

The Boys in the Boat - Discussion Questions

1. Did you know much about rowing before reading this book? What aspects of the sport surprised you most? If you already followed the sport, what did you learn that was new? What drew you to this story if you do not generally follow sports history?
2. Compare how the Olympics were regarded in the 1930s to how they are regarded now. Why was the boys' win in 1936 significant on the eve of World War II? What political significance do the Games hold today?
3. The author uses interviews and archives from Joe Rantz, his daughter Judy, and others. How did Joe's perspective influence your reading? Why do you think he was willing to share so deeply with a relative stranger?
4. Beyond one crew, the book reflects a generation coming of age in the Great Depression. Which aspects of 1930s life struck you most? How do those circumstances compare with challenges Americans face now?
5. Rowing demands unusual physical and psychological strength. How did those demands play out in the boys' academic and personal lives, and how did their personal histories shape their approach to the sport?
6. Despite long hours training, Joe did not form close friendships on the team until his third year. Why do you think that was? What finally made him realize it mattered who else was in the boat with him?
7. Joe and Joyce maintain a loving relationship through college. How did it develop, and how did Joyce support Joe emotionally? How did her own family struggles affect their bond?
8. Coach Al Ulbrickson's leadership could be severe and guarded. What about him inspired the boys to work their hardest? What strategies did he use to foster competition and a strong work ethic, and why did they work?
9. George Pocock and Al Ulbrickson are both iconic yet very different figures. Discuss their different leadership styles and roles within Washington rowing. What enabled Pocock to connect so deeply with Joe?
10. Pocock advises Joe to give himself up to his crewmates, even at the risk of getting his feelings hurt. How did this advice affect Joe's relationships with the team and with his family?
11. What was Ulbrickson's relationship with the local and national media, and how did sportswriters influence collegiate competition? Were you surprised by the level of involvement? How does that compare to collegiate sports coverage today?
12. Ulbrickson later said a career highlight was the day in 1936 he first put Joe Rantz in the Olympic boat and watched it take off. Why was that moment so important? What made Joe special, and how did he help unify the Husky Clipper?

13. Many of the boys later admitted they each thought they were the weak link. Why might they all have felt that way, and why did it take years to say it out loud?

14. What was your most hair raising moment while reading? Even knowing the Olympic outcome, were there points you were unsure the boys would make it?