

Jabo keeps his oars in the water



Randy Jablonic

AARON MAYES, UW-MADISON, UW COMMUNICATIONS

A phone call to legendary Badger rowing coach “emeritus” Randy Jablonic finds him fresh off a lake in northern Wisconsin.

“I’m on a fishing trip with some other members of the 1959 national championship team,” said Jablonic, better known as “Jabo” to his crew teammates from 1954-60 and the student-athletes he led as an assistant and then head coach from 1960-96. “I’m here with Palmer Taylor, Dale Sharpee and Phil Mork. We just talked to Larry Schmitt on the phone. We get together every year.”

Such loyalty and long-term friendships are hallmarks of Jablonic’s life and career. When Jablonic decides on a

course of action, he’s in for the duration. His long-range thinking is evidenced in the estate gift he has made to benefit the rowing program in the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

“I came out of central Wisconsin to the University and received a much richer and broad-based education than I ever dreamed of,” he said. “Thanks to the University and the crew, I have had more than a lifetime of wonderful memories and experiences.”

Seeing how Jablonic went straight from the University and a spot on the rowing team to a coach after graduation, it can seem like that was his plan from the start. Far from it.



Randy Jablonic is seen, inset left, during his time as UW-Madison rowing coach and, left, when he was a student-athlete, letter winner and national champion.

“Well, Norm convinced me on that plane flight,” Jablonic said. “He said, ‘You’ll never get rich, but you will reap the rewards of working with young people and cashing in on friendships that will last a lifetime.’ He was so right about that.”

One could hear the sunshine in Jablonic’s voice as he talked about the student-athletes he coached through the years.

“I had all these incredible young men and women enter the program,” he said. “It’s just a richly rewarding thing to see them grow and go through this institution as top academicians turning into strong and productive citizens of this state, the country and the world. To think I had an association with such great people, that makes me the most proud.”

As each holiday season arrives, Jablonic receives warm greetings and cards from former UW-Madison rowers spread across the globe. “I see their growing families in the pictures, and they always say the nicest things. These are thrilling moments for me, to see these kids making lives for themselves and their families. That’s what it’s all about.”

He has a place in Badger lore as one of the most colorful coaches in University history, and “Jabo stories” abound. There was the time he jumped in a crew launch to help herd a steer on the loose from the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences back to shore from the middle of Lake Mendota. On another occasion, he saw a number of golf balls on the frozen lake, tacked long 2-by-4s to his boots to spread out his weight as he went after them but still managed to fall through the ice. It took a human chain of rowers to pull him from the freezing water.

And, as documented in *On Wisconsin* magazine, he was

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“It was 1960, and I was about to graduate with a major in soil science,” he said. Jablonic had started his college career as a mechanical engineering major, and he finished school a few credits short of a second degree, in journalism.

“We were coming back from the Eastern Sprints at Princeton University, and Norm Sonju, the rowing coach then, asked me if I had ever thought about going into coaching,” Jablonic said. At the time, he had job offers on the table from the Upjohn Drug Co. and Wisconsin Power and Light, and Jablonic confessed that he hadn’t considered a coaching career.

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—Randy “Jabo” Jablonic



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instrumental in the UW Marching Band and Mike Leckrone adding “The Chicken Dance” to its repertoire after he returned from a trip to Germany as coach of the U.S. national team.

“Randy ‘Jabo’ Jablonic’s history with Wisconsin rowing extends over one-third of the sport’s 118 years as a varsity sport on campus, far longer than any other UW men’s crew coach,” said Brad Taylor (’68 BBA BUS), author of “Wisconsin Where They Row, A History of Varsity Rowing at the University of Wisconsin.” “From rowing to a national championship as a UW athlete in the 1950s, to coaching a Badger rower or two into every Olympics, from his first year to his

last as head coach (1968-96), Jabo’s contribution to the men’s crew program is writ large.”

Taylor referenced Jablonic’s consistent record of success at the University as an athlete, freshman coach for eight years and then head coach.

“Thirty-seven years of Badger rowers under Coach Jablonic have learned what the desire, hard work and discipline learned leaning over the oars on Lake Mendota can carry into one’s career and life’s work,” Taylor said. “Those same rowing alums, when thinking back on their years at Wisconsin, think first of Coach Jablonic as the embodiment of that experience.”

It’s mentioned to Jabo that the current rowing teams no longer train on the frozen ice the way his student-athletes once did.

“They have a fine facility and great tools to work with, and look what they’ve done as a result,” said



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Jablonic, referring to the national IRA title won in the 2008 season. “I’m friends with (current head Coach) Chris Clark and his crew, and I stop in once in a while. Nothing has brought me greater pleasure than seeing the success Coach Clark has had.”

During the 2008 Eastern Sprints, which the Badger 8 won, “I listened live on the Internet, where there is stroke-by-stroke coverage,” Jablonic said. “When the race hit the last 500 meters, and I was sure they were going to win, I called in a message to Coach Clark.”

Similarly, he followed each stroke of the national championship race, and he again called in congratulations before the contest was finished. Was he worried he might jinx the squad? “There was no way they could lose. They were rowing a perfect pattern,” Jablonic said. “They are such a well-disciplined and well-coached team.

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are about, teaching and building a team. Participating in a sport like rowing adds a little depth and texture to the educational experience.”

Jablonic, through his gift, will add depth and texture to the program and the University he loves.

“I really believe in the Wisconsin Idea, and I have seen young men and women expand their horizons intellectually and socially,” said Jablonic, whose granddaughter is enrolled and on the rowing team. A second granddaughter started school this fall and plans to row as well. “I think it’s incumbent upon the alumni, in a sense, to protect the investment they have made in money, time and experience at Wisconsin.

“You certainly want people to recognize your university as one of the best in the world, and ours certainly is,” he said. “We need to reinvest to keep this institution world class.”