

# TISHOMINGO READS: COMMUNITY-WIDE READING PROGRAM

**About Tishomingo Reads:** Tishomingo Reads is a community-wide reading program inspired by the “One Book, One Community” projects found across the nation. Sponsored by the Old Courthouse Museum, the Northeast Regional Library, and the Tishomingo County School District, this program aims to bring our community together through the shared experience of reading and discussing a single book.



## **This Year's Theme: The Olympic Journey: Stories of Perseverance**



In celebration of the 2024 Summer Olympics, our theme focuses on stories of perseverance. Adult readers will dive into the 2014 bestseller *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics* by Daniel James Brown. The school district will provide suggested titles for younger readers, ensuring everyone can participate.

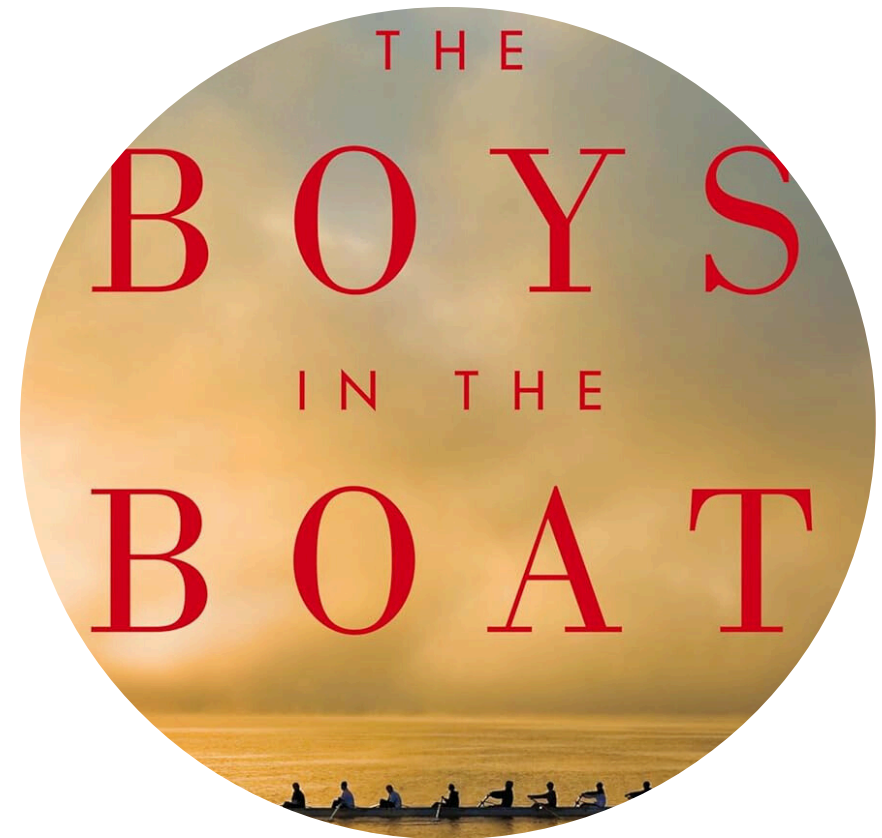


**Inspire:** Discover powerful stories that motivate and uplift.  
**Educate:** Learn and grow through shared reading experiences.  
**Connect:** Foster a sense of togetherness and community spirit.  
**Get Involved:** Book lovers of all ages are invited to join us for the first planning meeting. Come share your ideas and help shape this exciting new program!



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# Tishomingo Reads Resource Guide



## The Boys In The Boat by Daniel James Brown

Sponsored by the Old Courthouse Museum,  
the Northeast Regional Library, and  
the Tishomingo County School District

*The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*

Daniel James Brown, 2013

Penguin Group (USA)

416 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780143125471

### **Short Summary**

Out of the depths of the Depression comes an irresistible story about beating the odds and finding hope in the most desperate of times—the improbable, intimate account of how nine working-class boys from the American West showed the world at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin what true grit really meant.

It was an unlikely quest from the start. With a team composed of the sons of loggers, shipyard workers, and farmers, the University of Washington's eight-oar crew team was never expected to defeat the elite teams of the East Coast and Great Britain, yet they did, going on to shock the world by defeating the German team rowing for Adolf Hitler.

The emotional heart of the tale lies with Joe Rantz, a teenager without family or prospects, who rows not only to regain his shattered self-regard but also to find a real place for himself in the world.

Drawing on the boys' own journals and vivid memories of a once-in-a-lifetime shared dream, Brown has created an unforgettable portrait of an era, a celebration of a remarkable achievement, and a chronicle of one extraordinary young man's personal quest.  
(Information courtesy of Penguin Group)

### **About the Author**

*In his own words:*

I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and attended Diablo Valley College, the University of California at Berkeley, and UCLA. I taught writing at San Jose State University and Stanford before becoming a technical writer and editor. I now write narrative nonfiction books full time. My primary interest as a writer is in bringing compelling historical events to life as vividly and accurately as I can.

I live in the country outside of Seattle, Washington with my wife, two daughters, and an assortment of cats, dogs, chickens, and honeybees. When I am not writing, I am likely to be birding, gardening, fly fishing, reading American history, or chasing bears away from the bee hives.  
(Information courtesy of the author's website.)

### **Survey**

Free copies of this title were provided by a grant from the Mississippi Library Commission and the Mississippi Center for the Book. Please fill out this survey for our grant report and to help determine next year's title! Return completed surveys to the luka Library or the Old Courthouse Museum.

How did you hear about this project?

Why did you decide to participate?

Where did you get your copy of *The Boys in the Boat*?

Did you read and discuss the book with friends, in a book discussion group, or just by yourself?

Were the discussion materials in this booklet helpful to you?

Why or why not?

How did reading the book affect you?

Do you think this title was a good selection?

What would you like to see for future Tishomingo Reads selections?

## Notes:

## Reviews

The astonishing story of the UW's 1936 eight-oar varsity crew and its rise from obscurity to fame....The individual stories of these young men are almost as compelling as the rise of the team itself. Brown excels at weaving those stories with the larger narrative, all culminating in the 1936 Olympic Games... A story this breathtaking demands an equally compelling author, and Brown does not disappoint. The narrative rises inexorably, with the final 50 pages blurring by with white-knuckled suspense as these all-American underdogs pull off the unimaginable.

*Seattle Times*

This riveting tale of beating the odds (and the Germans) at the 1936 Olympics is a rousing story of American can-do-ism. It's also a portrait of the nine boys who first rowed together for the University of Washington, and of the one in particular who made the sport his family and his home.

*Parade*

Brown's book juxtaposes the coming together of the Washington crew team against the Nazis' preparations for the Games, weaving together a history that feels both intimately personal and weighty in its larger historical implications. This book has already been bought for cinematic development, and it's easy to see why: When Brown, a Seattle-based nonfiction writer, describes a race, you feel the splash as the oars slice the water, the burning in the young men's muscles and the incredible drive that propelled these rowers to glory.

*Smithsonian*

In this sweeping saga, Brown vividly relates how, in 1936, nine working-class rowers from the University of Washington captured gold at the Berlin Olympics.... [T]hese athletes overcame the hopelessness common during the Great Depression by learning to trust themselves and one another, and by rowing with grace and power.... [A] superb book. —

Jerry P. Miller, Cambridge, MA

*Library Journal Magazine*

## Discussion Questions:

### SPOILER ALERT!

These book discussion questions are highly detailed and will ruin plot points if you have not read the book.

1. What are the differences, if any, as to how the Olympics were regarded in the 1930s to how they are regarded now?
2. What are your thoughts on Avery Brundage and his role on the Olympic committee?
3. Bobby Moch was Jewish. Knowing what he knew about Germany, are you surprised he went? Would you have gone? Why did his father not tell him sooner?
4. Let's talk about Joe's family life. What are your thoughts? Specifically Thula and Harry ?
5. Which relationship do you believe was ultimately the most pivotal for Joe?
6. Ulbrickson kept putting different boys in different boats, what do you think made these boys fit together?
7. What do you think was the turning point for Joe to become a unit with the rest of the boys in the boat?
8. Why do you think the boys were so unbeatable?
9. How much of a pivotal character was Pocock? Could they have won without him?
10. What did you think about the way the Germans handled the race?

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**A:** Certainly because they hailed from the West they felt that they had something to prove, both to the long-entrenched rowing establishment and to the press in the East. That helped them forge their identity. It painted them as underdogs even though in some ways their natural surroundings—plenty of ice-free rowable water all year long—actually probably favored them. Because they were seen as somewhat rustic, their accomplishments attracted all the more attention in the East, and that in turn helped fuel their success and their confidence.

I do think you can make a very good argument that they are the greatest collegiate crew of all time, and I base that on two things in particular. For one, they had to row and win at both very short (two-thousand-meter) and very long (four-mile) distances. There's nothing like that today, and this crew, both in 1936 (their gold medal year) and in 1937, was simply unbeatable. No one defeated them over that two-year stretch. Second, they were not recruited from all over the world, as today's crews are. They had no modern erg (rowing) machines or specialized training routines or psychological support. They were just incredibly tough and incredibly good and incredibly fast.

**Q. Were you a fan of crew and the Olympics before you starting work on the book? How did your conversations with Joe change your perspective on crew or the Olympics or team sports in general?**

**A:** The only awareness I had of the sport growing up was that in the 1930s my father had been a huge fan of Ky Ebright's crew at the University of California at Berkeley, where both he and I went to school. Ironically, Ebright turns out to be one of the principal antagonists for Joe and the boys in the boat, as Cal was Washington's main rival through much of their story. But I had little familiarity with the sport beyond that. In a way, I think that unfamiliarity might have helped me write the book. Because I wanted to make sure I got everything right on a technical level as well as on a psychological level, I immersed myself in rowing lore, interviewed oarsmen and coaches, went out on the water with the freshman crew from the University of Washington, and generally learned everything I could about the sport. I don't think I've ever researched anything so thoroughly in my life.

And I also have to say that while I've never participated in team sports much—too short to be an oarsman and too fat to be a coxswain, for instance—the experience of writing this book has really opened my eyes to some of the positives that can come out of team sports. I honestly believe that crew saved Joe's life, or at least redeemed it and made it worth living. If he had never been on crew I don't think there's any doubt but that he would have remained somewhat damaged goods—something of a loner and somewhat dysfunctional—all his life.

**Q. The Boys in the Boat is set during the financial depression of the 1930s, when millions of Americans lost their homes and jobs. Yet, in the midst of this despair, sports provided an avenue of success for athletes and a major distraction for the public at large. Why do you think sports, and the story of the 1936 University of Washington crew in particular, provided a sense of hope and escape for their fellow Americans?**

**A:** I think this story is much like the Seabiscuit story in that regard. These nine boys were ordinary, working-class Americans from the rugged Pacific Northwest. They were the sons of loggers and fishermen and dairy farmers. Almost any ordinary American could identify with them, particularly in economic terms. Like everyone else, they were struggling simply to feed and clothe themselves. So in that sense they served as a model—something you could identify with if you were struggling yourself. This perception grew even more acute when they began to compete against the often very wealthy boys at Ivy League schools in the East. And then even more when they began to compete against the aristocratic British boys from Oxford and Cambridge. And most of all, of course, when they competed against the handpicked Nazi oarsmen in Berlin. It's hard to imagine a starker representation of good and evil brought face-to-face than these nine American kids dressed in ragged old sweatshirts and mismatched shorts racing against regimented blond oarsmen in crisp white uniforms with swastikas on their chests.

**Q. Working as a team of nine, how did the group mentality come to shape each individual's perception of himself outside of the boat?**

**A:** Rowing is unusual in the degree to which it demands that very strong-willed young men and women must lay down their egos and put the needs of the crew ahead of their individual wants and needs. This experience totally redefined Joe Rantz's view of life, and I think it did the same for many if not all of the boys. To succeed at the level they did, they had to become bonded in a way that is almost impossible to describe except by telling the whole story—indeed, that is what the book attempts to do. I think all nine of them would have told you that the experience defined the way they viewed work and competition and life in general for as long as they lived. They wound up being unusually capable, but also unusually humble men.

**Q. There's an interesting dichotomy between the rowers of the East Coast who came from well-to-do families and were at elite Eastern schools and those members of the University of Washington crew who became the 1936 gold medalists. How do you feel the background of the West Coast boys helped them become the champions they were? Why does this particular team stand out as one of—if not the—best of all time?**

## **Additional Discussion Questions**

1. Did you know much about rowing before reading *The Boys in the Boat*? If not, what aspects of the sport surprised you most? If so, did you learn anything about rowing that you didn't know before? And if you don't generally follow sports or sports history, what made you want to read this book?
2. While *The Boys in the Boat* focuses on the experiences of Joe Rantz and his teammates, it also tells the much larger story of a whole generation of young men and women during one of the darkest times in American history. What aspects of life in the 1930s struck you most deeply? How do the circumstances of Americans during the Great Depression compare to what America is facing now?
3. Joe and Joyce maintain a very loving and supportive relationship throughout Joe's formative years, with Joyce consistently being his foundation, despite Joe's resistance to relying on her. How did their relationship develop while they were still in college? In what ways did Joyce support Joe emotionally? What about Joyce's own challenges at home? How do you think her relationship with her parents affected her relationship with Joe?
4. Al Ulbrickson's leadership style was somewhat severe, to say the least, and at many times, he kept his opinions of the boys and their standings on the team well-guarded. Even with this guardedness, what about him inspired Joe and the boys to work their hardest? What strategies did Ulbrickson use to foster competition and a strong work ethic among them and why?
5. At one point, Pocock pulls Joe aside to tell him "it wasn't just the rowing but his crewmates that he had to give himself up to, even if it meant getting his feelings hurt" (p. 235). How do you think this advice affected Joe's interactions with the other boys? How do you think it might have affected Joe's relationship to his family, especially after the deaths of Thula Rantz and his friend Charlie MacDonald?
6. Later in the book, it is noted "all along Joe Rantz had figured that he was the weak link in the crew" (p. 326), but that he found out much later in life that all the other boys felt the same way. Why do you think that was? And why do you suppose they didn't reveal this to each other until they were old men?
7. What was your favorite hair-raising moment in *The Boys in the Boat*? Even knowing the outcome of the 1936 Olympic Games, was there any point where you weren't sure if Joe and the boys would make it?

(Questions courtesy of the publisher)

**More Themes to Explore:  
Teamwork and Trust**

Perhaps the most important theme of *The Boys in the Boat* is teamwork, both in the sense of working as part of a literal team and the metaphorical sense of trusting and cooperating with other people.

**Sports, Politics, and Community**

*The Boys in the Boat* isn't just a book about rowers; it's also about the political role that athletic events play in different communities. In the first half of the 20th century, rowing was one of the most popular American sports—as popular as football or basketball in the 21st century. Teams from around the country traveled to compete, with tens of thousands of fans watching and millions more listening via the radio.

**East Versus West**

*The Boys in the Boat* explores the vast cultural divide between the Eastern and Western United States in the early twentieth century. While the idea of an “East-West” rivalry is still a big part of American society, especially when it comes to sports, many of the differences between Eastern and Western America have disappeared in the last century.

**Propaganda**

While the majority of *The Boys in the Boat* is about the American crew programs of the 1930s, the rest of the book is about the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin, Germany, hosted and organized by the Fascist government of Adolf Hitler. Working with his Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, and the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler instituted a top-to-bottom makeover for Berlin, which manipulated thousands of foreign athletes, politicians, and diplomats into thinking that the city—and, by extension, Nazi Germany—was the height of civilization and enlightenment.

**Class**

Another major theme of *The Boys in the Boat* is class, and particularly the conflict between different socioeconomic classes. The book takes place during the Great Depression, an era when the collapse of the stock market and the decline of industry threatened to wipe out the middle class. Many families that had never wanted for food were thrust into poverty for the first time. At a school such as the University of Washington, where the book is set, the divide between the wealthiest and the poorest Americans was particularly stark.

Theme information courtesy of LitCharts.

**Q. What did you discover in your research that most surprised you?**

**A:** There were quite a few surprises, but I'd say three stand out. The first was the degree of absolute devotion these nine men had for one another, literally to the day the last of them died. Another was the extraordinary physical demands of rowing. There's nothing else quite like it in sports or in life in terms of sheer endurance and pain. (There's also nothing else quite like it in terms of the comradeship and teamwork it demands.) And the third surprise was quite different—a big historical revelation for me. I think we all know that the Nazis used the 1936 Olympics as a propaganda tool, but until I did the research I had no idea of the scope of the Nazis' endeavor to deceive the world. It's really staggering when you bore down into the details of it. They basically turned all of Berlin into an elaborate movie set to sell a completely fabricated version of reality to the press and the thousands of foreigners who visited the city that summer.

**Q. You include a lot of details that seem personal to each character, whether it is Joe Rantz; another one of the boys; Pocock; or many others. Were you able to interview any of them or people close to them? If the boys in the boat were alive today, how do you think they would receive your book?**

**A:** Only Joe and one other crew member (Roger Morris) were alive when I started. I interviewed both, of course. But a great deal of personal information about the others came from letters, diaries, news clippings, scrapbooks, and photos that their families saved. I also interviewed more than a dozen of the children of the nine men. They were in many cases able to give me deep insights into not only what their fathers had done in Berlin, but what kinds of people they had been, both before and after the Olympics. I've tried to be as faithful as possible to the spirits of the men as their kids revealed them to me, and, I think, based on the feedback I've gotten from them so far, that I've got their individual stories “right.” As to whether the boys would approve of the book, my honest guess is that they would. Most of them preferred not to talk a lot about the Olympics during their lives; one of the things that distinguished them was that they were, for the most part, very modest men. But when I asked Joe, in his last days, whether he wanted me to write the book he said yes quite eagerly. Then he added a qualifier—only if it was about “the boat.” By “the boat” he meant the whole crew and the strands of affection that bound them together. That's what I set out to do, and I think they would all understand the book is a monument not just to what they accomplished, but also to what they became together.

## A CONVERSATION WITH DANIEL JAMES BROWN

Courtesy of Penguin Random House

### Q. How did you discover the story that became *The Boys in the Boat*?

A: One day about six years ago, my neighbor, a lady in her midsixties whom I knew only as Judy, came up to me after a homeowners' association meeting. She said her father, who was in the last weeks of his life and under hospice care at her house, was reading one of my earlier books. He was enjoying it and she wondered if I would come by to meet him. Of course I said yes. A few days later I sat down with her father, Joe Rantz, and after a while the conversation turned first to his experiences growing up during the Great Depression and then to his experiences rowing for a gold medal at the 1936 Olympics.

As I talked with Joe, I noted that tears came readily to his eyes at certain junctures. Men of his generation don't generally cry easily, so I knew immediately that there was something extraordinary going on. As he unfolded more of his story to me, I began to see that all the elements of a great tale were there—intense competition among individuals, bitter rivalries between schools, a boy left alone in the world, a fiercely demanding coach, a wise mentor, a love interest, even an evil stepmother. But I think what really clinched it for me was the simple fact that the climax to his story played out on an enormously dramatic stage—the 1936 Olympics in Berlin—and it played out under the gaze of Hitler himself. Really, what more could a storyteller ask for?

### Q. *The Boys in the Boat* is an incredible combination of history and the personal heartwarming story of Joe Rantz and the rest of the boys who made up the gold medal boat at the 1936 Olympics, as well as a history of crew in the United States. It's a lot of areas to cover. How did you do your research?

A: The core of the research into Joe's personal story was the countless hours I spent with him, and—after he was gone—with his daughter. Judy had spent most of a lifetime listening to stories and collecting materials to document the crew's accomplishments. Much of the "heart" in the book comes straight from her. Beyond that, though, I had a lot to learn about rowing, about the other boys in the boat, and about the history of the mid-1930s. I read a lot, of course, but I also talked to many rowers and many rowing coaches, particularly at the University of Washington. I went out in the coaching launch on cold mornings. I interviewed dozens of the offspring of the original crew. I pored over hundreds of news accounts from the 1930s on microfilm. I went to Germany and explored every corner of the rowing facilities at Grünau, still largely unchanged since 1936. Then it was a matter of sitting down and distilling thousands of facts and anecdotes into a coherent narrative.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Author website: <https://www.danieljamesbrown.com>

Additional discussion questions and reading group guides: Lit Lovers <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/14-reading-guides/non-fiction/9712-boys-in-boat-brown?start=3>

Additional information about the themes of the novel: LitCharts <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-boys-in-the-boat/themes>

Additional conversation with author: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/310727/the-boys-in-the-boat-by-daniel-james-brown/9780143125471/reading-guide>

(Video) Daniel James Brown on *The Boys in the Boat* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blb3k8VTsTM>

"Nazi Olympics Berlin 1936" article by United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nazi-olympics-berlin-1936>

(Video) 1936 film of Olympic rowing <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HunZsKugJmY>

For more information on the history of University of Washington rowing: [www.huskycrew.com](http://www.huskycrew.com)

For more about USA Olympic Rowing: <https://usrowing.org/teams/olympic>

An English translation of the Nuremberg laws can be found on the U. S. Holocaust Museum website at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)

## Readalikes and Other Recommended Reading

*Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* by David Clay Large.  
Athletics and politics collide in a crucial event for Nazi Germany and the contemporary world.

*Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics* by Jeremy Schaap

In 1936, against a backdrop of swastikas flying and storm troopers looming, an African-American son of sharecroppers set three world records and won an unprecedented four gold medals, single-handedly crushing Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy.

*Seabiscuit: An American Legend* by Laura Hillenbrand  
Seabiscuit was one of the most electrifying and popular attractions in sports history and the single biggest newsmaker in the world in 1938, receiving more coverage than FDR, Hitler, or Mussolini. But his success was a surprise to the racing establishment, which had written off the crooked-legged racehorse with the sad tail.

*Facing the Mountain: A True Story of Japanese-American Heroes in World War II* by Daniel James Brown

Brown extensively interviewed the protagonists' families to tell a gripping World War II saga of patriotism and courage of the special Japanese American Army unit that overcame brutal odds in Europe; their families, incarcerated back home; and a young man who refused to surrender his constitutional rights, even if it meant imprisonment.

*Ready All! George Yeoman Pocock and Crew Racing* by George Newell

*Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* by Donald Worster

*The New Deal and the Great Depression in American History* by Lisa Wroble

*Black Tuesday: The Stock Market Crash of 1929* by Barbara S. Feinberg

*Bravey: Chasing Dreams, Befriending Pain, and Other Big Ideas* by Olympic runner Alexi Pappas

*Unbroken: An Olympian's Journey from Airman to Castaway to Captive* by Laura Hillenbrand

*Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl* by Steven Bach

### For Junior Readers:

*Boundless* by world champion high jumper Chaunté Lowe  
*The Mind-Blowing World of Extraordinary Competitions: Meet the Incredible People Who Will Compete at Anything* by Anna Goldfield  
*Olympic Track and Field Legends* by Marty Gitlin  
*Team Sports at the Paralympics* by Matt Bowers  
*Unbeatable Betty: The First Female Olympic Track & Field Gold Medalist* by Allison Crotzer Kimmel  
*Hour of the Olympics* by Mary Pope Osborne

## Timeline of Events

**1928 • Great Depression Begins:** the U.S. stock market crashes in October 1929, leading to widespread economic hardship

**1930 • Dust Bowl Begins:** Severe drought and dust storms exacerbate the Great Depression, affecting many Americans, including the families of some of the rowers.

**1933 • Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal:** In an effort to combat the Great Depression, FDR introduces programs aimed at economic recovery, which influence the broader context in which the rowers are living.

**1933 • Construction begins on the Grand Coulee Dam:** where Joe worked during the summer of 1935. Upon completion in 1942, the dam will bring hydroelectric power and irrigation water to the state of Washington.

**1934 • The Nazi regime:** continues to rise in power. Leni Riefenstahl's film, *Triumph of the Will*, is released and will come to define the iconography of Nazi Germany. The first Nuremberg Rally is also held in Germany

**1935 • Rallies:** continue to be held in Germany. Hitler went before the German Parliament to introduce new laws making the swastika the official flag of Germany and setting in motion the Reich Citizenship Law.

**1936 • Jesse Owens' Victory:** African American athlete Jesse Owens wins four gold medals, challenging Nazi racial ideology during the same Olympics.

**1938 • Tensions in Europe:** The Munich Agreement is signed, allowing Nazi Germany to annex the Sudetenland, foreshadowing the outbreak of World War II.

**1928 • Summer Olympics in Amsterdam:** Rowing events take place, but the U.S. eight-oar crew fails to win the gold.

**1930 • University of Washington Rowing Program:** Under Coach Al Ulbrickson, the program begins to rise in prominence, setting the stage for the events in the book.

**1932 • Summer Olympics in Los Angeles:** The University of California, Berkeley's crew wins the gold medal in the men's eight, becoming a rival for the University of Washington.

**1933 • Adolf Hitler Becomes Chancellor of Germany:** Hitler's rise to power marks the beginning of the Nazi regime, which will play a critical role in the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

**1934 • University of Washington's Success:** The Washington crew, including Joe Rantz (one of the book's central figures), begins to dominate American rowing.

**1935 • Preparation for the 1936 Olympics:** The University of Washington's crew continues to train and compete, with eyes set on representing the U.S. at the Berlin Olympics.

**1936 • Berlin Olympics:** The University of Washington crew represents the U.S. and wins the gold medal in the men's eight, a significant achievement amid the propaganda-fueled atmosphere of Nazi Germany.

**1937 • Aftermath of the Olympics:** The victory of the U.S. crew is celebrated back home, and the lives of the rowers are changed forever.

**1939 • World War II Begins:** Germany invades Poland in September, leading to the outbreak of World War II, which profoundly impacts the world and the lives of the book's protagonists.