

Different Strokes, Sophia Staal, T'15

Coming to Duke, I had some pretty clear-cut opinions regarding college sports. In my mind they served a minimal entertainment value and were, for the most part, a waste of time and money and a deviation from the entire purpose of college. As far as student-athletes were concerned, I didn't believe that their talent on the playing field worthy of a place at a prestigious university. After all, the whole point of school is to crank out papers and study for exams so you can eventually earn a degree that will get you a good (read: high-earning) job. I was fundamentally opposed to the notion that athletes could spend their time throwing a ball around, scrape by taking easy classes and be showered with free gear and special privileges.

And then, as fate would have it, I joined the women's rowing team.

I am now a Division I varsity athlete. Irony and hypocrisy aside, my involvement in Duke Women's Rowing has been the single most transformative experience I have had thus far in college and perhaps in my entire life. I had expected a group of bumbling jocks, devoid of original thought, whose main virtue was the ability to pull an oar. Instead, what I found were some of the most remarkable and inspirational people I have ever known. They have changed the way I see school, sports, and the way I see myself.

The average Duke experience, from what I have seen, is driven by a desire for personal achievement above all else—and that was precisely my attitude when I began here in the fall. But I have come to realize that this mindset only ever leaves you feeling isolated and viewing your peers primarily as competition. On the other hand, being part of a team means working towards a common purpose, one that outweighs your own individual successes and failures. When one person gets faster, gets stronger, it means the whole team is faster and stronger. I can push myself harder everyday because whatever pain or exhaustion I may be feeling is insignificant compared to the pain of seeing my team lose.

Being a part of this sport has also forced me to see the value of patience and delayed gratification. I used to be entirely reward-oriented and narrow minded when it came to school: pay attention, study, and get good grades. I was easily frustrated by what I saw as 'unnecessary' film screenings, guest lectures, assigned readings etc. If it wasn't going to be used in a paper or on a test, then it was pointless. Which is how I sometimes felt about rowing practice, when we literally repeated the

same drill over and over: lift your hands, lower your hands, lean forward, lean back. But the more I did those pointless drills, the more I improved. All knowledge and experience, whether or not it pertains to a particular class, is helping you grow, and you will become a more fulfilled person for having learned it.

Rowing is a completely unique sport in one regard: all members of the crew move in perfect unison. Your talent as an individual is irrelevant if you are unable to follow the rower sitting in front of you. I have, for many years, prided myself on what I called my 'independence' and 'self-reliance,' and what others saw as arrogance. I called myself a leader, because I could give orders while disregarding the thoughts or feelings of those I was supposed to be leading. But you can't do that in a boat. If everyone speeds up, then you speed up, and if everyone slows down, then you have to slow down too. True leadership is having the ability to make compromises and negotiate to find solutions, not just choosing the option that suits your personal agenda. In a boat there are only seven other people to worry about; in life there are many, many more. But the moment you forget about those people is the moment you lose.

The women on my team are engineers, pre-meds, compsci majors and econ-51 curve breakers. They are linguists, Irish dancers, philosophers, and future lawyers. They are also athletes, which means they do everything that an ordinary Duke student does, in addition to waking up before 6 a.m. every day and working out for three (or more) hours. And then they take it a step further, because they are compassionate, giving, and supportive of one another no matter what.

I had it wrong. I thought their priorities were misplaced: spending too much time focusing on their sport, and not enough focusing on school. But it's very clear that I am the one who needed to sort out my priorities.

Sophia Staal was born in Nairobi, Kenya, in May, 1993, to a UNHCR worker and Ph.D. student. She attended International School of Kenya in Nairobi from kindergarten through high school graduation, and was involved in theatre, the arts, a capella groups, and the jazz band (she's an alto sax player). Staal is on the varsity women's rowing team. Her major is "undeclared," but she hopes to double-major in French and Philosophy and pursue an Ethics Certificate.