

Published August 2nd, 2023

## Fineman and Heinz represent Lamorinda at World Rowing Championships

By Jon Kingdon



From left: Nate Fineman and Keenan Heinz Photo provided

Just a week ago, the Under 19 National U.S. Rowing team left the United States to compete in the 2023 World Rowing Championships the first week of August in Paris, France at the Vaires-sur-Marne Nautical Stadium, which is where the Olympic rowing events will be held in 2024.

The U.S. team roster of 53 men and women has seven rowers from Oakland Strokes (the largest number of rowers from one club) and two of the seven, Nathan Fineman (8-man crew) and Keenan Heinz (4-man crew with coxswain), are upcoming seniors at Miramonte High School.

During a crew race, rowers' heart rates can vary depending on the intensity of the race and the individual fitness levels of the rowers. According to a study published in the Journal of Sports Sciences, the average heart rate of rowers during a 2000-meter race was 174 beats per minute.

For the past four years, starting in eighth grade, Fineman and Heinz have been training at and competing for Oakland Strokes. "I had just stopped playing water polo and my parents were looking for another sport for me to participate in," Fineman said. "At first, I really didn't enjoy it and I couldn't see myself doing this for a number of years, but it's definitely stuck with me. After rowing a few months, I started to enjoy it a lot and saw a future in it for myself and I've been pursuing it since. Towards the end of my novice year when I started high

school rowing, I began to appreciate it more."

Heinz began rowing at the encouragement of his mother. "My mom just wanted me to try something new and it turned out pretty well," Heinz said. "Just getting into the sport was pretty easy and initially I treated it as more of a hobby, after school thing. I began to get competitive my sophomore year. The physical work was hard and that took a lot of persistence. I'm still learning new things and trying to improve what I can do now. At first, it was intimidating because there are a lot of new things that aren't common in most sports, but I got the hang of things fairly quickly."

Jovan Jovanovic, the head coach at Oakland Strokes, was witness to the evolution of Fineman and Heinz's improvement. "From the beginning, Keenan was always very talented, and we saw early on that he had that discipline," Jovanovic said. "Even though he is not the biggest kid (6'1"), he's a good racer that has the discipline and training. When Nathan (6'5") first came to Oakland Strokes, he had very good size and strength and was not as polished, but I told him that if we kept up the good work, you never know what could happen. In the last two years, both of them made big strides in their development and this year especially, both of them stepped up and found that next gear. We always talk about getting to the next level and focusing on not just being the best at our rowing program but thinking about the big picture, our whole country."

The time demands put on the rowers in their training are second to none, according to Heinz: "During the school year, we work out 6 to 7 days a week. The five days during the week we work out for three hours after school and on Saturday, it is usually five hours and before big races during the season, we will also work out on Sunday for 2-3 hours."

"Rowing is mainly, for me, a mental sport," said Fineman. "It's a lot of effort for a little payoff. You train for many months just for six minutes on a two-kilometer course."

The physical demands of rowing impose unique physiological challenges to rowers with implications not only for their physical, technical, and mental preparation for competition, but also for health and longevity.

"It takes all these things to be a good rower," Jovanovic said. "It is important to be physically gifted and talented but none of it matters if you are not persistent, motivated, and driven. You have to set high goals

because rowing is a cyclical sport and even though it does look repetitive, you can always improve, and you always have things to work on and build on. We try and recognize the weak points in each athlete in their development and guide them but, at the end of the day, it goes back to them. It really shows who they are as people and athletes and how willing they are to pursue that excellence. We can guide them, and we can help them with some things but when it comes to mental preparation, they are the ones that have to grab those tools in their hands and really work little by little every day. I put it on them, and they've met the challenge."

As difficult as it can be during the race, for Heinz, it's keeping his eye on the prize: "In the moment it can be really hard in the heart of a workout or race when it's really painful mentally and physically but at the end of the race, you get that sense of relief and accomplishment because it can be so hard and even if you don't do well, you can still be excited at finishing the race, knowing that you put your full effort into it and that's what I get really excited about and what pushes me through, being able to have an opportunity to push myself as hard as I can, no matter what the outcome is, it's something that I can be proud of."

For Fineman, it's both the journey and the destination. "I do enjoy rowing, but I wouldn't say that I find joy in it," Fineman said. "The training is really grueling, training many, many, hours a week but I find joy in seeing my efforts pay off in a competition when I medal at a regatta or perform well on the erg machine. It requires a lot of mental toughness and fortitude to keep pushing, making sure that you have the goal in mind and not to stray off the path you put yourself on."

Jovanovic has tried to make the athletes know that they are responsible for their success. "What I have tried to instill in them is to start with yourself and don't worry about anyone else," Jovanovic said. "I try to remind them every day you had a good piece but what are the Germans or the French or the Australians are doing? Can we find that extra gear and it's a rhetorical question, but I tell them that they'll know it the best inside of themselves."

It's not the arms that are the key in effective rowing. "It's about 65% legs to 30% back and core," Heinz said. "The arms are actually minimal to a rowing stroke. You start by driving with your legs and hips which are the most powerful muscles in your body and then you start swinging your body back which gives you the leverage and you barely finish off with your arms which is the minimal part. During a race, you're at such a high heart rate for such a long time and repeating the same move over and over, so having a powerful heart and lungs enables you to circulate air for a prolonged amount of time."

Fineman and Heinz also learned that as individual as the training is, working as a team is more crucial in rowing than in just about any other sport. "Everybody really needs to be in the same head space, rowing the same way," Fineman said. "If everyone is locked in on the same mental wavelength, believing we can win and pushing forward and rowing as well as we can, the boats go really fast but one weak link can ruin everything. With the national team, we needed time to get to know each other and the more time we practice together, the more we are able to become a tight knit crew. We practice 3-4 hours a day knowing that tough hard work and tough hard experience can bring any group together."

The necessary tools to be a successful rower have carried over to other aspects of rowers' lives. "I've become a much better student," Fineman said "My grades have improved and there has been a direct connection between my racing performance and my performance in school. During the school year, I've had to develop new strategies to become as efficient as possible to get my schoolwork done. Starting rowing and having more constraint times, has made me a more efficient student."

Fineman and Heinz have proven to be the epitome in what Oakland Strokes aspires their rowers to be. "It makes us proud to see our kids make the national team and represent the country on the biggest stage," Jovanovic said. "I can talk about my experiences, but they have to personally experience it. I always try to have them bring it back to themselves because it always starts inside of them, getting them to focus on themselves and what they are doing, building confidence through hard and good workouts. In the end, it's their development and daily improvement and their own accomplishments."

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