



“Ritual of the River” Why we trade sleep for the Corrib Mist

Lee Kortmann, Coláiste Iognáid SJ, Gaillimhe

Before the sun even considers rising over the River Corrib, a small fleet of boats are already slicing through the dark misty water.

While the majority of teenagers are deep in a Doom Scroll, or dreaming of a warm sunny beach, or a night out with friends, or crispy rashers with poached eggs and warm toast glistening with melting butter.

We are at the Coláiste Iognáid boathouse for 6:30 a.m.

Sharp.

Our breath visible in the cool crisp air as we labour to open up the stiff and stubborn heavy steel doors to carry the boats out and get them ready for work.

People often inquire, as to why I willingly spend eighteen hours a week training, or why I'd ever choose to wake up, and more pointedly get up, at 5.45am four mornings a week, two of them on school days?

The unpretentious and humble answer is searing simple. It isn't just about the sport - it's about the ritual.

Rowing is a total reset for the mind.

Every stroke requires a level of precision and synchronisation that you just can't find in a classroom or in any other sport that I am aware of.

When you're out there on the river, rowing, the repetitive motion becomes meditative.

It clears away the noise of exams. The clutter and asinine nature of social media.

And crucially the pressure to meet everyone else's expectations for you.

All white noise is on mute for that precious time off land and you are alone in your head, concentrating on each individual stroke.

Nothing else matters as your focus is so crystal clear on the job in hand.

The humdrum of life is suspended for ninety minutes and you feel truly alive. And grateful to be in that moment.

Indebted to be a rower.

As one school friend I have trained with for the past four years described the cult and joy of rowing as: "Out on the water, the noise in my head fades. It's just the rhythm, the breath, and the sunrise. It feels like freedom".

However, the physical grind is only leath an scéal.

A significant cohort of Ireland's young people are currently experiencing a massive decline in mental health, with levels of anxiety and social isolation hitting record highs.

In a country where teenage life satisfaction is recorded as amongst the lowest in Europe, the rowing club has become a sort of sanctuary for my friends and I.

It offers a sense of belonging, a sense of a collective unity that you can't find on any screen.

There is a unique bond that forms during shared exhaustion.

Whether we are shivering in the mist or pushing through a brutal session, we're doing it together.

That's where the real lesson is: "The boat only moves forward when everyone pulls together - it's the purest lesson in teamwork I've ever learnt". This discipline carries over into every other aspect of your existence.

If you can conquer the river before the rest of the city has even opened its' eyes, you feel like you can conquer anything.

Rowing builds a type of resilience that stays with you long after you've left the boathouse.

It reminds us that strength isn't just in muscles - it's in choosing to show up, working hard, giving of your best, again and again.

Rain or shine.

By the time the sun finally climbs over the horizon and paints the sky in pink and gold, we are returning to the slip.

Our muscles are aching, and our arms are heavy, however, our spirits have been lifted.

We are walking on sunshine, and we've already won the day.

For us, the Corrib is more than just water and mist. It is where we grow stronger, think clearly, and find our community.

Our tribe.

Rowing is a daily reminder that even in a world that feels increasingly out of our control, we can take charge of our own morning and our own future, one stroke at a time.

I row because, in those quiet morning hours, I'm not just an athlete. I'm part of something bigger.

And as we head off to school while the rest of the world is just waking up, we carry that feeling of accomplishment with us.

We aren't just dreaming about our goals, we're out there living them