



## Henry Hollingsworth Chapel speech October 21, 2024:

Introduction by Forrester Clark '25:

*Mr. Price said to me the other day that one of the coolest parts of his job here at Brooks is seeing students he trains go off and do amazing things like play professional sports. Well, today, we're lucky to have one of those people back here at Brooks. Henry Hollingsworth graduated from Brooks not too long ago in 2017, but since then, he's accomplished a lot. After graduating as the captain of the Brooks crew team, he spent four years rowing for Brown University, during which time he earned all-Ivy and All-American honors as well as well as being elected captain. In 2022, Henry made the U.S. national team and raced in two consecutive world championships. This past summer, he represented the United States at the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris, in which he won a bronze medal. Now that he's back at Brooks, we're fortunate enough to hear about his story, So it's my privilege to welcome Henry Hollingsworth.*

Good morning, Brooks. Thanks. Thank you, Forrester, for, introducing me.

So as Forrester said, my name is Henry Hollingsworth. I was class of 2017 here at Brooks. I was lucky enough to be part of this U.S. Men's Eight that won a bronze medal at the Paris Olympics this past summer. And contrary to what you may believe, me standing there with an Olympic medal with my teammates, this story is definitely not all about success.

The sport of rowing has been my life for the past three years, and there have been many trials and tribulations that it took to get to this point and important lessons learned along the way about teamwork, perseverance and focusing all your energy into one single goal.

Rowing is a pretty niche sport, but one that I believe is especially unique in the way that it demands fitness and technique. For anyone not familiar with the sport, rowing involves a crew of athletes propelling a boat across water using oars through synchronized movements over a 2,000-meter-long race. The goal of the crew is to output as much power as possible as efficiently as possible over this roughly five-and-a-half minute effort.

My rowing career started here at Brooks down on Lake Cochichewick. I was lucky enough to have coach Smith as my coach during my senior year. I was then recruited to row at Brown [University], which is definitely a big step up both athletically and academically. For one: At Brooks, they row fours, the boats with four rowers, but in college, they row the Eight. That's a 2,000-pound object flying across the water with everyone looking backwards, except for the for the coxswain who's steering. Pretty intense.

But the whole challenge of balancing school and rowing was a level up — much more time on the water and more time wrestling with problem sets for engineering. Although, I think my time at Brooks definitely prepared me well for that.

At the end of my time at Brown, there were two paths that I was choosing between: finding a job or continuing my rowing career by trying to make the national team.

When seeking advice from Brown Rowing Alumni, the overwhelming message was that your career will always be there, but you only have one chance to pursue rowing. Even if you don't make it, you'll regret it for not having given it a shot at all and seeing the level that you were truly capable of. This was a message that has stuck with me throughout my rowing career.

So I did end up making the national team that summer and raced at the World Championships in the Czech Republic in the Men's Four. We ended up getting 10th.

The 2022 campaign was very developmental for me personally as an athlete, having to fight for my seat in the boat against some of the best rowers in the country, and racing for the first time at an international level. But in the grand scheme of things, this world championships was mostly inconsequential in the path to Olympics. It was the next year when things really started to matter, and that's where the story really begins, which is at the 2023 World Championships in Belgrade, Serbia.

This was an especially important competition because Olympic qualification spots are on the line in the pre-Olympic year. In the Eight, which is the event that I was racing in, the top five places would qualify directly for the Paris Olympics.

We were pretty confident that we'd be able to do this because we'd put down some pretty fast times in training earlier in the summer. We also had the benefit of being coached by Steve Gladstone, one of the most renowned coaches in all of rowing history. So this was our goal: fifth or higher. No exceptions. [Video shown]. That was sixth, and that's what it looks like, total despair.

We had failed in our goal to directly qualify for the Olympics, and an uncertain path would lie ahead. U.S. Rowing would have to now send the Eight to what it's known as "the Regatta of Death," where an additional two qualifying spots would be given. Officially called the final Olympic Qualification Regatta, this race in Switzerland is known by many as the place where Olympic dreams go to die. Ten percent of the athletes competing at this regatta end up qualifying for the Olympics. The rest don't.

This is why you see a huge range of emotion here with people achieving their dreams of going to the Olympics, and others having their dreams crushed after sacrificing years to get to that point.

It was now September of 2023 and this race would take place in May of 2024. We had nine months to prepare for this single, five-minute-long race. But first, we would have to rebuild.

The next few months saw many of us going our separate ways to train on our own after having been on the road since the beginning of June. The team would reconvene in January for a high-altitude training camp in Colorado Springs.

There's no actual water to row on in Colorado Springs, which might make it seem counterintuitive as a training location, but our team director assured us that the training benefits of being at high altitude would outweigh not actually being able to row on the water.

Quick biology lesson: Training at high altitude stimulates your body to produce more red blood cells, increasing your body's ability to transport oxygen to your muscles when you return to sea level. This results in greatly improved aerobic performance, which is very important for rowing.

We did a huge amount of mileage on the rowing machines over a three-week period, and we were also subjected to extensive physiological testing to ensure that our training was fully optimized.

After Colorado, we flew to Sarasota, Florida where the selection camp for the Eight would take place. By this point, most people have either quit their jobs or put them on hold to focus exclusively on rowing and getting through this selection camp.

The format was a series of races in pairs, which are two-person boats, followed by racing in fours and eights where rowers would be swapped between boats from race to race in order to determine the best combination of eight athletes from a group of 20.

Over half the athletes invited to this camp would eventually be sent home. This is one of the most stressful points of the entire summer because everyone is fighting for their life to try to make this boat, oftentimes against close friends.

Because of the nature of the swapping athletes across in between pieces, you are not allowed to know when you're going to be switched because you could just not try for every other piece so that you're fresh when your time came. This meant you had to be constantly ready to perform at your absolute maximum, and keep in mind, this is all to make a boat that was not qualified, that would still have to win this race in Switzerland at the end of May.

Luckily, during this time in Florida, I'd arranged to live in an AirBnb with three of the guys in the Men's Four: Nick, Justin and Grady. The Four was the priority boat this year, meaning U.S. Rowing was basically stacking this boat with the best athletes because they believed they had the best chance of winning a medal. The Four won silver at the 2023 Worlds where we just got sixth. Based on this result, U.S. Rowing decides to just keep the Four of the same people without opening it up for selection in order to focus more on preparation. They were basically just doing their own training when we were in Florida while we were running selection.

Being able to live with these guys and become close with these guys I think helped me a lot since they'd give me advice on how to perform best during the selection and it was really helpful just being exposed to their mindset and their approach to training as some of the best of the best.

A piece of advice that I would give you all, in whatever your endeavors may be, is to surround yourself with other people that are better than you. I really think that is one of the most effective pathways to self-improvement.

Luckily, I made it through the grueling selection process, and the boat was named.

On the last day of selection, the final lineup did a time over 1900 meters that was close to a world record pace. This gave us a lot of confidence that we had serious speed and was a good starting point for the campaign. We stayed in Florida for a few more days before flying to Seattle for another training trip with our new coach, Michael Callahan.

Callahan was the head coach of the University of Washington men's rowing team, who were, and kind of still are, the best college team in the country.

We spent all of April in Seattle with everyone living in host families around the city and commuting into the boathouse. It was during this time that we really started to come together and flow together as a crew.

We also committed to using absolutely every tool at our disposal to give ourselves the best chance of success. From lactate testing to monitor training zones, telemetry systems wired up to the boat, we used a special calculator to generate target speeds based on the wind speed and the temperature of the water. Even protocols for heat acclimation and adjusting to jet lag, any performance enhancing substance that was legal under anti-doping laws, we would do it all, in pursuit of any marginal gain possible because we knew that we had real speed and a very good chance of qualifying.

After a month in Seattle, we flew to Milan, Italy for the final two weeks of preparation before the qualifying race in Switzerland. Here, we rejoined the rest of the U.S. team and we were able to compare times with other boats including the Men's Four that were doing the same training plan as us, which is a benefit that we didn't really have in Seattle.

Pretty soon, it was time to take the three-hour bus ride north through the Alps into Switzerland.

So, the final qualification regatta: It's for everyone who that hasn't qualified for the Olympics. We would go up against Canada, Italy and Austria in the final for the last qualification spots.

We were confident about our speed, but in rowing, you can feel like you have every advantage over your opponents, but you still have to race the race and everybody starts level.

I remember being so nervous about something going wrong, an oar breaking or our steering cable breaking or the fin on the bottom of the boat coming off. And all these other boats that think they have no chance will just go crazy off the start to try and fluster other crews. It was likely that we'd be behind in the first part of the race.

On finals day, when we were warming up in the boat park, we watched as other rowers in other races before us had their Olympic dreams come true, and others had their dreams shattered and experienced total defeat and sadness.

We watched the US Men's Quad, which is another boat trying to qualify from the U.S., miss out by 0.1 seconds. We knew we just had to shut those emotions out of our mind and focus on our own race.

Winding up at the start line. I remember how quiet it was. There weren't many spectators at this race like there are at other races usually, but there were just some cows with their cowbells ringing, just grazing on the Swiss countryside, which is a weird just juxtaposition as we were about to race for our lives.

But once the race starts, all the anxiety disappears, and you're just zoned in on the race. It almost goes by in a flash. We managed to take the lead early with Canada close in second, Italy dropping back into third. We extended our margin towards the end of the race while Italy had a crazy sprint to come back even with Canada. We crossed the line first while Italy and Canada cross the line at the same time and neither of them knew who had just gotten the second qualification spot.

[Gestures to photo] That was the photo finish of second- and third-place. Italy and Canada with us off the screen to the left. Italy won by 0.01 seconds. That shows how close the margins in the sport can be. Italy at the top got to go to Paris and Canada went home.

But, anyway, we had done it. We had finally punched our ticket to Paris and it was a huge relief.

We were staying in Switzerland for the Lucerne Regatta later that week, which would happen on the same lake that we just raced on. This is the second biggest rowing race of each season where most teams that would be at the Olympics come to compete. It'd be an opportunity to test ourselves against the other top teams in the eights field, including the Germans, the Dutch and the British.

The British were the dominant team and had won the past two World Championships in the Eight. So for us, we kind of approached this race with a kind of, "Let's see what happens" attitude, since now the pressure was off for a little bit and we'd probably be happy with like a third or fourth finish. And if we did that, we'd probably be at a good place relative to the field since we are newer, younger, less experienced crew.

Let's see what happens [shows video]. We just finished a very close second behind the British, the defending world champions. So this put us in a really great spot for the rest of the campaign and leading into Paris.

It would have been pretty cool to win that race, but most of us agreed that this was still an insane and amazing result for us, and finishing a close second would probably push us more throughout the rest of the summer than if we just had won that and just took everything for granted and, like, not really pushed ourselves that hard after that.

The next six weeks saw us completing mostly the same training block as we had just done, which would take place in Princeton, New Jersey, and in Italy again. I'll mostly skip over that part.

The mantra for this period of time was to not be satisfied, meaning to continue to train incredibly hard even though we had already achieved something much greater than we initially set out to do this summer. And we did train really hard, maybe a little too hard, in fact, because one of our rowers, Evan, started to have serious problems with his back. He could only row for one or two sessions and then his back would hurt so much that he had to be out for a day or two while our spare athlete, Gus, filled in for him. We were pretty nervous that Evan wasn't going to be able to race. So we flew to Paris, unsure of who was actually going to be racing in the boat.

We arrived at the Olympic Village in the northern part of Paris, a closed-off area of newly constructed apartment buildings built to house athletes from around the world. It was bustling with activity, with hundreds of athletes, coaches and volunteers roaming the streets both on foot as well as on bikes. There were these, like, electric buggies that were zooming around. It's pretty crazy. The dining hall was a massive building with different sections serving different cuisines from all over the world. There was this game going on where you could trade pins, and people were trying to collect pins from different countries. So you'd have people trying to ask you for a U.S.A. pin in a language you've never heard before. We got two giant bags full of U.S.A. gear, and people were complaining about, "Oh, some stuff doesn't fit" and trying to trade. It didn't take us long to realize how distracting of an environment the Olympic Village was. It was almost as if performance was second, as if performance was not the priority.

With all the constant buzz combined with all the media and family and friends trying to see you, it was very important that we remain focused on our routine and our own competition. We could take part in all the pageantry and partying after the racing was over, and that part would be a lot more fun having won a medal.

So we take an athlete bus from the transport mall at the village, the rowing venue, which was located east of Paris. Luckily, there was a special Paris 2024 lane on the highway, so the buses could just blow by all the traffic, but it still took like an hour, each way, to get to the venue.

The first week after arrival was spent getting acclimated to the course and not doing anything too hard training wise, just making sure the rhythm of the boat was still there and that the rowing was still sharp.

Evan eventually got steroid injections in his back, which the doctors said, should get him through racing, so that was good. The work was already done at this point. We just had to execute for our 1st race coming up on Monday. The way that the progression would work for the eights in the Olympics is that there are seven entries: In this case, the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Australia, Romania, Italy and the Netherlands.

There'd be two initial races, called heats, with half of the field in each race, and the winner of each heat, the first place of each heat, would advance directly to the final while everyone else would have to do another race called a repechage, where the bottom #1 of that race would get eliminated, and then the top five of that race would move to the final, which is a race of six boats across. So in our heat, we would face the Netherlands, Germany and Romania.

From the racing experience in Switzerland, we knew that the Netherlands would probably be the only boat that would be able to challenge us for the win. We also knew that no one could match our speed off the start and in the final sprint, but we knew the Netherlands wouldn't be able to match us in the start and the sprint, but they would probably have more speed in the middle of the race. We would just have to hold them off in that point and then we should probably be good.

The race ended up playing out pretty much exactly as predicted with us getting an early lead and the Netherlands coming back level and us pulling ahead again in the end.

Germany finished back in third and the Romanians basically stopped trying completely halfway into the race once they realized there's no way they could win. They were just saving their energy for their next race.

In the other heat, Great Britain cruised through the line way ahead of Australia and Italy. After our race, one of the other USA coaches who happened to speak Dutch, heard the Dutch team speaking in Dutch on the docks saying like, "Oh, we really have to stay with the Americans next time. We can't get dropped off the start."

By winning our heats, it meant that us in Great Britain had the benefit of not having to do another race until the final, which would take place on Saturday. We had five days to get ready for that race, while we watched the other eights race the repertoire on Wednesday. The Netherlands, won that race and Italy got eliminated. So Italy was out and the final was set.

We also watched the US Men's Four, with those three guys I mentioned earlier, win the gold medal in their event, furthering our confidence in the training that we had done alongside them.

The night before the race, we met as a boat to discuss logistics for race day, reviewing our schedule where everything leading up to the race was planned out in explicit detail. We also took time to discuss, kind of, what this race would mean to us.

If everything went according to plan, we were going to win this race and it would be the best day of our lives. We had proven time and time again that we had the speed to do so. And if we were nervous, it was just because we cared about this, not because we had any reason to not have full confidence in ourselves and our ability. It was a pretty emotional meeting. Not many of us were able to sleep very well that night because we were so amped up, but it was okay because we knew all the other teams would be experiencing the same exact thing, if not more.

The British had been in the same lineup for three years. They'd won every race since the Tokyo Olympics, and anything less than gold for them tomorrow would be an utter failure and a disaster. So all the pressure was on them, and we knew they were scared of us because we'd essentially tied them in that race in Switzerland, the Lucerne Regatta, having only having been together for, like, a few months. Basically, we came out of nowhere.

Here's the race [shows Olympics video] We got third, behind the British and the Dutch. And we think our shortcoming was that we weren't able to get good traction on the water in the first part of the race because the rowing was just a bit too wild instead of loose and relaxed, which is how we felt during the heat. We were just so hyped up on the gravity of the situation and once we actually, like, got tired through the rest of the race, through the middle of the race, we actually started rowing better. And so you saw us kind of come back towards the end.

I think that's where the experience really comes into play of those other two crews. They're both significantly older than us and they had the experience to know how to row within and execute within their limits when everything is on the line. But of course, we were very happy to come away with a medal there.

So the special thing that I found about rowing is that people more or less get what they deserve.

It's a training sport and you simply have to put in the work required in the training, and then you have to build a trust in yourself and your teammates to have the physical and mental toughness to replicate your work in a race situation.

If you try to do something superhuman, something outside of your capabilities, you will pay for it in the end. In short, hope is not a strategy, but hard work is.

In your capacity for hard work, your capacity for grit goes through the roof when you feel like you're part of a team, part of a cause.

In the millions of meters I rode with these guys over the course of the summer there were so many instances where I was pushed by my teammates to train harder than I otherwise would have, and I'm sure that I pushed my teammates in the same way because we were just all so competitive that we wouldn't allow anyone else to be doing more.

In 1894, the father of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, adopted the Olympic motto which says, "The important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well."

Our sport isn't nearly as popular as gymnastics or swimming or basketball or track and field in the US. There are no sponsorship deals in rowing. Many Americans would not be able to describe the sport if you ask them to. Nevertheless, we chose to struggle for the love of the sport and dedicate our lives to that struggle, and I think nothing is more essential to the Olympic spirit than that. Thank you.