

A Conversation with Mercer Alum Cate Porter- April 16, 2020

We had a chance to catch up with former Mercer Junior summer athlete Cate Porter who is a member of the Class of 2020 and Women's Rowing Team at Brown University. Cate is still in Providence working on her senior thesis for her major in Environmental Science, but her rowing career at Brown was cut short by Coronavirus. (She's studying how climate change affects plant growth, seeing how they differ with changes to temperature and other variables. Fortunately, her lab work is done.) For now, at least, rowing is over. She's "no longer a member of Brown's crew team" as the school shut down all access to facilities and the team is not practicing.



Brown recruited Cate to row for their very competitive team from Kent School where she attended high school. Cate rowed for Mercer Junior Rowing beginning in 7th grade and went on to row at Kent, Mercer during the summers, and of course, Brown. Rowing for Mercer was where she got her first experiences with competitive racing. She competed at Canadian Henley and Youth Nationals wearing the Mercer logo, often as a sculler racing the single.

We talked about Cate's experience rowing at Brown for John and Phoebe Murphy who have coached the women's team for 36 and 34 years respectively, and the ultimate draw for Cate to choose Brown. They did not disappoint. She describes rowing as a hard balance between athletics and academics but perhaps easier there than other very top teams because "the coaches understood that academics were a priority". Despite that, Cate said it was "very tough" but she felt that rowing taught her to be "gritty and disciplined"; the "schedule is very beneficial, you learn how to be very efficient" with your time.

When and how did you find out that the spring rowing season would be canceled?

"We heard that Harvard & another team made the first move, then on Wednesday (March 11th) the Ivy League canceled the Ivy League championships. We got a message not to come to a scheduled Lift practice tomorrow am, we'll have a meeting in the afternoon. That meeting took place on the 3rd floor of the Brown University boathouse where both the erg room is and the Coaches' office are located. It hit me the most climbing the stairs to that meeting with the coaches holding back tears, and they're gruff New Englanders. Coach John was reading a statement and had to pass it to his wife, Coach Phoebe, to finish it. They advised us not to break training rules yet. We weren't allowed to use the facilities. Campus is locked down."

To add to the brutality for Cate, 3 days earlier she broke 7 minutes on her 2k time during the second full team 2k test of 2020. She described that moment of pride as she stood afterwards, as the coaches have athletes stand if they PR. Cate stood up alone and was the only person to break 7 minutes that day (3 other had done so including a freshman earlier in the year, the first at Brown since Tessa Gobbo who went on to win gold for the USA). Cate was the 1st new person to break 7 minutes, a huge accomplishment for sure.

Cate described her "shock and disbelief at that news." "Hard to process. Everything is very different and strange on the whole. So abrupt for the start of the spring racing season to be pulled out of it."

"The Class of 2020 is not practicing anymore, not part of the team anymore. There's no coaching, no campus facilities. The Class of 2020 lost something that we'll never get back. Hopefully no one will experience this. We lost something we can't get back."

What's next?

Cate will finish the spring academic term and her career as a member of the Class of 2020 at Brown University. She's not sure about a graduation ceremony which she said might be postponed until the fall. As far as rowing, the NCAA gave all classes another year of eligibility so some people could transfer. She's been considering options for grad school and a possible 5th year of rowing but for now nothing is certain.

She's staying in touch with friends and teammates through social media and is working out, trying to stay in shape hoping to get access to an erg soon. Cate describes her relationship with rowing as "charged"; she's spent ½ of her lifetime with the sport, beginning with her time at Mercer. As recently as the week her senior year collegiate rowing career at Brown was canceled, she was switched from port to starboard. She credits her experience sculling with Mercer during the summers as helping to make that possible.

Any takeaways of the benefits of rowing beyond competition?

Losing this season has "made me look back and appreciate the things I might not have. All the moments were more important. My class has bonded over mutual misfortunes. Grittiness, which is applicable to life after rowing as well. There's something very special about rowing. The way that you feel being on the water, that's unique to rowing." Cate played ice hockey, ran cross country and swam. "They're all difficult, but there's nothing like winning in rowing. It's so physically demanding, you feel the other boats break as you win. Rowing is the ultimate teamwork sport."