



Barbara Johnson, 63, competes on Carnegie Lake in Princeton Township.

Staff photo by Katharine Wyland

Rowing through troubled waters

Reeve's mother finds peace, self-confidence in decade of sculling

By NANCY COLASURDO
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PRINCETON TOWNSHIP — Barbara Johnson emerged from her boat, sweaty and exhilarated. The sturdy, 63-year-old woman was clothed in black bike shorts and a white tank top.

The boats in the women's master single event of the Carnegie Lake Regatta had just crossed the finish line. Near the dock, a man crooked his ear toward his walkie-talkie as a woman's voice

came through the speaker.

"Did Barbara beat Nipser?" the charged voice said.

"Yes, I believe she did," replied the man pleasantly.

Minutes later, the 5-foot-9½-inch Johnson stood near the board on which the times and standings from her 1,000-meter race would be posted. The endorphins were beginning to kick into full gear, and what a welcome rush it was.

These days, she embraces anything that could even temporarily push away images of the dark-haired young man

the world thinks of as Superman — the actor Christopher Reeve, eldest of her four sons, paralyzed in a riding accident on May 27.

No, she didn't need to think about that round the clock. It would drive her mad. Instead, here she was on a beautiful Saturday morning, surrounded by warm, wonderful people on the shore of the lake she has grown to love.

• see JOHNSON, A10



Christopher Reeve

Johnson

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THE APPREHENSION that normally comes with the moment of finding out how you fared in a sculling race was compounded that day by the fact that, rather than competing in a seniors category, the distinguished, gray-haired woman was in an open division with women as young as 33. While handicapping is done to compensate for age differences, Johnson knew the tough part would be overcoming the mental aspect of watching the younger competitors zip off the starting point for a nearly advantage.

Now, having cleared that hurdle, she watched as her time of 5:10.0, shaved to 4:37.6 with the handicap, was penciled into the square representing lane No. 2. It had earned her second place.

"You go, girl," a young woman and fellow Carnegie Lake Rowing Association member said as she patted Johnson on the back.

An older woman wearing the fresh glow of competition approached Johnson then.

"Did you win that one?" Nipser Mackey said.

Well, in a manner of speaking.

Johnson, basking in the camaraderie, had not won the race, per se, but she had triumphed in the latest battle of Barbara vs. Nipser.

A decade ago, had you told Barbara Johnson that she would have an "archrival" on the rowing circuit, she would have looked at you like you were some kind of nut. Rowing? Barbara Johnson? The same woman who as a little girl seemed to be always recovering from colds, tuberculosis, asthma? The same woman, who, as a long-legged teenager, felt there was no more awkward person on Earth than she? An avid, competitive rower?

SITTING IN her home, a simply furnished place where each piece seems to have meaning or history, Johnson spoke of life's passions and heartaches. An orange and black oar — given to her by the club for her devotion to it — hangs in her living room above a picture window that overlooks a cozy backyard. The oar is a source of pride and its prominent place in her home speaks volumes about the enormity of its impact on her life.

It all started for the Princeton resident when a friend who lived on the lake showed Johnson her house and her boats in the summer of 1988.

"Something clicked inside me," Johnson says. "I said, 'Huh, I can do that' or 'I would like to do that' or a combination of the two."

Rather than jump in, Johnson did what any respectable journalist would do — she learned about the Carnegie Lake Rowing Association by writing an article on it for *Town Topics*, a weekly publication in Princeton. Johnson, an assistant editor, has worked there for 20 years and revels in such responsibilities as covering planning board meetings, religion and music in her community. The chance to write about rowing was a bonus.

IT ALSO turned out to be life-altering. She not only joined the club, but became a trustee. If she wasn't already sold on the idea of rowing, a coach's words would strike just the right chord.

"I remember my excitement when he stood over us in those tanks at the Princeton University boat-house and said, 'You have power in your bodies and it's up to me to help you learn how to unleash it,'" Johnson says. "What a concept! What a concept!"

That was in January of 1989. Since then, Johnson has developed her strength and her endurance. A diet that includes no sweets, except for occasional yogurt with fruit, and an abundance of liquids has helped. So have the sculling camps in Vermont. So has weight training at Princeton Sports Medicine, something that came about after she broke her wrist ice skating with her grandchildren a few years ago.

"With Chris' thing ... I'm off it right now," Johnson says. "But all last winter, the winter before, twice a week ... I row at least three times a week."

There are always broken sentences when the subject of Reeve comes up. There is no need to ask why. His first and second vertebrae are fractured. He is paralyzed from the neck down and must use a respirator to breathe. Through therapy, he has learned to drive his electric wheelchair by puffing air through a plastic tube.

JOHNSON IS currently trying to balance visits to Reeve with her work and her rowing.

"I mean, (rowing) adds the fatigue factor, I think," Johnson says. "But it's wonderful to go out there and row and sort of forget or put aside the ... I hate to say images of Chris. I mean, maybe you've seen the ... but, I don't know ... what ... you can't just forget, I guess ... or put aside the images of him in his ... it's a terrific struggle for him, just a terrific struggle. To put that aside for a little while is good."

So there are races, and sometimes there are even medals. Johnson has 11 of them. They dangle from nails on the side of a wooden bookcase located in a room on the second floor

of her home. The room is intimate and telling, for all that Johnson truly treasures can be found within its walls.

Walk through the doorway and the lineup of medallions on ribbons is immediately in front of you. The bookshelves line the left wall. Under a window on the far wall is a tidy desk. The right side of the room is also shelves, but these are adorned with photos. Lots of them. There are sons and grandchildren, stepchildren and step-grandchildren.

Barbara Johnson is beaming.

"That's the whole clan," she says. "Here's Kevin in the Peace Corps with Jimmy Carter. Kevin has enormous respect for Jimmy Carter ... He makes peace. I treasure that photo."

KEVIN, 32, is the younger of the two sons she calls "the Johnson boys." Her second marriage, which ended 10 years ago, produced Kevin and Jeffrey Johnson, a 34-year-old social studies teacher and ice hockey coach. By her first husband she had "the Reeve boys" — Chris, 42, and Benjamin, a 41-year-old lawyer.

"I have extraordinary sons and they are everything to me," she says. "Just everything."

Her eyes continue to sweep the lineup of pictures.

"I used to have more," she says. "I used to have a bunch, Chris shaking hands with the Queen ... they go back to 1978 when 'Superman' came out."

She conspicuously directs the conversation back to the bookshelves on the opposite wall.

"This year I won the Erg race," she says proudly, holding up a newsletter. "That's what this is. March 11. My best time ever. My absolute best time ever — 11:20.4. And when I first did Erg races, I was at 11:40. Can you imagine? I mean, taking off seconds on an Erg race is tough to do."

An Erg race is simply a timed trial on a rowing machine. In the women's 2,500 meters, 60 to 69 heavy (over 130 pounds) category, the 142-pound Johnson is fourth of 18 in the worldwide listings.

"**THAT'S KIND** of fun," she says. "It was so exciting to me when I first opened this."

The excitement has also been in gauging her progress out on the water. There is sculling, which is done solo, and sweep oar rowing, which is done with a team of four or eight in one boat. Johnson has done both.

"Since Chris' accident, I haven't done any sweep oar rowing," she says. "I may be at the point of retiring from that. The club has grown so much and there's such a demand for the sweep oar seats. Since I have my

own boat, maybe this is a good thing. It will enable me to concentrate on sculling."

Which brings Johnson to her New Year's resolution — competing in the daunting Head of the Charles race in Boston this October. An important stepping stone to that was competing in the Head of the Schuylkill. She finished fourth, but the two women who came in fifth and sixth had been first and second at the Head of the Charles. That convinced her the time was right for the major hurdle.

"I've entered it," Johnson says. "I sent in my application. A friend from Cambridge sent me a map. Another friend has given me an article about how to steer. The thing about the Charles is that it's more than three miles long. I think there are five bridges and all these kind of serpentine turns. It's a steering challenge as well as an endurance challenge."

JOHNSON'S competitiveness is newfound and also ironic given the dynamics in her shaky relationship with her mother.

"She was fiercely competitive and I, as a result, had some problems with competition," she says. "It was hard for me to compete, even when I played tennis. I would get up to 40-love and then I would lose the game. It was almost as if I couldn't psychologically bear to win. I never, in any other sports endeavor, got to a point where I excelled."

Until now. Now there is purpose to the long legs. They provide the initial power in the rowing motion. Then the back. Then the arms.

"I've always loved water things," Johnson says. "I've also been, in the past, an ardent bird watcher. So it's partly the whole ambiance of being on the water. It's the fluid motion of the boat. It's the fact that it engrosses all of you, which is the thing I like about writing. The combination of writing and rowing, it can't be beat for absorbing you, for engaging one wholly. When I row, I just forget about everything else and concentrate on trying to make the next stroke a little bit better than the last stroke."

Again, she mentions the desire to forget. It has always played an important role. Back in 1991, Johnson stopped home to shower and change for a celebratory dinner after the 'B' boat team she was a part of defeated the favored 'A' boat in the Carnegie Lake Regatta. Thrill turned to deflation when she listened to her messages — her mother had had a stroke.

"In ways it was very similar to, but maybe less drastic than what happened with Chris' accident," Johnson says. "It turned my life upside down."

Not only was Johnson commuting

to Connecticut every weekend, but eventually she and her sister had to assume responsibility for selling their mother's house. The 91-year-old Beatrice Pitney Lamb, who founded the League of Women Voters in her town and authored a book about India, is currently at Meadow Lakes in Hightstown, wheelchair-bound and dependent on others for her survival.

Much of Johnson's ancestry is fascinating — her father practiced law in New York after pulling himself out of a not-so-privileged Midwestern background, and her maternal grandfather, Mahlon Pitney, was in the New Jersey Senate before being tapped by President Taft for the Supreme Court. There is a Pitney window in the Princeton University chapel.

"The chromosomes I've inherited and that my boys inherited are something, I think," Johnson says. "I'm very aware of that."

Johnson attended Vassar, but left after two years because she fell in love. She later found her abbreviated education to be an "albatross" around her neck. Her position at Town Topics alleviated that, for it was her knowledge of Princeton that mattered, and her years as a stay-at-home mother had made her a near-expert.

That expertise now includes the nooks and crannies of Lake Carnegie. It extends to rowing elsewhere, in other states. Against Nipser, her nemesis.

Just a few years ago, Nipser said to her at the starting line of a race, "Barbara, you really ought to win this because your legs are longer than mine." Then Nipser went out and won the race. To add insult to injury, she wanted Johnson to pose for a photo.

"She, wearing the gold medal and me, looking hot and wet and defeated," says Johnson, laughing at the memory. She fishes out the snapshot and offers it for proof.

There it is. Barbara Johnson and her archrival.

If only the other challenges in life were as friendly.