“Pocock Racing Shells and the Tree of Life”

Don Costello will display and share the history of two racing shells that George Pocock built in the 1960’s, and of a third shell, a Pocock Classic, built by Steve Chapin in 2009 in the Pocock tradition. These rare, fragile, rowable boats are constructed primarily from western redcedar, known by the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast as the “tree of life”.

The presentation will include a demonstration of rowing technique; a brief history of Costello’s involvement in the sport of rowing as competitor, coach, developer, and historian; and his perspective on why western redcedar is to him, indeed, the “tree of life”.

Don Costello was raised in the wine country of California. He discovered crew (competitive rowing) in fall of 1966 as a freshman at UC Berkeley, raced intercollegiately for Cal Crew during his undergraduate years, and has been deeply involved in the sport ever since. He has had two stints coaching crew for University of Oregon (1971-1972 and 2015-currently); was the founder of several other collegiate- and private rowing programs; and serves as business manager for several of Norway’s Olympic rowers. The Pocock shells come from the group of wooden singles, doubles and oars he has assembled into one of the largest private collections in the country. He has been an Oregon lawyer since 1977, a judge since 1984, and Chief Judge of the Coquille Indian Tribe since 1997. He lives in Coos Bay with his wife Karen, who is also a lawyer and rower, and his father Howard.
“Pocock Racing Shells and the Tree of Life”

The three Pocock racing shells on display today come from the Costello collection of wooden racing singles and doubles, sculls and oars:

2009 Pocock Classic Single (1x), BETTER ANGEL Built by Steve Chapin of Port Townsend, WA for Don Costello.

The shell is a “teardrop” heavyweight, meant for a 190# – 220# rower. George Pocock designed the teardrop hull to meet the requirements of the great American sculler Joe Burk. The beam of the teardrop hull is widest at the bow end of the stateroom, giving greater buoyancy and “run” for the sculler with slow-out-of-bow technique.


Standard hull for heavyweight rower. Brass nails through the skin to the keelson identify Mr. George Pocock as its builder.

1968 Pocock Double (2x) ALAMEDA. Built by George Y. Pocock for Long Beach Rowing Association.

For heavyweight rowers. Can convert to a pair (each rower has one long oar rather than two shorter sculls).

The Costello collection includes:

Singles (1x):

1930 George Sims (England)
1967 George Pocock (US)
1975 B & H Restricted Single (England)
1976 Pirsch (Germany)
1982 Empacher (Germany)
1984 Ron Owen (US)
1987 Ron Owen (US)
2009 Pocock Classic (US)

Doubles (2x):

1958 Stampfli (Switzerland) – winner of silver medal at 1960 Rome Olympics and multiple world- and European championships
1968 George Pocock – can also be rowed as a pair-without-coxswain (2-)
2004 Vak Shell / Juergen Kaschper (Canada)

Sculls (each rower has two, slightly less than 10’ in length) and oars (each rower has one, about 12’ in length):

Many, built in US, England, Germany, and Australia
GEORGE POCOCK, SHELL BUILDER, 84

SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES  MARCH 20, 1976

SEATTLE, March 19 (UPI)—George Pocock, internationally known for his construction of racing shells, died here last night. He was 84 years old.

Mr. Pocock, a native of England, established his shell-building business at the University of Washington in 1912 and maintained the quarters until 1926 when he moved to a site on the north end of Lake Union.

Virtually every oarsman who has ever competed in crew racing rowed shells built by Mr. Pocock and his son, Stan, who has continued the business since his father's retirement.

Dominated at Regattas

George Pocock was a master builder, a craftsman of the old school, who never lost his dedication to absolute accuracy, perfect fit and innovative design.

In his lifetime of shell building, he tried, and used or discarded, nearly every type of wood, devised new methods of construction and spectacularly improved racing-shell design and speed. By the mid-1920's his boats began to dominate, and even monopolize, intercollegiate regattas. He became the dean of American shell builders, supplying the boats used by the Naval Academy in a 31-race winning streak and those rowed by United States Olympic crews.

Mr. Pocock's shop became the leading shell-building plant in the country, turning out about 50 percent of all those used by American college crews.

Others imitated his designs, but rowing coaches insisted that Pocock shells went faster and stood up better. This was a result of the technique that Mr. Pocock had learned as a boy in his father's boat shop in Teddington, England. He served his apprenticeship under his father, who had learned from his grandfather.
George Pocock emigrated to Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1911. He started building boats for the Vancouver and Victoria Rowing Clubs, and the next year sold his first shell to a college, the University of Washington, where he was invited to set up shop. With Pocock shells, Washington oarsmen took the national title and his reign began.

Among the innovations developed at the Seattle shop were lightweight oars, special oarlocks, sliding seats and a special steering apparatus combining a fin and rudder. The latter invention, placed directly under the coxswain’s seat in place of a tiller at the stern enabled the coxswain to steer by a rudder post with his hands or, in an emergency, with his knees.

Mr. Pocock’s oars were made of two hollow shells around a solid core and skillfully joined four pieces of wood.

He used Sitka spruce from British Columbia for the keels and gunwales of the shells. Pound for pound, this wood is tougher than steel. An even harder wood, Australian ironbark, was used for the track upon which the seat rollers move.

The seats, of Idaho white pine, gave the eight oarsmen a mechanical advantage by allowing them to get their legs into a stroke. Also, the shift in weight allowed by the sliding seats helped propel the shell.

In applying the planking, or skin, of the boat, the designer used red cedar, placing it over 59 pairs of ribs of Indiana ash. The rudders were made of wild cherry or Honduras mahogany.

With a Pocock shell, a heavyweight crew could attain a speed of 15 miles an hour.

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A version of this archives appears in print on March 20, 1976, on Page 25 of the New York edition with the headline: GEORGE POCOCK, SHELL BUILDER, 84.
Pocock Singles Project

Pocock Wooden Racing Singles

Archival from the old Pocock Racing Shell website, by permission

Selected Links

Archive Index
Wooden Shells
Parts List
History
Refinishing
Who Built It
George on Rowing

"We try to give them shells that will raise their spirit a little above their competitors."

Pocock's Cedar Singles are constructed in the traditional fashion from carefully selected wood. The hull is unique in that the skin is made from a single steam bent plank of 3/32" thick Western Red Cedar. The planks were purchased in the 1970's and sawn from trees 600 to 800 years old. The fineness of the grain, often one hundred lines to the inch, was rare even in the 1950's. These materials, combined with 75 years of expertise, result in a finely crafted single scull of rare beauty.

Standard Single

Classic competition single: fine bow section with maximum beam midship. Suitable for the widest range of rowing conditions and body weights.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capacity</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Beam</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midweight</td>
<td>150-200 lbs</td>
<td>26'-6&quot;</td>
<td>12&quot;</td>
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Teardrop Single

Originally built in large and small versions for the great scullers Joe Burk and Joe Ayngal, these boats carry their greatest beam at the forward cockpit, with relatively deep and narrow stern sections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Max Capacity</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Beam</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>220 lbs</td>
<td>26'-6&quot;</td>
<td>13&quot;</td>
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George Pocock's intimacy with the material properties of wood, knowledge of how it must interact with a crew and poetic nature made the Pocock name legendary.

Nearly a century later, we continue to pursue the highest standard of excellence. Diligence, science and art come together in the sometimes invisible nuances that make Pocock boats unique.

The Artisan at Work:

http://pocockclassic.org/pocock/woodboat.html
### SCULLING OARS

We also have beautifully handcrafted Competition and Club series sculling oars. These unique pieces of work are both beautiful and functional.

The type of wood selected for the sculling oars is chosen for both its quality and its appearance. Club Series oars are Sitka Spruce, and the Competition oars are made from Engleman Spruce with Australian Ironbark along the back of the loom. The oar loom for both Competition and Club Series oars consists of three bonded pieces; a single plank is split to make "book ended" sides, and another piece is cut for the center. This superior design prevents twisting or warping as the wood expands and contracts. The center and side pieces of the Competition oars are milled to form a bi-tubular loom, thus reducing the weight of the sculls while maintaining their stiffness. The darker Australian Ironbark is an extremely dense wood that provides extra stiffness along the back of the loom.

Due to the unavailability of the wood and artisans, our current stock will be the last wood boats and oars produced by us.

### Prices:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competition Series:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engleman Spruce w/Australian Ironbark, 9'-7&quot; or 9'-10&quot;</td>
<td>$640 / pair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club Series:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitka Spruce, 9'-7&quot; or 9'-10&quot;</td>
<td>$425 / pair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pocock Classic Cedar Single

Owner:
Don Owen Costello
Better Angel Rowing Endeavors, LLC
P.O. Box 600
Coos Bay, Oregon USA
bowman@betterangelrowing.com

Vessel description

The Pocock classic cedar single is a type of rowing shell in which a single rower uses two oars to row—or scull—the boat. The single is built for competition and is light and stiff.

With a length of 26 feet and 6 inches and a beam of 12 inches, it weighs only 34 pounds, yet is designed for a rower weighing up to 210 pounds.

The hull planking of a Pocock cedar rowing shell is 3/32" thick, like the skin of a Stradivarius violin. The hull of the Pocock single is unique in that the skin is made from a book-matched pair of steam-bent Western red cedar planks. Yellow cedar is used for bedes, cheeks and washboards; sugar pine for the keel, gunwales and frame; ash for the shoulders.

No drawn plans exist for the Pocock cedar single. Only the forms, jigs and molds that perpetuate their traditional shape and construction remain.
Historically, Pocock shells were made by four generations of the Pocock family. In the heyday of Pocock's wooden shell-building, all piece parts were made in multiples and stockpiled. Then construction of the hulls occurred separately, one or two at a time.

The wooden Pocock shell was in danger of disappearing, when Bob Brunswick, its last wooden shell builder, retired in 2003. A unique arrangement was made with the Northwest Maritime Center of Port Townsend, Washington for a collaborative effort between Brunswick and shipwright and champion sculler Steve Chapin. The knowledge of how to make these unique shells was passed down through first-hand tutorial, thus preserving the art of making these one-of-a-kind shells.

The Pocock shells are unique because the frame is omitted to save weight. The result is a monocoque hull in which the skin, as Brunswick calls it, is a structural element. The shells also use one thickness of solid, steam-bent wood per side, unlike strip-planked or cold-molded hulls. And the Pococks are made of Western red cedar, giving the shells a combination of stiffness and springiness that other boats of the type don't possess. Such new wooden-hulled singles are a rarity these days.

**Vessel details**

- **Type:** Human Powered
- **Construction:** Wood
- **Wood hull:** Yes
- **Engine:** None
- **Year built:** 2009
- **Builder:** Steve Chapin
- **Designer:** George Pocock
- **LOA:** 26'6"
Beam: 0'12"
Draft: 0' 1 1/2"