



Francis Cunningham  
Social Studies

## Frank [Francis] Cunningham

### Seattle Rowing Icon Dies at 91

U.S. Rowing Hall of Famer co-founded Seattle Parks  
junior crew program in the late 1940s

Frank Cunningham, one of the grand old men of Seattle rowing, has died [March 3, 2013] at age 91.

Cunningham died Sunday night in a Bellingham hospital. He had been staying with a daughter while recovering from hip-replacement surgery and developed pneumonia.

UW women's head coach Bob Ernst called Cunningham "an icon" in Northwest rowing and a "Renaissance guy" with a Harvard education plus a hands-on talent for repairing boats.

Cunningham was a coach, teacher and author. A member of the U.S. Rowing Hall of Fame, he was the 2010 recipient of U.S. Rowing's Medal of Honor, and in 2011 the Washington State Senate honored him with a resolution for service as a teacher and coach.

Ernst, who has been a Husky coach since 1974, said one of Cunningham's major contributions was co-founding the junior rowing program in the Seattle Parks system in the late 1940s. Cunningham coached in the junior crew program until 1968, when he began coaching at Lakeside School, where he taught humanities after starting his teaching career at Edmonds High School, [Social Studies teacher]. Since 1980, he has been rowing and coaching out of the Lake Washington Rowing Club in Fremont.



His students included 1984 Olympians John Biglow, Paul Enquist (gold medalist with Brad Lewis in a double scull) and 1988 Olympian Sherri Cassuto.

John Alberti, a LWRC rower, said, "He contributed greatly to the emergence of women's rowing as a major competitive sport and seems to have been the first to recognize the need to fit the equipment — then designed for 6-foot-plus men — to the athlete."

Cunningham's rowing critiques could be ascerbic. Penny Lewis, a former member of the Martha's Moms Rowing Club, remembers his assessment of her club's performance in an eight-oared race in Oregon in the 1980s: "You had two really good fours in the race. It's too bad they were both in the same boat."

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Cunningham preached that good technique could defeat brute strength on the water. He also stressed that proper technique could prevent the rower's curse of back injuries. His son, Chris, noted that it was a back injury in football that had prompted his father to switch to rowing in prep school.

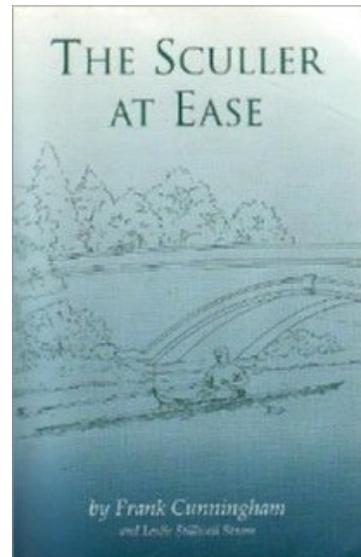
Cunningham's devotion to technique was evident in a 2005 interview before a rowing clinic in Juneau when he said: "I guess the best analogy would be learning to play a musical instrument. Anybody can pick up a musical instrument, but it takes a long time to get a sound out of it you expect to hear. It's a sport marked by nuance. That's where it departs from exercise."

Cunningham was from a six-generation Harvard family from Lowell, Mass., and he stroked the Crimson varsity to a record-setting victory in a 12-boat regatta in Seattle in 1947. His college rowing career had been interrupted by World War II and stateside duty in the Marine Corps.

Cunningham visited Seattle after graduating and was struck by the physical setting and his own sense of freedom 3,000 miles away from his patrician Eastern roots.

After working as a steam-cleaner, he took a job at Boeing, didn't like it, but met his wife there. He then got a teaching degree at the University of Washington and began his career in education.

The Sculler at East Cunningham was presented favorably in David Halberstam's acclaimed 1985 book "The Amateurs" about rowing. Cunningham's book "The Sculler at Ease" was published in 1992. (Sculls are boats in which each rower has two oars).



In the introduction, Cunningham wrote: "To learn the quickness and spontaneity that characterizes good sculling, spend some time watching animals. From them you can learn the grace that comes from their economy of movement and their complete reliance on their senses."

Cunningham was preceded in death in 2004 by his wife, Jane, who piloted military planes during WWII to bases in the U.S. as a member of the WASPs (Women's Airforce Service Pilots). The family had made its home in Edmonds. He is survived by his son Chris of Seattle, daughters Laurie Cunningham of Seattle and Ellyn Van Houten of Bellingham, and five grandchildren.

Details are pending for a memorial service to be held at Lakeside School the second weekend in April.

Original of this obituary by Craig Smith: Online at Seattle Times  
Thank you to EHS'57 for this alert.