



## Competition Newsletter of the Swanbourne Nedlands Surf Life Saving Club

(The race might finish between the flags, but between the ears is where the race is won and lost...and it's also where the famous red and white cap of Swanny sits...)

### **The Boatie Edition**

You wouldn't think it to look at the club these days, but Swanny has historically been a boatie club. Yes, that's right; our biggest stars, our brightest lights, our most successful champions have mostly been boaties. The U21 crew of 63 was the first WA crew to EVER win a national boat title, and our Reserve boat crew of '79 is one of only 3 national champions the club has ever had. George "Ken" Jolly, a member of both crews, is the only Swanny member in history with 2 Aussie gold medals.

Boaties down at Swanny these days are a rare and endangered species, but even so, there are more boaties still around than people think. For example, who knew that John Garnett was the "A" crew captain for nearly 6 years? Or that Briggy first joined Swanny simply to row surf boats? Ed Jaggard, Gav Pascoe, Kev White and Leavo have all been sweeps, and many of our life members are old boatie die-hards. John Stringfellow, Terry Foley, Jon Broomhall, John Foley, Gary Williamson, Dave Gallagher

and Erin Gallagher – the list is a who's who of Swanny glitterati, committee members and social stalwarts. The list also includes such luminaries as Dan and Ben Jingles, Dan Hazell and current nipper parents Sam van Dongen and Sharon Wyllie (Nee Nelligan). Even Christo Rowley has rowed competitively for the club.

In an effort to stimulate some interest in surfboats, to relive some of the glory days of Swanny boat history, to instruct novice newbie paddle pops, sand dancers and basket-weavers in the courage, raw strength and (let's face it) bone-headed stupidity of the boatie fraternity, welcome to the Boatie edition of "Between the Ears", the competition newsletter of the Swanny Surf Club!!! (Loud cheers and whistles).

So firstly, what exactly is a boatie? Well, this is what Barry Galton had to say about boaties in his book *Gladiators of the Surf*.

The men of surfboats mostly fill a mould of their own. They are a special breed. They are the seafarers and buccaneers of surf lifesaving. They usually play it hard and fast, seem to enjoy competition the most, can usually drink most of the others under the table, tell the best stories and as the years go by, the waves get bigger, the dumpers harder and the efforts more heroic. Many tend to keep to their own kind and are usually found relegated to a separate part of the beach. But they usually are the first to be summoned in an emergency, their rescues are legendary, and they are invariably good clubmen, ready to pitch in and help, provided there are a few beers at the end of it all. They do not like boat judges, do not agree with the way most boat championships are conducted, have been known to cheat, speak their minds most fluently and colourfully (particularly in races), are handy in a blue and always seem to have the best and most original nicknames. They provide the greatest thrills for spectators and most of the sweeps make good ham actors.

What always impresses me about surfboat rowers is the damage nature of their sport. I remember the first time I saw footage of a surfboat race, an old black and white reel from the Forties. I'd been in ecstasy. The awesome splendour of it! The might and power of the wave! The sheer courage of the oarsmen! The sheer stupidity of the oarsmen! The inevitability of it all! The carnage! The destruction! I mean, really. Imagine getting into a craft with all the speed and the manoeuvrability of a tortoise in a bath of liquid soap.

Imagine pointing it out into the biggest waves you've ever seen. Imagine rowing blindly into it, only able to guess at the size of the wave by the look of terror on the sweep's face. Imagine actually expecting to make it through! These guys were hardcore. This was a damage sport like no other.

(If you haven't seen a montage of surf boat crashes, here's a link to one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfqoLyk8XMw>.

By the end, you start wondering if anyone EVER makes it out and back again without rolling it. Check out the last scene; those boats are 27 foot long, and just compare the boat to the size of the wave...)

OK, so those guys are all clearly crazy. But when you've been around boaties for a bit, you realise it's not just madmen and crazy bastards. Once you get in boat, everyone starts behaving like this. When I first joined the club, we had a large number of boatie members, and they were all completely mad. I started hanging around with them and rowing surfboats, and I ended up doing things I still can't believe I survived.

On my first day, instead of teaching me how to row (or how to even get in the boat, or how to even hold an oar for god's sake!), the guys decided to go wave cracking... at Swanny!

So they put me in a boat with Eagles (Mark Eagleton) and Bill (Erhardt), a new boy like myself called Andy (Bonnell), with Bill's younger brother, Rob, sweeping. After ten minutes of practice with the boat chocked in the sand, Rob took us out on the water.



The guys I learnt to row with, the Swanny "A" crew, at the Gero Country Carnival 1989; Paul Soanes, Terry Foley, Briggy, Billy Erhardt, Stewie McVey (McVomit).

Eagles and Billy were the only two experienced oarsmen in the boat, so Andy and I just sat in the boat with our oars skyed while the other two rowed us out past the break. Once there, Rob just wanted to crack waves. It didn't matter that he had only swept a surfboat once before (I hadn't known this, and didn't know enough about surfboat rowing to have been scared if I had), or that there were two complete novices in the bow. Neither did it seem to matter that we would be pulling into the famous Swanny Sand Barrel Specials, the ferocious shorebreak that's crippled more than a few beachgoers. Rob showed us once how to trail our oars and to walk to the back of the boat, and then we sat out the back and waited for a wave.

A large green swell appeared on the horizon, and Rob just sat there watching it. I was sitting in my seat, knuckles white with fear on my oar, my mind screaming in blind panic. Suddenly surfboat rowing wasn't so much fun anymore. It certainly wasn't as amusing as when I'd watched it on TV. Why weren't we doing anything? Why were we just sitting here waiting to die? Then at the last moment, Rob called us forward.

“And row!” he yelled.

We dug our oars in, and the boat started to move, picking up speed as we lengthened out. I should have been watching my blade, but I could see this monster building out of the corner of my eye, and it was affecting my concentration. It was getting bigger and bigger, and coming closer and closer, and I could see the front of it starting to hollow out. We were in exactly the wrong spot if we wanted to come out of this alive. Suddenly, sitting in the bow seat of a surfboat in front of a cresting wave was the last place on Earth I wanted to be.

Then the wave was under the boat and I could feel the sudden lift of speed. My blade was skimming across the glittering surface of the ocean as I recovered. The stern lifted high in the water and the bow dropped and dug in. I could feel we were on it now; and I couldn't get any pressure on my blade as it pulled through the water. I stopped rowing, my blade skyed, and looked around at the other guys, who were still stroking madly. Why were they still rowing? Why hadn't they stopped?

“Let 'em go!” screamed Rob from the back of the boat.

I should have finished the stroke I was on, and then leant back and swung the handle over my head, so the oar trailed beside the boat. Instead, with my arms at full stretch in front of me, I simply let go of my oar. The blade dug into the water, bit hard and was swept backwards to trail alongside the boat. The handle, which was inboard, came towards me at a million miles an hour, caught me under the chin, swept me backwards onto the floor of the boat and pinned me against the hull. I couldn't move, and with my oar still gripping the water, the boat started to slew sideways.

To this day I don't know how Rob straightened that boat up. Surfboats go sideways without the smallest provocation. You can do everything right; line up straight on the wave, be in exactly the right spot when it breaks, keep the trim on the boat... and it will still go sideways. But somehow Rob managed to pull the nose around, and suddenly there was less pressure on my oar. I managed to pull it off me and scramble back onto my seat. The other guys were yelling in exultation as the wave bounced us towards the beach, while I was left white and shaking. When we got back to the beach, there was a frenzy of congratulatory backslapping. Stewie McVey, who had been watching from the shore, was laughing so hard he was almost sick.

The other guys wanted to go back out and catch a few more, but I had had enough. I was bruised and battered; my jaw felt like it was broken, and I had red welts across my back where I had been pinned against the hull. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to break this to the others, and before I knew what was happening, I found myself heading back out to sea to crack a few more waves.

After two hours out there, I decided that they were all insane. I had seriously underestimated Eagles; he may have been pale and thin and scrawny, and blind as a bat without his Coke-bottle glasses, but he was also wiry and deceptively strong. They were all madmen. Rob, Billy and McVey in particular, had no sense of self-preservation. They stared death in the face and simply laughed.

A lot of the really hard core guys at Swanny in those days were boaties. They were a really scary bunch – well, coming from my western suburbs, protected and coddled background, I thought they were scary. Billy Erhard was a mean-looking bastard with a skinhead haircut. The first time I met him, he looked me up and down with a mad glint in his eyes and a sneer on his lips (which I later found out was what passed for a smile for him), and asked “How ya goin’ ya cunt?”

He'd been in trouble with the law a few times; nothing serious, according to him, just the odd assault charge. He had a nasty temper when aroused, and he was completely unpredictable when drunk. There was Diff, who attained a degree of fame in the local area by falling off the balcony at Club Bayview in Claremont, and landing on the road on his face. “Eat the peanuts outta my shit,” he said to me during the first conversation I ever had with him. I now know that he was just quoting from *Full Metal Jacket*, but at the time I thought he was the toughest guy I'd ever met.

There was Paul Garner, who would get absolutely paralytic drunk and then start fire-breathing, a bottle of wine in one hand and a bottle of metho in another. God knows which one he was drinking out of, because he certainly didn't. Stewie McVey was pretty quiet, but he was so tough he used to put an IRB motor over one shoulder and carry it up the beach by himself. Kev White was also there, and he was (and is) as tough as nails as well. The first time I saw him in a surfboat he was doing a haka on the bow as it came down a wave at Denmark. Little Eagles (Mark Eagleton's little brother) also used to get up to the bow as it came down waves. He did handstands until he got bored with that, and

pulled a brown-eye. The officials took a dim view of it, and threatened to suspend him from the carnival. So he stopped the brown-eyes, and the next time he did a “flies eyes” instead. This is where you pull your bathers up at the front so one testicle falls out of each side. Little Eagles now rides barrels bigger than his house – he’s one of those crazy bastards who tows in at Cow Bombie when the swell is 60 foot (and he learnt to surf in the Swanny shore break!).

The boaties were all a little bit wilder than other people I knew at the time. I thought my Uni friends were hard drinkers, until I met the Swanny guys, who did it for a living. At the club, you weren’t a serious drinker if you didn’t end up nude in the gutter, covered in puke *every weekend*. And they didn’t just get drunk and throw up; they got nude and did seriously dangerous stunts and got injured and started fights and got in trouble with the law. I loved being around them, because they were so different from my other friends (even though they psyched me out a little).



Photo from a surfing week at Denmark, 1986. In this photo are: Phil Gallagher (Dave’s older brother), Rob and Bill Erhardt and a very young looking Leavo. Obligatory wave-cracking surf boat in the background.

When we started to get girl boaties, we found out just how tough they were, too. Check out this video from the Swanny chicks “A” crew from 2006:



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic\\_xXsNZ9aM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic_xXsNZ9aM)

How good is Carl's voice-over and laugh?

But it's not just the wave cracking, heavy drinking and fighting that sets boaties apart from everyone else. The racing itself is very different to just about any other discipline in surf – and I don't just mean that you use an oar instead of a paddle. The way you race, what your mindset is, what going hard actually means, is all completely different if you're a boatie.

Unlike swimming or the craft events, competitors don't row around the same course as the other competitors in their race; each team has its own can. Although you can see the other boats in the race, you can't get near them, or plough into them, or draft off them. You can't dominate them on the line. You can't talk to them during a race (much). Maybe you can fox them and trick them into making mistakes, but it's more remote and somehow much less personal. You can't *race* like you can in the craft and swim events.

If you're an oarsperson, you don't have to think at all. You don't have to worry about tactics, or how to approach a race. You don't have to make any decisions. You simply watch your blade, respond to the sweep's commands and row your guts out. You're told when to row, when to stop, when to turn, how fast to rate, when to lift, when to let 'em go and when to get back. All your concentration is focused within the boat and what the other boats are doing simply isn't important.

So if you're a boatie, goin' hard means busting a gut to stay with the crew. It means digging deep and lifting, not so you can beat someone else, but so you don't let the crew down. It means taking the pain and staying in time and keeping the length because you know the other guys will notice if you don't.

When you row a surfboat, the crew becomes everything. It's like you're married to them. You spend a lot of time on the water together, training and racing and cracking waves, but it goes far beyond that. A good boat crew should be evenly matched. You should be about the same height and the same weight, and equally strong. It's not uncommon that you all start looking the same. You start wearing the same clothes, you start saying the same things and dating the same girls (that's a frightening thought



considering some of the people I've rowed with, and some of the chicks they've gone out with). Soon you're just a bunch of clones, and it's hard to tell which bits of you were the original you and which bits are borrowed from someone else.

Because you can't race, train or catch waves without the whole crew, pretty soon you can't do anything without the whole crew. And I mean *anything*.

So letting the crew down is the worst crime a boatie can commit. You just don't do it, whether in a race or on a wave or in a fight. Now it's pretty easy not to let the crew down if they're all soft-cocks. Unfortunately, the agenda always seems to be set by the maddest, toughest bastard in the boat. That means you'll find yourself suddenly doing things you'd never normally do in a million years.

Eagles (Mark Eagleton, member from the 80s) told me once about a marathon he rowed in.

"It was the Bridge to Bridge, about an hour long. We didn't have rollers back then. We just wet up and rowed until our arses started squeaking on the seats and then we stopped and wet up again. My bathers didn't fit properly, so when I pulled them up my crack I was lying on them as I finished the back part of the stroke. I was gettin' a bit of chafe and I started bleeding onto the seat. Foles was sweeping, and he thought it was pretty funny. He kept askin' me if I had haemorrhoids. Eventually I couldn't take it anymore."

"You stopped rowing?"

"Nah. I took my bathers off and threw them in the bottom of the boat. Foles thought that was even funnier, because every time I'd come forward for the catch, my balls would fall off the front edge of the seat. Then I'd push back and my chopper would hit the edge and bounce into the air. It was jiggling all over the place. It was a wonder that it didn't go off. But it was worse than before because I dried out faster than the other guys. I didn't have any bathers to keep the seat even a little bit wet. The last ten minutes were pretty bad. Foles'd ask us if we needed to wet up, and the other guys'd say no. I didn't want to paf out so I'd say no, too, even though my arse was stuck to the seat with dried blood. I was goin' eeeeeek eeeek eeeeeek all the way home, and I've got the scars to prove it."



U21 Crew, silver medalists State Tiles 1988; Glen Walsh, Dave “Diff” Robertson, Mike Tucak (yes, Tim’s younger brother) and Chris Gatti. I think that’s Bunno Surf Club in the background

### Tips for Rowing Surfboats

1. Listen to the sweep
2. When the sweep says “Jump in!”, jump in the boat.
3. When the sweep says “Row!”, row.
4. When the sweep says “Turn”, turn.
5. When the sweep says “Pick it up!”, row faster.
6. When the sweep says “Let ‘em go!”, finish your stroke and let the oar go.
7. When the sweep says “Get back!”, go to the back of the boat.

### You must also

1. Stay in time with the stroke no matter what

2. Keep your length no matter what
3. Keep power on the blade no matter what
4. Back up your crew mates no matter what

If you want to

1. Think for yourself.
2. Look at the other competitors
3. Choose your own rating
4. Choose your own course
5. Try to read the surf
6. Make any of your own decisions
7. Have any control at all down a wave

... then give up surfboats and take up ski paddling, board paddling or swimming

One of the perennial problems for oarsmen and women is that the coach, race strategist and captain is always the sweep, who is doing far less physical exertion than the guys who are rowing. The sweep doesn't really know how hard the rowers are going, how much they're hurting and how much they have left in the tank. In my experience, the race strategy, as called by the sweep, goes something like this:

1. The gun goes off. "In crew! Fucken go!"
2. You row through the inside whitewash. "Now go hard, flat out, get through the break!"
3. You start to get to the big breakers out the back. "Okay, fucken roooooooooowwwwww! Go hard now! Fucken goooooooo!"
4. You reach the flat water out the back past the break. "Okay, give me thirty strokes flat out! Hard as you can! Count 'em out! One! Two! Three!"
5. You approach the buoys. "Okay, give it everything now, to the buoys! And row! 100%!"

6. You're on the way back in. "Okay, pick it up now! This is the race! Give it everything you've got! C'mon! You're not trying! Fucken row! DO you want this race or not! Fucken roooooowwwwww!"

For those of you paying attention, that means you jumped in the boat and started with 100% effort, and after that, you continued to give 100% effort AND were asked to then "pick it up" or "row harder" no less than 4 times.

If you don't believe me, check out this video; no spectacular crashes, but an excellent video-essay on what a race looks like from a sweeps' perspective.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUojzh5Xt84>

Notice how he never stops talking and exhorting the oarsmen to put more effort in. And noticed how stuffed the oarsmen are after the last race...

## **Fiction Part 1: The "A" Crew Final, Gero '89**

We're on the line in the 'A' final at Gero '89. It's my first country carnival and the boys have gone ballistic. We've only been rowing as a crew for three weeks, we've only been in the boat six times together and here we are in the final at our very first carnival. I'm stuffed from the heats and the semis, but there's a wave running and that means that anyone can win, even us.

I stand with my hand on the corner of the bow seat, ready to jump in. My other hand holds the end of my oar just under the gunn'l so the blade is skyed and out of the way. I'm trying to watch three things at once; the starter on the beach in front of me, the waves behind me and the foot-chocks where I'm going to have to land my feet when the gun goes off.

The gun's up, but I can't watch the starter because there's a wave coming. I push the bow around, and it swings ponderously to face directly into the oncoming surf. The wave breaks onto the boat, lifting it off the sand. Suddenly the gunn'l is up under my armpit and my seat is two foot above me. As the wave recedes and the boat settles back down, I see the ocean has sent me a little gift. There are streaks of sand all over my seat.

"Great," I think to myself. "That'll be fun to slide on."



The Swanny “A” crew 1989 just before the Gero Country Carnival. My very first surfboat, the Cygnet III (the one I went wave-cracking in on my first day) won an Aussie Title with the Swanny Reserve crew of ’79. My second surfboat (the one above, the “Norm Rees II”) won an Aussie Title at Scarborough in 1987 with the North Cronulla crew. It was sad to see them go.

The gun’s still up, but there’s another wave coming. The gunn’l catches me under the armpit and lifts me off the ground just as the gun goes off.

“Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck**fuckFUCK!**” I’m yelling as I try to get into the boat. It’s just not possible, though. I can’t get over the gunn’l. The other guys are in and starting to row and I’m still hanging onto the outside, getting dragged along. All the trim’s gone on the boat, and it’s starting to turn sideways on to the surf.

“Fuckin’ get in Briggy!” Foles yells at me, as if I wasn’t trying. I manage to scramble in at last, but as I try to slip into time with the others, my blade clashes with McVomit’s.

“Fuck Briggy! Get in time!” he yells at me.

I'm feeling really pissed off by now. None of this is my fault, but they're both yelling at me as if it is. And when I get annoyed, I start to talk to myself under my breath.

"Fuck you, Foley. Fuck you too, McVey. Like to see you two fuckers get into a fuckin' boat when the fuckin' gunn'l is above your fuckin' head. Fuckin' yell at me. All right for you fuckers. You can just step into the fuckin' thing. But poor bloody Briggy up the fuckin' front..."

We're in the break now, rowing hard and Foles yells at us to keep coming. We hit a wall of white water and fly easily over it. We all come forward and catch at the same time, in perfect sync. It feels powerful and strong as we surge through the water. Even after our disastrous start, we've passed a couple of boats that have been hit by the surf.

"Okay, fuckin row!" Foles screams at us from the stern. "Row! Go hard! Lift! There's a wave comin'!"

I'm experienced enough by now not to take a look over my shoulder, but I can feel the goose bumps rise on the back of my neck as I see the wave out of the corner of my eye.

"Fuckin' rowwww!" Foles screams. A green wall about eight foot high and moving at a steady twelve k's an hour slams into the boat and suddenly I'm launched into space. We've hit it just as it's peaking. The bow rides up and out over the back of it. I'm out of my seat and about ten foot above the surface of the water. The boat's started to fall already and will hit before I do. That means I'm going to free-fall for ten foot onto the hard plastic of my seat. I try to go forward so I can get my blade in the water. If I can make the catch while I'm still in the air, I can stand in the foot-chocks and take the shock with my arms. But my oar slams into Soansie's back. The breaking wave caught his blade and he's been pushed backwards in his seat and onto me. I can't come forward at all.

"Fuckfuckfuckfuck..." I scream as the water comes up to greet me. I push Soansie forward, but it's too late. The boat hits the water, and I hit the seat a fraction of a second later, my oar still in the air. I'm in a world of pain. I've taken a ten-foot drop straight on my arse and I'll be bruised for weeks. But that's only a secondary concern at the moment. The fall has completely winded me and my stomach muscles, my diaphragm and my intercostals have spasmed. I can't breathe.

I get in time with the others, hoping that this will only be temporary. Maybe I can row through it. Three... four... five strokes, and still I can't breathe. I'm starting to turn purple up in the bow. But Foles doesn't notice that. All he sees is that I'm rowing shorter than the others and that my blade-work had gone to shit.

"Fuckin' Briggy! Fuckin' lengthen out! Fuckin' stay in time! Stop fuckin' around!"

I can't even start muttering to myself like I usually do. Twice before I've passed out from lack of oxygen after being winded, once in a shorebreak and once on the rugby field. It's not a pleasant experience, and I hope this isn't going to be number three.

But on the seventh stroke I feel my muscles loosen, and I'm able to draw in a tiny, shallow breath. Each breath becomes easier and easier, until at last I can breathe normally. Even so, it's another five or six strokes before my length through the water is the same as the others. By now we're halfway to the cans, and, at last in a decent rhythm, we settle down and row as a team.

We pull past two crews on the way to the cans, and as we prepare for the turn we're not far behind the first three boats.

"Okay, and tuuuuurn!" Foles screams.

Bill and Soansie each take their inside foot out of the chocks and brace it in the centre of the boat. With their oars dug into the water they lean hard to the left and down, slowing the boat on that side. Me and McVomit have to pull the boat around. The first two strokes are no different from a normal race stroke, but as the boat slows, we have to shorten down and rate higher. Three, four, five strokes, and we're around.

"Okay, and rowww!" Foles screams again.

Bill and Soansie take a short stroke, and then lengthen out as we complete the turn and head for the beach.

That's when it happens. The boat in the next lane has come too far over in the lead-up to their turn. They're way too close to us. With my back to them, I can't see what's happening until it's too late. We've just finished a stroke, and my blade has exited the water. We haven't feathered yet, so our blades are still square. In that split second, the oars from the next boat, perfectly in time, slice through both mine and McVomit's blades and neatly carve out the centre panels.



I see shards of wood flying through the air, and my oar kicks back into my chest. The shock from the collision has knocked it clean out of the rowlock. After bouncing off my ribs, it's slid back the other way and hit Soansie in the back.

I can hear Foles and the others cursing, but I've got too much to think about to hear what they're saying. I come forward to the edge of my seat and grasp the body of the oar, pulling it inboard and across the boat. The oar tapers towards the blade, and the thin neck below the blade is the only part of the oar that will fit into the rowlock. While the others keep rowing, I try to fit it back into the rowlock, which has spun around and is now facing the wrong way. With one hand on the oar, I spin the rowlock around. McVomit's oar slams into mine again, knocking it out of my grasp. I fumble for it, and, miracle of miracles, the oar slides neatly into place at the next try. I push it outboard again, and come half-forward, waiting for the catch.

As the others reach that part of the stroke, I drive back hard with my legs, and we're in time once more. But fate has one more card to play; the torn cartilage in my right knee has flipped over as I came forward that last time, and as I drive back, I find I can't straighten my right leg.

It's an old rugby injury (along with two broken collarbones, an abdominal hernia, a dislocated AC joint and eighteen dislocated shoulders). The cartilage flips whenever I bend the knee and rotate it laterally. It doesn't hurt at all, but I just can't straighten the leg until it flips back. I need both hands on my leg to do this; one on my ankle to bend the leg towards me, the other on the inside of the knee to push it laterally again. With an oar in my hands, there's no way I can do it.

I try anyway. Each time I come forward for the catch, I take my right hand off the oar and punch the inside of my knee as hard as I can. I'm hoping that with my foot anchored in the foot-chocks and with my legs bent for the catch, I can do it one-handed. But it's futile. I simply can't exert the pressure at the right angle; I'm going to have to row without straightening my right leg. I slip it out of the foot-chocks and hold it dangling in front of me. All the drive is now coming from my left leg.

Halfway in from the cans, it's clear that our race is over. Both oars on the bow side are shattered, my right leg is useless and my left has just about seized up from lactic

acid overload. There's little point in continuing, especially since the tear in my knee could be getting worse with every movement I make.

But I'm a boatie, and goin' hard means never letting the crew down. Ever. So when McVomit goes into his end-of-race battle frenzy, I've got to go with him. Paffing out is not something I can even consider.

"Aaaargh!" McVomit screams as he pulls his blade through the water.

"Aaaaaaaaargghh!" he screams again.

Each time we take a stroke, his scream gets louder, and he pulls his blade harder through the water. Billy up the front has caught the madness and starts screaming too. Soon we're all doing it, wrenching our blades through the water like maniacs. There's little science to our rowing anymore, but that doesn't matter. The blood lust is on us, and we couldn't stop if we wanted to. I can't feel the pain anymore. All I feel is rage; rage at the capriciousness of the ocean and of racing, rage at the other crew, rage at my broken oar, rage at my broken body. And with the rage comes a savage joy, so that I can feel a wild grin on my face as we pull onto the face of an unbroken wave.

I can see the wave out of the corner of my eye, and I can feel the bow dip as the stern lifts up. With less pressure on our blades, we rate faster, and the oars thud against the rowlocks at the end of each stroke. On the recovery, the blades skim flat across the water, and the speed of the boat and the movement of the water make them look as if they're going twice as fast as they really are. This is the greatest moment in surfboat rowing, and one that makes up for the tedious grunt sessions on the river. We're so fast, and so powerful, and in perfect synchrony, and we're about to pull into one of the most awesome forces in nature. Billy's settled down a bit, knowing that staying on a wave is all about keeping the trim on the boat, keeping it steady, and maintaining a steady pace. We still pull hard, but not so wildly, and only McVomit is still screaming as he pulls. And then we get the centre of gravity of the boat out in front of the wave, and we suddenly slide down the face, smooth and quick. We're on it.

"Let 'em go!" Foles roars.

As I finish the next stroke, I lean further back than normal. Instead of pushing down on the handle to sky my blade, I pull the handle past my face and let it go. The

blade is caught by the relative backward motion of the water outside the boat, and the oar trails next to the gunn'l, where it won't get in the way if things go wrong.

"Come back!" Foles roars again.

I step out of the foot-chocks and place both feet in the centre of the boat. Then I walk quickly and carefully down the centre to the stern, making sure I don't upset the trim; not easy on one leg. That walk from the bow to the stern always takes on a kind of nightmare quality for me. Not that it's scary in any way; it's just that everything seems to be happening so fast and yet so slowly at the same time. I can see Soansie's hairy arse wobbling in front of me as he scrambles to the back; I can see the giant wave cresting above the back of the boat, dwarfing Foles who's struggling to control the sweep oar. I can hear the roar as the wave breaks, and the creaks of the boat and the cracking of the oars against the gunn'l, as my whole world is reduced to an ocean of rushing water, foam and loose oars.

Seconds or hours later, I get to the stroke seat. I turn around and sit down next to Soansie. Behind me, Billy has grabbed the end of the sweep oar, and is helping Foles to keep it straight. For once, we don't turn sideways (known in the sport as "broaching"). We picked the wave up from a long way out, so we had to row hard to stay on it. But it's also given us the speed to catch up with the three boats in front of us. As the wave finally breaks, pushing us out in front of it, we're one of four boats on it. And we don't even have to go back to our seats and row, because the wave pushes us over the line and into second place.

Second place! In three weeks, from nowhere to second in the state! And after one of the most disastrous races I've ever rowed in! How much better will we be at the state titles in six weeks? The state championship's virtually in the bag! And why stop at the states? A crew like this could go all the way to an Aussie title!

So we jump around and act like madmen, pummelling each other and screaming with victory-induced 'roid rage. It's only about ten minutes later that I remember my knee, and carefully manoeuvre the cartilage back into place.

Now it's time to meet some of the club's past boatie members...



The Swanny Open Women's Surf Boat Crew on their way to the bronze medal at the Aussies, Kurrawa '99. Willo rejuvenated the boat section of the club between 1997 and 2000. The girls' crew won a state title in 1998, and were unlucky not to medal at the Aussies that year. In 1999, they won the silver medal at the State Titles, and the bronze at the Aussies. The crew are; Nikki Gibson (bow), Ellen Coenra, Tanya de Hoog, Sharon Nelligan (stroke) and Gary Willliamson (sweep). In the first row of the championships, Nikki Gibson was hit in the head with an oar. She had six stitches in her head, and feeling sick and dizzy, she found a helmet and continued to row. One of the toughest things I've ever seen. Those waves were not small...





Surf boat on the Avon Descent. Only Swanny was brave (and stupid) enough to try this. As Stewie Alcorn wrote in his report; "They were forced to pull out at this stage [Katrine Bridge], with all of the officials screaming blue murder that there will never be another surf boat again. Many at the Swanny campfire that night were proud of our inaugural legends for their efforts." Says an awful lot about Swanny...







One of our few State Champions who DON'T have their photo in the gallery upstairs, the State Champion "A" Surf Boat Crew from 1973, all alive and kicking in 2007; Ross Bosworth, Geoff Annear, Peter Wales, John Stringfellow and Ian Hodgkinson



Men's "A" boat crew punch through a wave at the 1996 State Titles. Gav Pascoe, Chris Gatti and Carl Dyde are all ten year long-service members, while Kev White and Terry Foley are Life Members. A great photo, too.





Another great shot of a Swanny boat crew as it goes over a wave, this time at the Aussie Titles at Kurrawa '03. The team is; John Garnett (bow), Carl Dyde, Mark Wallis, Sam van Dongen (stroke) and Terry Foley. John, Mark, Sam and Terry formed the backbone of the Men's "A" crew for a number of years, with Carl, Dan Bishop and Patrick Tydde all filling in at different times. This crew, with Dan Bishop at 2<sup>nd</sup> stroke, won the bronze medal at the WA State Championships in 1999.





Swanny Women's "A" crew, Aussie Titles 2004; Emma Doyle, Erin McKeown (now Gallagher), Terry Foley



Swanny "A" crew late 90s: Sam van Dongen, Terry Foley, John Garnett, Dan Bishop, Mark Wallis. (And nice pose Johnny Garnett!)





Reserve Crew late 90s. John Stringfellow, Evan Shapley, unknown (to me), Dan Bishop and Chris Gatti



Anna Bishop, Claire O'Brien, Tanya de Hoog and Sharon Nelligan, Aussie Titles '98. This crew made the final, and was in the lead when a large wave wiped them out on the way through the break.



I don't know when or where this was taken, but that's Christo Rowley in the bow...



Not a good place to be. Swanny "A" crew, 2004



This is really what surf boats are for; before we had a trailer, all our gear would go to a country carnival in a surf boat. One of the great traditions was waking up the morning after a country carnival at 5 am with the sunrise to hear Leavo puking his guts up from where he'd fallen asleep under the surf boat the night before. Good times!

## **Fiction Part 2: Easter Long Weekend at Denmark**

Ocean Beach at Denmark is one of the great beaches of the world. It's a vast, open expanse of sea, beach, dunes and river mouth. The water is crystal clear, and the beach is almost completely deserted most of the time. The surf club is nestled in the curve of the bay, between the native scrub and the rocks of the headland. The surf can be spectacular, and with three or four breaks around the bay, there's room for everyone. It's best when it breaks directly in front of the surf club; you don't have to walk for miles around the bay, and there's a permanent rip that runs out along the headland, so you don't even have to paddle on the way out. Some of the best days of my life have been spent on that beach, surfing, swimming or lying in the sun on the rocks, and, unsurprisingly, rowing surf boats.

I remember the second time I ever went to Drenmark with the surf club guys. I went down with the rest of the guys in my "A" crew, and I rowed only with them. Bill and Stewie McVey were lunatics in surf, but Soansie and I quickly learnt that although

they did outrageous things, they never put themselves in a position where they got hurt. So while everyone else considered them to be insane, I was pretty happy to row with them.

We had contests with the North Cott crew, competing to see who could have the worst wipeout or the most artistic broach. Then we practiced doing headstands or hakas in the bow as we came down waves. McVomit also tried to teach me blade surfing. This is where you get out of the boat as it's coming down a wave and stand on the blades of the oars as they trail next to the boat. He swore that it was possible, but he never proved it to my satisfaction.

On our last day, Foles decided to sit on the beach with his kids, so we had to find someone else to fill in while the rest of us took turns sweeping. Glen Walsh was there, and could row a bit; he'd rowed "A" crew for a while, but had given it up to paddle skis. Nothing was ever said openly, but I got the feeling that the rest of the boaties thought he was soft. I don't know how good he was in a race, because I never rowed with him. But after that surf session in Denmark with us, I know that he wasn't too happy cracking waves in a surfboat.

Six foot surf at Ocean Beach is probably not the place to learn to sweep, particularly if you're only going in and out of the break. The four of us in the regular crew had complete faith in each other. Glen didn't, but we managed to convince him that we were all experienced sweeps. We'd line up a giant wave, and Glen would be wetting himself up the back of the boat, while me, Stewie, Bill and Soansie laughed at him down our sleeves. If the truth were known, I was as scared as he was, but I knew better than to let it show to these guys. Anyway, a wave would come along, and whoever was sweeping would call us half-forward, and we'd start to row. Things would be fine at first, because we were all experienced oarsmen, but soon we'd come down the face of the wave, and things would invariably go wrong.

Once on a wave, surfboats are notoriously difficult to keep straight. Even with experienced sweeps, surfboats go sideways without the smallest provocation. With an inexperienced sweep, and with Billy throwing his oar overboard just to see what will happen, or with Stewie running down the bow to do headstands, we had no chance. The boat would lose trim, bite and do a right-angle turn.



The keel of a surfboat, when side-on to a wave, tends to dig in. When the pressure from the face of the wave becomes too great, the boat lifts up slightly and drops another two or three foot down the face. So once the boat's side-on, instead of coming down the wave nice and smoothly, it bounces down the face, completely out of control. It's impossible to stay in your seat, and the oars come out of the rowlocks and go hurtling through the air. It's usually at this time that I'm holding on as tightly as I can, white-knuckled, and praying that I don't get hit by a stray oar. Two things stick in my mind; one is the sound of Stewie McVey laughing, great big chuckles as he's thrown around the bottom of the boat. The other is the sound of Glen screaming, "Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuuuuuck!" at the top of his voice.



Easter Weekend Surfing Safaris to Ocean Beach at Denmark have been an institution at Swanny since well before 1982. This photograph captures a Swanny boat crew coming down the face of a perfect Denmark wave in 2002. Life just does not get any better than this.

The worst bit about being sideways is when the wave breaks over the boat. You can see the wave peak in front of you (you're facing at right angles to the way you started by now, with the boat parallel to the face of the wave), and the boat rides up the face



sideways. It's touch and go whether you'll make it over the top before it breaks, or whether it'll just break right over you. You lean towards the wave, as hard as you can. That way, if the wave breaks on the boat, it'll just fill it with water. If you lean away from it, the wave will hit the bottom of the boat and will roll it over. There's not much else you can do at this stage, just lean the right way and hang on. And suddenly the boat's at the top, and the peak looms right over you, and it breaks. Your world is just an ocean of rushing water, foam and loose oars... and suddenly you're on the other side. You wipe your brow, and think, "Thank God! We made it!" And then you realise that the boat's full of water, your oars have all floated away and you're side-on to the waves, right in the impact zone.

It's at this stage that you can generally tell who's enjoying it, and who's scared out of their tiny little minds. While the rest of us are laughing as we retrieve our oars, Glen isn't. He turns to Soansie, who happens to be sweeping just then, his face twisted into a rictus of fear.

"I fuckin' hate you Soanes," he says.

## Boatie Puzzle Page

### Quiz

You are the sweep of a surf boat that is completely under control coming down a wave. You are T-boned by another boat, making you broach, turn sideways and finish out of the places. Do you:

1. Take it in good spirit – that's surf after all, and it may be you causing the crash next time
2. Swear at the other sweep
3. Swear at the other sweep and then take a swing at him when you get back to the beach
4. Swear at the other sweep and then take a swing at him and try to nut him with a headbutt when you get back to the beach
5. Swear at the other sweep then get your crew to take on the other crew when you get back to the beach

Answer: None of the above. It was a trick question; a surfboat is never under control coming down a wave.

In the meantime, check this out. In a scenario much like that outlined above, just listen to the crusty old Kiwi sweep.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIXQ3pVulSk>

Actually, one can't blame him; this is absolutely epic, must-watch Youtube!

## Join the Dots

● <sup>1</sup>

● <sup>2</sup>

(I was going to have just a single dot, but that is really a very difficult philosophical question, like “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”, or “If your sweep oar snaps in the middle of an empty ocean, did it really snap?”. It would cause a boatie’s head to explode. They should just about be able to manage this one.)

Maze

---

Start

Finish

---

Okay, you get the picture. Boaties are generally not very smart. Except for Sam van Dongen, who’s a lawyer. And Claire O’Brien is also a lawyer. And so is Mike Tucak. And Mark Eagleton is a vet, so he’s pretty smart. And so is Anna Le Soeuf. Actually, at Swanny, we get a different caliber of boatie to most clubs. But it’s still fun to make fun of them...

