

Oxford vs. Cambridge: The Boat Race [C1]

Oxford e Cambridge sono da secoli simbolo di eccellenza accademica, ma la loro rivalità sportiva è altrettanto famosa. Scopriamo come si preparano alla celebre regata annuale sul Tamigi immergendoci nel cuore di questa tradizione.

When you think of the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, prestige and academic rigour may come to mind. However, sporting excellence is another **hallmark** of these world-famous institutions. Being collegiate universities, meaning they are divided into small communities called 'colleges', sports can either be played at a college or at university level. While colleges have teams and **crews** that compete against one another, university-level teams compete against teams and **crews** from other universities.

MEDIEVAL ORIGINS

Cambridge University was established in 1209, and Oxford University between 1249 and 1264. As such, they are the oldest universities in Britain. All of Oxford's thirty-six colleges and Cambridge's thirty-one have their own boat clubs where students can learn **to row** and compete against other students at the same university. Rowers **strive** to be **awarded** a 'full blue', which means they are selected to represent their university in the annual Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race. The Boat Race is an opportunity for the universities to compete against each other and **showcase** the best of their talent. Members of both **crews** are traditionally known as 'blues' and each boat as a 'Blue Boat', with Cambridge in light blue and Oxford in dark blue, making it easy for the **hundred million-plus** viewers worldwide to tell which crew is which.

GENDER ISSUES

The **varsity** boat race takes place on the River Thames in London. There have been four official courses since it was first held in 1829: Henley-on-Thames, Westminster to Putney, River Great Ouse and the Championship Course. Originally only open to male competitors, from 1856 on, the event took place annually, with the only exceptions made during the two World Wars and the Covid-19 pandemic. The first race for women took place in 1927, but it was only from 1964 on that the Women's Boat Race was held annually.

THE BOAT RACE 2025

The Boat Race takes place on 13 April this year on the Championship Course, a 6.8-kilometre **stretch** of the Thames in south-west London, between the **boroughs** of Putney and Mortlake. To find out more, Speak Up contacted twenty-four-year-old student Sian Dennett. Originally from Yeovil, Somerset, in south-west England, she began rowing for Balliol College, Oxford, where she completed her **undergraduate degree** in Maths and Statistics. Now studying for a DPhil (Doctor of Philosophy) in Healthcare Data Science at Oxford's Keble College, she is participating again in university-level rowing and training with the women's boat race **squad**. As Sian explains, many rowers start out just for fun. **Sian Dennett (English accent):** I knew **from the outset** that I was going to try rowing in Oxford because it's such a thing. And as soon as you tell someone you're going to go to Oxford, they ask, "Oh, are you going to try rowing?" And I thought I'd just have **to give it a go**. And I did, and immediately really liked it. My first year was very disruptive because it was a Covid year. So there actually wasn't that much rowing, but come the end of my first year, we were sort of back into the routine. So I was actually learning **to row** then. It was just so [much] fun. I'd never seen a rowing boat before. It was totally new, it was nice to be outside and there's a couple of college events happening **throughout** the year between all the different colleges, and they're just so much fun. Total chaos... **carnage**... There are so many people who, like me, never rowed before. They don't know what they're doing. 'Cause we have quite a small, fairly **narrow stretch** of river in Oxford where the college is trained, and there's boats everywhere, like, oh, that's crazy... but yeah, really, really fun. So

that was when I began rowing and then for the four years of my **undergraduate degree**, I rowed at Balliol and nowhere else. We had some successes in my college, in my crew. We did well in a couple of these competitions, which made it all the more fun. I finished my **undergraduate degree** over the summer, came back in September to do a postgraduate degree now at Keble, and I felt like I was ready for something new, a bit of a challenge, and I thought that I would give uni rowing — Oxford rowing — a go, which is how I've ended up here.

TRAINING REGIME

Sian described what goes into the rigorous training programme in the **run-up** to The Boat Race. It includes 'erging', indoor rowing using a machine. **Sian Dennett:** The season usually starts in September and the Boat Race is usually March-April time. There's quite an intense training programme which is based in Oxford, we train at Iffley sports centre most of the time. We also have our boathouses in Wallingford, which is a town [a] **thirty-minute drive** out of Oxford. So we row in Wallingford and we train all other things at Iffley, in Oxford. We train twice a day usually. We do get rest days, but it's usually like, training in the morning, training in the afternoon or evening **to fit around** people's academic **commitments** and schedules, which are usually 9 to 5. So, primarily, lots and lots of training is part of the preparation for the Boat Race. But that training does vary **throughout** the season. It also takes various different forms. We obviously, of course, actually row on the river, but we also do lots of erging on the rowing machine and we do weight sessions to kind of keep your body robust and build strength.

DRESS REHEARSAL

The practice run of The Boat Race is known as Trial Eights. We asked Sian what this event involves. **Sian Dennett:** Just before Christmas is the Trial Eights race event, which both Cambridge and Oxford do separately. And essentially, Trial Eights is a **dress rehearsal**, like a **mock boat race**. Everything is exactly the same as it will be on Boat Race day, but it's Oxford **v.** Oxford and, separately, Cambridge **v.** Cambridge. So it's like an internal

event, and you're supposed to be split into like matched crews, so that it's supposed to be quite a close battle when you go down the course. So you kind of get the most out of it as an athlete. And that's quite a big part as well of the run-up and like part of the selection process for the coaches. And then moving forward to the Boat Race this year, there's the Fixture Series, which, again, are kind of internally organised, so Oxford organise their own and Cambridge organise their own. But usually you race other highly-competitive crews from somewhere else in the country. So for example, Leander Club or Oxford Brookes University. You invite them down to London and you do this kind of mock boat race with them. You go head-to-head with them, and it's a good way to kind of not only get some training in, but also see where you stand, see how things are kind of shaping up. And that's again another important part for coaches when it comes to selecting crews and all those kinds of things.

DIFFERENT RIVERS

While Cambridge students' local river is the River Cam, Oxford students practise rowing on the same river that The Boat Race is held on, the River Thames. While this appears to be an advantage, the conditions experienced on the Thames can vary greatly along its course. The Thames is 346 kilometres in length, beginning at Thames Head in the Cotswolds and ending in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, where the Thames Estuary meets the North Sea. As conditions are not always optimal during The Boat Race, there have been cases when boats have started to fill with water. In 1978, for example, the Cambridge crew sank as strong winds forced water into the boat just before the finish line. While Oxford won the race that year, Cambridge went down in history, earning a place on Channel 4's list of 100 Greatest Sporting Moments. We asked Sian to tell us more about what it can feel like to be on different sections of the Thames in a rowing boat. **Sian Dennett:** It's just a different beast. Like, it's the same river, if you followed it all the way down, you would start in Wallingford and end up where we row on the Boat Race course. But it's really, really wide and it's tidal as well. So the direction of flow changes with the tide. And it's a bit more exposed, it's quite windy, the water

gets very **choppy** and **rough**. And sometimes you... honestly you feel like you're rowing on the ocean.

TIME MANAGEMENT

As all participants in the race are also in the process of completing their studies, there can be challenges surrounding time management in a high-pressure sporting and academic environment, as Sian explains. **Sian Dennett:** I would say finding the balance is definitely the most challenging thing. You're in a **squad** full of people who are **high achievers**, very **driven**, everybody wants to do everything right all of the time and get it 100 per cent. So, you've got **to be on your A-game** a lot of the time. And that's not just in the rowing aspect of their life, that's also in the academic part of their life, and probably everyone's very sociable and wants to have lots of nice time with their friends. And, to be honest, I found it, at least so far, hard to do it all, and often actually not possible to do it all. You know, **something has to give** a lot of the time. And when you've got a degree to be doing as well, that's really hard because you need to be concentrating and in the right kind of state of mind to get your academics done, maybe you've got exams coming up, pressure from all of that... And to be honest, maybe the thing that you feel like you want to do the most is just go and have a pint with your **mates** at the pub. But I've been having such a great experience, I've learnt so much about myself and my physical limits and how **to push myself**. **Regardless of outcome** for me, I'm here for the process as well. It's just like so amazing and I'm absolutely loving it.

Glossary

- **crews** = equipaggi
- **strive** = sforzarsi
- **varsity** = squadra universitaria
- **high achievers** = persone di successo
- **mates** = compagni
- **to push myself** = spingere te stesso
- **Regardless of outcome** = indipendentemente dal risultato
- **to row** = remare
- **showcase** = mostrare
- **hundred million-plus** = più di cento milioni
- **get the most out of** = trarre il massimo da
- **narrow** = stretto
- **v.** = contro
- **sank** = affondare
- **down in history** = entrare nella storia
- **tidal** = con le maree
- **boroughs** = distretti
- **commitments** = impegni
- **shaping up** = svilupparsi, progredire
- **matched** = accoppiati
- **Fixture Series** = serie di appuntamenti
- **head-to-head** = faccia a faccia
- **rough** = agitata
- **something has to give** = bisogna rinunciare a qualcosa
- **hallmark** = marchio distintivo
- **undergraduate degree** = laurea
- **from the outset** = fin dall'inizio
- **carnage** = massacro
- **to fit around** = adattarsi a
- **driven** = motivati
- **awarded** = assegnare
- **squad** = squadra
- **to give it a go** = provare

- **run-up** = preparazione
- **thirty-minute drive** = viaggio di trenta minuti in auto
- **dress rehearsal** = prova generale
- **stretch** = tratto
- **mock boat race** = regata simulata
- **split** = dividere
- **choppy** = mossa
- **to be on your A-game** = dare il massimo di te