Carl A. Holtz
An Oral History Supplemented with Historical Research

Carl Holtz

Carl Holtz, a University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate (Class of 1947), rowed at Wisconsin from 1940 to 1942 and, after WW II, from 1945 to 1947. In his junior year (1945-46), Holtz stroked UW’s varsity eight crew to an undefeated regular season, including a Badger victory at the inaugural Eastern Sprints regatta, UW’s conference championship for men’s rowing. For these successes, Holtz and his 1946 varsity crew at Wisconsin were inducted into the National Rowing Foundation in 1977 and, Holtz individually, into the UW Athletic Hall of Fame in 1999 for achievement in men’s college rowing.

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Brad Taylor
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Born December 11, 1920, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Carl Alex Holtz was one of three children, which included an older brother, Bob, and a twin sister, Marianne. At age three, Carl’s father left the family and the three children were raised by his mother Adele. She would become a ‘ubiquitous’ fan of her son Carl during his rowing years, according to Carl’s wife, Jean. The absence of a father would be one reason Carl and his future Wisconsin crew coach, Allen “Skip” Walz, would form strong, life-long bonds.

Carl attended Milwaukee’s Riverside High School, where his friend Roy Rom, a future Wisconsin coxswain and assistant coach, was also in school. Roy and Carl were Cub Scouts together, attended University of Wisconsin-Madison at the same time, graduated from Wisconsin with degrees in agriculture and would later serve as assistant crew coaches under Walz at Yale. Each would eventually be in the other’s wedding.

Holtz did not participate in any sports during his high school years. He would later say, with the ever-present gleam that brightens Carl’s eyes, “I didn’t participate in (high school) athletics because I was a small and delicate boy in high school. I’m still delicate.”

Following graduation from Riverside High in 1938, Holtz worked for two years at Sears, Roebuck in Milwaukee. In the fall of 1940, Holtz enrolled at UW, majoring in agriculture. Asked why a young man with an urban background would enroll in agriculture, Holtz responded, “I’m not sure. One reason may be that I did like the outdoors.” Of perhaps some additional influence was the fact that his schoolmate, Roy Rom, was also enrolling as an agriculture major.

Another of his friends, noting Holtz’s then filled-out frame of 6’3” and 188 lbs, asked him, “Why not go out for a sport?” So in the fall of 1940, Holtz tried out for and made the freshmen football squad. He found himself lined against Badger end Dave Schreiner, a UW All-American who played on both sides of the ball. “I wasn’t very good,” says Holtz, “since I’d never been out for a sport before. Schreiner was a great guy. After every play, he’d come over, pick me up and tell me what to do (to improve).”
Holtz continued, “The football team worked out in the Red Gym.” The Gym had a basketball floor with a balcony circling the court, one floor up. On the balcony level was a running track, some hydraulic workout machines used by the rowing team and several coaches’ offices. From the balcony one day, crew coach Walz looked down and noticed the tall, slender frame of Carl Holtz and, says Holtz, “He sent down one of his managers to ask me to come up and pay him a visit.” Soon Walz had worked his charm on the young Holtz and had him out for the crew team.

Holtz says, “When you finished one sport, you had to take something else in sports [or, in that day, go back into a physical education class], so I had to go out for something.” Crew practice after football his freshman year seemed quite logical. “From then on,” says Holtz of Coach Walz, “he treated me like a son.”

Perhaps the most colorful of Wisconsin’s crew coaches, Allen “Skip” Walz, born December 22, 1909, had grown up in New York City. He even attended UW-Madison for one freshman semester in the early 1930’s. In 1939, Walz became “the pioneer of pioneers in the matter of TV broadcasting,” according to an NBC Sports press release, when he acted as commentator for the first ever televised pro football contest. It was the 23-14 victory on October 22 of the Brooklyn Football Dodgers over the Philadelphia Eagles in a National Football League game at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. The game was attended by 13,501 fans and reached 500 TV sets over RCA’s experimental television station, W2XBS.

Walz was constantly keeping his eyes out for the athletic body types that might add to his crew. Another example similar to Holtz’s would be Ralph Falconer, a three-time letter winner on the UW crew from 1946-48. As told by Falconer’s roommate Carlyle “Bud” Fay, “On a day early in his enrollment at UW, Falconer was looking to sign up for basketball with that team’s coach, Bud Foster. Walz and Foster shared an office in the Red Gym. When Falconer showed up at Foster’s office to talk about his interest in basketball, Foster wasn’t there, but Walz was.”

UW crew coach Allen “Skip” Walz (1909-1990)
The charm of coach Walz soon had the young man out for rowing. “He really liked all his people,” Holtz added in describing coach Walz. Both Carl and Jean Holtz remarked of the flair for publicity Walz continuously demonstrated. Skip Walz also had a great ability to motivate his athletes and to get the most out of them. His friendly manner and easy charm carried Walz a long way. Many people who knew Walz remember him as always a classy dresser who paid close attention to his appearance. Photos of Walz wearing fashionable felt hats and sport coats confirm the fact.

Holtz’s freshman year as an oarsman at UW (1940-41) included only three races — two victories against Marietta College (Ohio) and another against the Culver Military Academy (Indiana). At the Poughkeepsie Regatta of 1941, Coach Walz was again successful at courting publicity. A former Golden Gloves champion in New York, Walz had gotten to know both boxers and sports writers.

Using these contacts, Walz invited world heavyweight boxing contender, Lou Nova, to row with his squad on the Hudson River as a means of getting in shape. (Nova would later lose to Joe Louis on September 24, 1941 at New York’s Polo Grounds.) Such visitors to the Badger pier naturally attracted the New York sports press and Walz soon had four writers – one of which was the New York Times rowing writer, Allison Danzig - in one of his four-oared shells, with Roy Rom as the coxswain.

Lou Nova stroking the four at a 1941 Poughkeepsie Regatta practice (AP Wirephoto)

Nova, who attended Sacramento Community College, cheered for the Cal eight in the varsity race and the Wisco freshmen in their event. The varsity eight, the lightest in
history at an average weight of 163 pounds, finished 6th of nine entrants but the freshmen did much better.

Coached by the 1940 varsity coxswain, Jack Gunning, the freshman eight was stroked by Carl Holtz. Bobby Moore was the frosh coxswain, with Rom as his back-up. Over a two mile course down the Hudson River, the Badgers lost by 1½ boat lengths to a Cornell crew that came from behind in the last quarter mile. While the Wisconsin freshmen didn’t regularly attend the Poughkeepsie Regatta, it was their best finish since 1913, though they had won the race twice before that - in 1900 and 1907.

Walz and his oarsmen at the 1941 Poughkeepsie Regatta returned to Wisconsin from New York City on the 20th Century Limited, an overnight train to Chicago. Always working on spinning things in his favor, Walz - with only 25 tickets and about 28 rowers and coaches making the trip home - made sure he held everyone’s tickets. By confusing the conductor from ever making an accurate headcount, Walz was able to persuade the conductor to accept his count of just 25.

In Carl Holtz’s junior year - the fall of 1942 - he was elected captain of the crew but had to decline. Having enlisted in the Army Air Corps, Holtz was called up. Coach Walz himself left Madison on November 22, 1942 to be inducted into the Navy as a PT boat commander.

When Roy Rom joined the Army Air Corps in January 1943, senior rower George Rea was asked by Athletic Director Harry Stuhldreher to assume the head coaching duties for one year (1942-43) at $75 per month. Rea reported, “I was grateful to get the position.” (The Poughkeepsie Regatta was suspended, because of the war, from 1942 through 1946.)

Though everyone sought to be a pilot in the Air Force, other skills in the air were also required. Holtz became a bombardier, navigator and machine-gunner (in a B-24, from the glass bubble above and behind the pilot). He flew 43 missions over Germany in B-17’s and B-24’s and was stationed in England at Cheddington, near East Anglia.

Today, Holtz enjoys the quarterly get-togethers of the Wisconsin Division of the 8th Air Force Society, where servicemen have the opportunity to socialize and remember their experiences and fellow flyers. “They’re a different breed of people (from their wartime experiences)….very decent people,” observed Holtz.
When the war ended, many GI’s went to college. Wisconsin had an especially large jump in enrollments, with some of the students resuming their educations and others just beginning college. Both groups benefited from the GI Bill encouraging continuing education.

Holtz returned to Madison in the fall of 1945…and so did coach Walz. The two would become very close. Walz had no sons and Holtz had been without a father since early childhood. Walz also spotted the character and work ethic which would make Carl Holtz the model competitive athlete. Walz and Holtz would remain friends until Walz’s death in Rancho Mirage, California on January 10, 1990, at age 80.

Throughout the interview leading up to this short, informal biography, Carl Holtz demonstrated an indomitable sense of humor. When this writer sat down on the floor to take notes on the names and the order of teammates in a photo (see page 8) being described by Jean from the couch, Holtz spoke up, in his frequently jovial understatement, “Well, here, let me get you a chair. When you visit here, you don’t have to sit on the floor.” The light in Holtz’s eyes still shines brightly, even as he nears 83 years of age.

After being told the relationship of Walz and Holtz sounded similar to the close relationship between earlier UW crew coach Mike Murphy and rower and, later, UW Professor Aaron Ihde, Holtz was asked if he know Prof. Ihde. “Certainly,” responded Holtz, “but I didn’t know him too well ‘cause he never told me I was rowing wrong.” With another wry smile, Holtz continued “He didn’t talk much and he never coached. Anybody who could tell me (how to row), why, I figured he coached.”

Mention Skip Walz to Carl, or his wife Jean, and smiles come to both faces. “Every time he’d walk up, (Walz) would smile and go like that, at my head,” Holtz gestured, putting up his fists like a boxer. After a few shadow boxing strokes, “he’d take a swing at me,” Holtz continued. “Every once in a while, he would catch me. I got so I could avoid it…most of them. But probably the reason I don’t remember too many things,” Holtz chuckled, “I didn’t avoid the blows all the time. [He’d hit me once in a while] not too hard, but it was hard enough.”

Holtz’s constant touch of humor in his conversation – much of it gently self-deprecating – as well as the mix of pride and Midwestern humility in his manner, his work ethic and his sense of playfulness has helped make Carl a living legend among many of his rowing peers, family and others who have come to know him.
Holtz’s friend Roy Rom also came back from the service to Wisconsin and to the crew. Both Holtz and Rom would re-enter the School of Agriculture. Because Rom had been paid as a coach for a few weeks in the fall of 1942, before himself joining the service, he was deemed ineligible as an athlete and took on assistant coaching responsibilities for coach Walz.

In looking back upon a 45-year career as a successful farmer in southeastern Wisconsin, Holtz was asked what was his most significant recollection from his agricultural education at the University of Wisconsin. “A class I took on Wildlife Management from Aldo Leopold at UW had a very strong influence on me.” Holtz answered. “He was an amazing, interesting fellow. His teaching was one motivation for my getting into farming.”

Leopold, a UW professor from 1933 until his death in 1948, was an internationally respected scientist and conservationist instrumental in formulating policy, promoting wilderness, and building ecological foundations for two twentieth century professions - forestry and wildlife ecology.

Holtz lived in Tripp Hall during 1945-46, effectively his junior year at Wisconsin. His future wife, Jean Vickery, lived in Adams Hall, where she noticed this “handsome hunk of a guy” who would always come running into the dining hall late, following crew practice. “The cook always had a big portion saved for Carl,” noted Jean. “She kind of hated me for the special attention I was getting,” remembered Carl. The feeling must have worn off after a while. The couple married in 1948.

Coach Walz’s continuing knack for publicity would attract nationwide media attention to his rowing program in 1946. He arranged the first airplane flight any Badger sport’s team ever took to a competition. The oarsmen flew to the Eastern Intercollegiate Regatta (later re-named the Eastern Sprints). The four-engine Douglas aircraft, dubbed the “Flying White House,” was believed to be the same plane President Franklin Roosevelt used to attend the Big Four Conference in Casablanca, Morocco, following WW II.

Holtz rowed one varsity year (1945-46) for Walz and the season was one of the most memorable in Wisconsin’s crew history. During the regular season, the Badgers won what would become the initial regatta in the Eastern Athletic Rowing Association’s 1946 Eastern Sprints, Wisconsin’s “conference” and “conference championships,” respectively, for men’s crew. The Sprints victory, Wisconsin’s first varsity eight championship at the national level, would mark the beginning of the modern era in UW rowing.
Boarding a flight to Philadelphia
Woman at lower left – Adele Holtz, Carl’s mother. From right to left: Wayne Sanderhoff, Coach Skip Walz (in the hat), Carlyle Fay, Dick Tipple, Gordy Grimstad, Carl Holtz, Andy Andrews, Fred Suchow, Ralph Falconer, Chester Knight, Dick Mueller, Paul Klein and a flight attendant (a Holtz family photo).

Later the same spring, the Badgers won the featured event – the 1946 American Championships – in the 12th annual Scholastic Rowing Regatta in Philadelphia. On a Henley distance course (1 1/16 mile) on the Schuylkill River, the Badgers defeated Coach Rusty Callow’s Penn varsity, which crew is believed to have included the future (1947) winner of the English Diamond Skulls title, John Kelly, Jr., brother of actress Grace Kelly.

The Badger team went undefeated in the regular season, losing only the post-season Northwest Maritime Regatta in Seattle, Washington. The losing experience included a bumpy, weather-delayed plane ride; a borrowed, late-pick hulk of a boat and an outside windy lane. Following this post-season loss in Seattle, Roy Rom remembers he and Holtz “cashed in our plane tickets, took a three-day train trip back to Minneapolis, hitch-hiked to Madison and kept a few dollars in our pockets.”

Holtz in a 1946 (Milwaukee Journal photo)

For his successes as a junior, rowing stroke for Wisconsin in 1946, Holtz and his crew were inducted into Citizens Athletic Foundation Hall of Fame in 1977 (the rowing elements of the Helms, and later Citizens Savings & Loan Hall of Fame, has since been assumed by the National Rowing Foundation). In 1999, Holtz, individually, was inducted into UW’s Athletic Hall of Fame.
Coach Walz would leave Wisconsin after the 1946 season for the head crew coaching position at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. One of the reasons behind the move was to return to the east coast and to be nearer his home town of New York City. Also, Walz be would be rejoining his spouse on the east coast. His wife Nancy, a former model with the Powers Modeling Agency and whom he would twice marry and twice divorce, had not returned to Madison with Walz in the fall of 1945 - preferring to remain in New York.

Carl Holtz in 1946

Holtz thus had a change of coaching for his senior year. Norm Sonju replaced Walz as Wisconsin’s head crew coach, arriving in January 1947. Roy Rom, who had remained in Madison until a permanent head coach replacement was named, left Madison in February of 1947 to join Walz as his lightweight coach at Yale. Holtz would follow the two to New Haven after his graduation in 1947.

The crew season of 1946-47 would not be as successful as the year before. The team did attend the re-started Poughkeepsie Regatta and finished in a three-way tie for seventh place, among a field of eleven boats.

Carl and Jean remember the two UW crew coaches – Walz and Sonju – as being very different in at least one way. “Walz was always talking,” says Jean, “and Sonju was a man of few words.”

Holtz worked as the freshman crew coach for Skip Walz from the fall of 1947 until the spring of 1952. Following their marriage in 1948, Holtz and wife Jean had five children – Debbie (UW ’71), Laura (UW ’72), Marcia (UW ’76), Mary (UW ’80) and Andy (UW ’82, from UW’s short course in agriculture). Mary rowed at UW.

Holtz would leave Yale in 1952. His friend Roy Rom was let go from Yale after losing a race or two and would become a professor of horticulture at the University of Arkansas, living in Fayetteville. Years later, in 2002, Rom would be invited back to New Haven by the rowers he formerly coached. His athletes would not only send an airline ticket for the reunion but would also contribute a shell, named the Roy Rom, to Yale’s lightweight program.

Walz would also be let go after a few important racing losses (in the minds of the alumni). Before leaving, he was known to have tried coaching from a helicopter, apparently provided (not for free) by the Sikorsky Helicopter Company, which was headquartered in Connecticut. Walz took a position as Vice President of Public
Relations for the Canada Dry soft drink company and later with the Getty Oil Company in California.

Holtz returned to Milwaukee in 1952 and worked for the Patrick Cudahy meat-packing company until 1957. In that year, Holtz acquired a 291 acre farm and, using his UW agricultural education, soon became a successful farmer, most recently raising beef cattle, sheep and chickens. As the farmer’s house, in 1957, was in good enough shape to rent out and raise some money, the new farming couple moved into one of the farm’s dilapidated homes once used by one of the hired hands. They fixed the house up, expanded the dwelling and live in the same house to this day. The original wide-hearthed fireplace of the 1837 structure still welcomes family and friends.

In 1999, around the time of Holtz’s induction into the UW Athletic Hall of Fame, the Patrick and Anna M. Cudahy Foundation contributed a new varsity eight shell to the men’s crew of the University of Wisconsin. Three years later, in 2002, the shell, named the Carl Holtz ’47, would carry Wisconsin’s varsity to a gold medal in the Eastern Sprints, the first varsity eight victory in the Sprints since Holtz stroked the Badgers to first place in 1946.

![Wisconsin’s 2002 Eastern Sprints conference winners in the varsity eight event, having rowed the Carl Holtz ’47](image)

Three from Carl and Jean’s family – eldest child Debbie, and her husband Rudy Steiner (a UW quarterback in 1971 and ’72) and daughter Mary live in homes nearby, on the original Holtz farm property – and son Andy, with his wife Barbara (UW ’85), today own the farm contiguous to the Holtz’s. Six grandchildren share their lives on the two connecting farms.

![The winning varsity shell at the 2002 Eastern Sprints](image)
Author’s Note:  Rowers are sprinkled throughout the Holtz family.  Besides Carl, they include:

-  daughter Mary, who rowed for UW-Madison
-  nephew Jonathon C. Henry (UW ’91) and niece Suzie (Henry) Mackin (son and daughter of Jean’s sister, Pat) also rowed for UW-Madison
-  daughter-in-law Barbara’s sister Elizabeth M. “Corky” (Johnston) Eloranta, whose husband Jack had two brothers who lettered in UW crew – Robert (’72-’74) and Dave (’75)

This oral history contains information on:

The Holtz family
Roy Rom
Allen “Skip” Walz (UW crew coach 1940 - 1942 and for the 1945-46 season)
Ralph Falconer
Aldo Leopold

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-  by phone October 16 and November 8, 2003,
-  by recorded personal interview at Mr. Holtz’s home October 23, 2003, and
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