conjures images of ferocity, intensity and →



*“The Huskies conjure images of ferocity, intensity and deep loyalty – the strength of the pack.”*

deep loyalty - the strength of the pack. It is perhaps these qualities that have allowed the Huskies to become the force they are today; IRA champions four consecutive times since 2011, Pac-12 champions five consecutive times, and holders of various team cups at regattas across the country. Chasing a fifth consecutive IRA title requires incredible strength in depth, a facet of quality that the Huskies possess in abundance.

Above all else however is the 'shaping influence' that moulds the crew into a boat of champions; the influence that hones and streamlines raw ferocity into fast, effective rowing; the figure who takes a group of novices and transforms them into oarsmen who are prepared to lay their lives on the line for their crew. For the University of Washington, Michael Callahan is that influence.

Callahan's history with the Huskies dates back long before he took over as Head Coach - his first experience



of the Huskies was as a high-school recruit. Embarking for that first time onto Lake Washington was particularly poignant for Callahan. “The University of Washington campus has been special to me since I first got here... I went out there and onto Lake Washington, and I loved the atmosphere”. His days spent rowing for UW saw him ultimately take on the role of captain and commodore of the team in 1996. From here, he went on to row in the

national team, and in 2004 was made a spare in the U.S. Olympic Team, where his attitudes towards the sport were shaped fundamentally through coaching by Mike Teti. Teti would later speak with poignant admiration for Callahan. “He was the complete package. He was strong, rowed well, had a good attitude, spirited, tough. People like that generally do pretty well in rowing”.

The complete package. It's a central conceit in rowing, the idea of all-round





**Left to right** A crew warm up in the early hours; athletes boat from the UW base; Callahan from the coaching launch.



brilliance that any oarsman aspires to; great physical strength, smooth and efficient technique, an ability to lead. It's also a conceit that Callahan has attempted to inspire in his own crews, throughout his coaching career. Callahan began coaching at UW in 2004 as a freshman coach, and quickly realized that, in drawing on his own qualities as an oarsman to instill in his crews, he could create his own complete package out of the young recruits

eager to begin their rowing journey at the University of Washington. In 2008, he was made head men's coach of the Husky crew by Bob Ernst, the Director of Rowing at UW, who has always been staunch in his support for Callahan. "He was a great captain. When he →

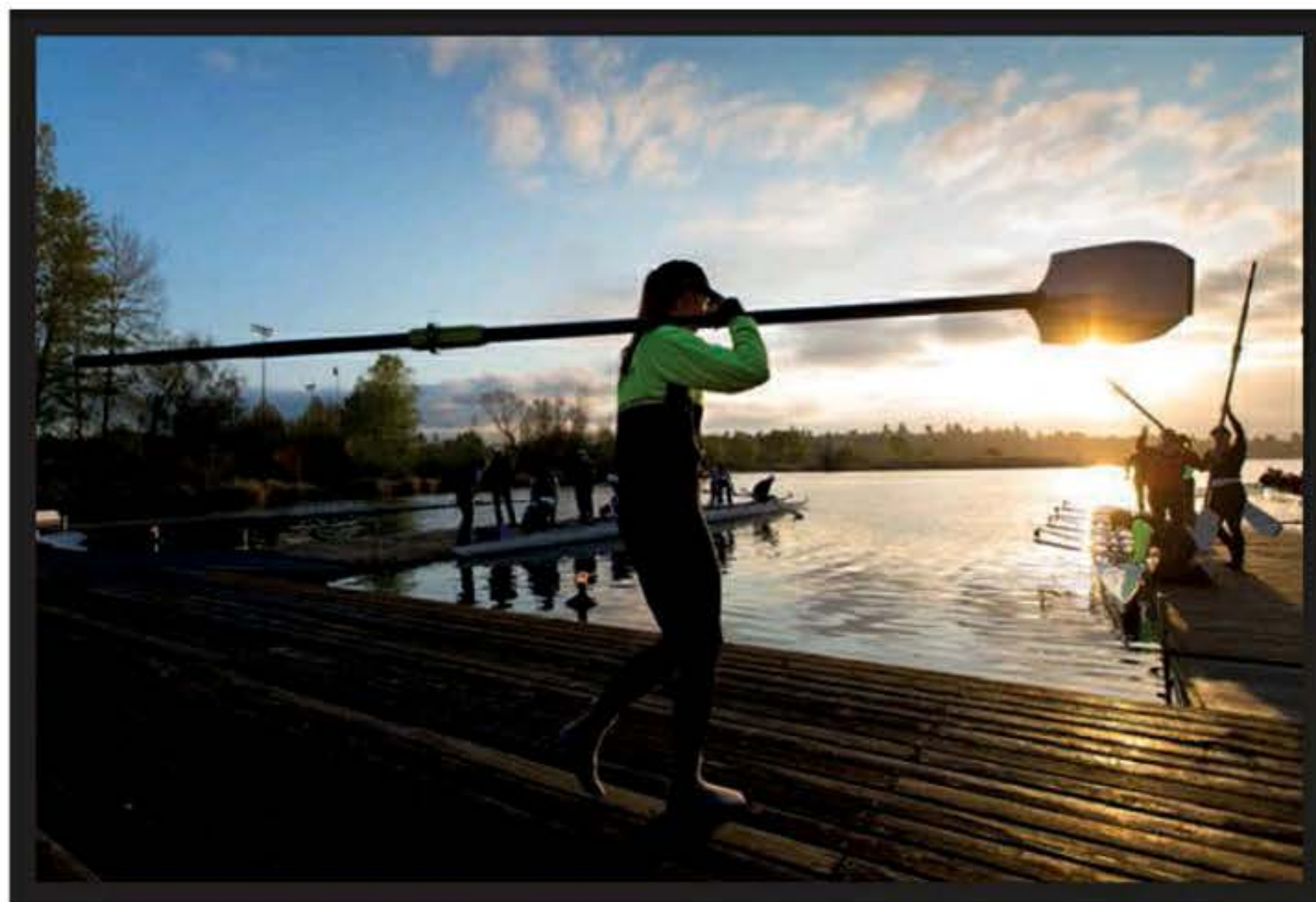


decided he was interested in coaching, I knew he'd be really, really good at it. He's a really good manager".

As head coach, Callahan has achieved what many others can only dream of, and he's been recognised for these achievements. In 2013, he was named US Rowing's Man of the Year, and 2015 saw Callahan named the Pac-12 Coach of the Year. He's characteristically modest about his personal achievements in

coaching. "When you get an individual award, sometimes it's really the result of a collective effort of so many people," he explains. "This is Washington rowing, and when I heard about the award for the year, I saw it as the collective effort of so many people".

Callahan puts a great deal of emphasis on the ethic of the squad. "One of the first values we teach here is Washington rowing is bigger than you or I, and you have to give up some of yourself to have the ultimate success with your teammates. In some ways, it's all about the values we have here". There's a sense that Callahan has a clear picture of where he wants to take the squad, how he wants to develop the guys coming in as freshman, and the men he wants them to leave as by the time they graduate. He's got a keen technical eye too, a skill he puts in part down to his own experience as a slightly 'weaker' athlete who relied on technical prowess to excel in the sport. This is evident in his crews; a finely-tuned Husky eight is truly a thing of beauty. There's an effortless acceleration about the boat, a horizontal and dynamic drive that gives way to a powerful swing through, a graceful float around the finish, and a controlled ascent to the catch. Five Husky men's crews, racing abreast on Lake Washington in those final sessions before the IRAs,



*"Callahan has his fifth consecutive IRA win; that chased dream has been caught."*

must truly have been a sight to behold.

In the mind of each man in the Husky Varsity Eight on that overcast morning at Lake Mercer, Callahan's words were echoing. Everything had been leading to this – the hundreds of thousands of kilometres rowed both on the ergo and on the water. Fear, however, was a memory from a bygone time; a time before a man like Michael Callahan, who has served to make American collegiate rowing predictable. The Huskies would always win the race; it was what they had trained for, it's what Callahan prepared them for. Nerves, yes. Fear? No. The buzzer sounded; the crews exploded into life, and Washington took the lead almost

instantly. There's no stopping them now. It's as if the race itself, which Washington indeed dominated from start to finish, was only for show.

Callahan has his fifth consecutive IRA win; that chased dream has been caught, and history has been made. Callahan speaks with as much gushing pride as his typically reserved and modest nature will allow. "I think we just nailed it. We wanted to take

control of the race right away, and even if they were going to come with us, we wanted to press the pace of the race". It's an incredible achievement, but Callahan did not dwell on it; the Huskies were moving swiftly onwards onto what Callahan described as the 'Wimbledon of rowing' – Henley Royal Regatta. There can be no doubt that victory was certainly on the minds of the Huskies travelling over – particularly the varsity eight, who entered the Ladies Challenge Plate against many of their collegiate rivals. The dominance of Callahan's program however was put under scrutiny for the first time in years; the Washington varsity eight was defeated in the final of the Ladies Challenge Plate by Yale University. There was some consolation for the Huskies though, as they emerged victorious in the Prince Albert Challenge Cup for student fours.

Despite the disappointment of defeat for his flagship crew, Callahan is certainly not one to be phased by competition. It is this confidence and unswerving belief that has permeated through into each of his crews and helped deliver them to the summit of collegiate rowing. They come to do a job, and with the strength of the pack binding them together, there appears to be nothing that can stand in the way of the University of Washington. **ROW360**