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Pupils from wrong end of river leave Eton rowers in their wake

Nicola Woolcock Education Editor

Eton College has the biggest boat club in the world, its own rowing lake and taught the Olympic rower Sir Matthew Pinsent.

Mossbourne Federation is in a deprived area several miles from the nearest river and until this week did not even have its own boat.

However, the federation, a collection of two primary, two secondary schools and a sixth form in Hackney, east London, which has more than a third of children eligible for free school meals, outclassed Eton and other prestigious schools in a recent rowing race.

Days later, it took delivery of its first boat — named No Excuses.

Dozens of pupils from Mossbourne arrive at school before 6am, several times a week, for rowing practice. The school — which is several miles from the Thames — has managed to secure full scholarships at American universities for two of its pupils.

Mossbourne has three full-time rowing coaches, with the head coach joining 18 months ago from a grammar school, and all pupils take part in an indoor rowing trial on joining the school.

It competed in a series of races at the national Schools Head of the River competition last week, the largest time-trial event for schools. The under-15 boys came first in their race, beating prestigious private schools, including Westminster and Winchester. Their time of 18 minutes 45 seconds to complete the 4.5-mile course was one minute faster than Eton's under-15 team who competed in a different category. Mossbourne's girls under-15 team came third, ahead of Godolphin & Latymer and St Paul's Girls' School.

At an event this week, the National Sculling Head, year 9 boys won a bronze medal ahead of Radley and St Paul's and the year 10 girls were fourth. It was the first time they had rowed in No Excuses, which was unveiled on Monday morning.

The rowing team at Mossbourne has, until recently, been sharing equipment with London Youth Rowing's learn-to-

row programmes, and this week marked the first time in the programme's history that the team had sole use of a boat.

It picked the No Excuses name as one of the federation's three core values, alongside excellence and unity.

Tom Wilkinson, head coach, said he was the first in his family to row and it changed his life. He said: "I want the same things for these children. I want it to open the same doors it did for me growing up. The rowing culture has started to be noticed around the school, we have the music turned up loud in the gym and the success is snowballing and bringing in more people.

"Rowing is a predominantly white, upper and middle-class sport for children from private schools so we're trying to attract those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. I talk to the children about elitism and how they can be role models and really change the sport.

"Some used to say they didn't want to go to regattas because everyone will be staring at us. This year, we noticeably changed that, they go in now with their heads held high and we say it's good to be noticed."

The free rowing programme, which gives all secondary school pupils access to the sport, started in 2004 with just 15 children and now has about 300 rowing and 110 in the squad. In 2019, 8 per cent of Mossbourne rowers were black or Asian, increasing to 15 per cent in 2020 and 30 per cent this year. One pupil has just qualified for the Team GB trials.

Pupils are driven to docks near the Excel Centre and return to school by 8.40am. Asked whether they were tired, Wilkinson said: "It wakes them up, they are alert and switched on."

The squad also trains indoors and, until it bought No Excuses, some of the boats it trained in had holes or had not been well looked after. He adds: "This boat is set up just for us. Money is our biggest restriction; it's a really expensive sport. We've purchased the boat which was £28,000, plus you have the

transport, the kit, the race fees. We make it free for all children."

The team has been supported by London Youth Rowing, Henley Regatta's charitable trust and the National Lottery, among others. When children try out for the squad, Wilkinson says: "Those who have never rowed realise they're really good. Some can't catch, kick or pass a ball or don't do any sport but they can pull really hard."

Zuhri James, 20, a Mossbourne alumnus now rowing at Cambridge, said: "Rowing at Mossbourne offered me the opportunity to try out something I wouldn't have been able to access otherwise. It's made me feel extremely proud of where I've come from, and I hope the students are beginning to believe that they are capable of achieving things far greater than they may have initially perceived as possible."

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Teams from Mossbourne Federation have had success in recent tournaments

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE



Early mornings in east London are the norm for the rowers, who arrive at 5.55am for school practice sessions