

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

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JOE This is the *Slice of MIT* Alumni Books Podcast. This is Joe McGonegal, Director of Alumni

MCGONEGAL: Education. Tobias Ayer, class of 1996, is the author of *Sphinx of the Charles, A Year at Harvard with Harry Parker*, published in October 2016 by Lion's Press.

Ayer, who rowed competitively for more than 20 years, during and after his time at MIT, served on the legendary Harvard coaches staff, and shadowed him through one of his ultimate seasons while preparing to write this book. Ayer currently teaches and coaches rowing at Salisbury School in Connecticut. Toby Ayer, why write this book now?

TOBIAS AYER: I started writing it while I was coaching with Harry. In fact, I started writing things down in those first couple of years when I was at Harvard. And I was seeing things that I'd never seen in print about him. And I thought someone should tell everyone about these parts of Harry, because I thought they were better than what was in the books and articles that came out.

I always felt like all the books and articles sort of repeated the same mythology. And some of it, I thought, it wasn't even true, and the reality was better. So I started just writing things down. Now I was hoping to have it done and out some time ago, and then I was busy. And then after he passed, I was really still-- I was on the verge of finishing it up, and that, I guess, so that really prompted me to get it done.

MCGONEGAL: He started coaching at Harvard in 1961, and you follow him most closely in this book through his 40th season. What was different about him in his 48th season from his first? What was the same?

AYER: So I asked him about that, occasionally, because people would say that there were ways that he had changed, and he had no, he didn't admit that there was anything that much different as he got older. But he may have reduced the amount of emotion he expressed. I think he allowed himself, early on, to be a little more-- I don't want to say forceful, he was always forceful. There were stories, early on, of him kind of blowing up a little bit more at his crews, and I think later on he sort of toned down, and he stopped being, maybe, quite as active with them.

In the early years he was always running with them, skiing with them, right in the stadium with them. And later on he was still doing it. The first couple of years that I was there, at Harvard, he was like, he did a triathlon just before Christmas. He ran the stadium, and ran and did 7,500 meters on the erg. He did all that with them.

But in the early years he was beating them. And I think that's part of what helped everyone follow him and buy into what he was doing, was that he competed with them. He pushed them himself.

And, later on, he wasn't quite doing that. But they were still, I mean, they were still mightily impressed that, you know, a 70-year-old who could-- he did not lose, the triathlon. He was not the slowest one to complete these events against, you know, the 20-year-olds.

MCGONEGAL: If I could describe your style, it's through a zoom lens that we look at Harry up close, on his launch, following his teams, out in the river, in Newell boathouse, at other university events and so forth. It's really a matter of access to him, and it did get me thinking of what a solitary sport it is for a coach, to be so distant from the fans, and so distant from the press, too often.

AYER: Clearly it's, the rowing, is a pretty obscure topic, you know, in sort of the general sense, that it ends up being a rowing book. But, I mean, I thought he was a pretty remarkable as a person. And I think that's what I wanted to depict, was just the person.

I was sort of thinking about a profile of a person who was a pretty remarkable guy. And, you know, the kind of success he had in his expertise, and the way people followed him. And, in a way, I think, wasn't necessarily all about rowing.

So yes, I struggled a little bit whether to try to reduce the amount of rowing in the book, but then it ends up, it seemed crucial to have all the detail in there.

But, yeah, it's true. I mean part of the mythology was that he never actually said anything. And no one, really, as far as I could tell, had ever recorded so closely what he actually did in the launch every day. No one really bothered to do that.

They would just say, oh everyone says he doesn't talk. And then that was all they said about it. Whereas, the reality was, he did say things. And it was pretty interesting, you know, what he said and how he said it.

And it was kind of like I was fundamentally trying to chronicle what he did, and try to pick out

the things that made his personality what it was.

MCGONEGAL: I found some pieces of actual paragraphs of their quotes from Harry, or your paraphrases of him, actually coaching. It's chapter three, page 29. Before they rowed the Head of the Charles, Harry reminds his men of the racing attitude. He expects to be strong and persistent, to take the first couple of minutes to settle in, focus on length, power, and rhythm, try to hold off chasing crews, but if passed, stay strong and keep going.

But so much of the actual heat of the moment coaching, he leaves to his coxswains.

AYER: Yeah, that's right. It is sort of an expectation that, like, they sort of learn in practice what the attitude is. And the coxswain's job is to put that into practice. And the rowers too. Their job is to, you know, incorporate that into their own attitudes and execute it.

I think part of it is, he tries to make it as simple as possible, so that there's no doubt about what their job is to do. Not a complicated plan, but you just keep pushing.

I mean, I guess there's an aspect that he's lucky enough to have good athletes that can execute that sort of thing, and learn how to, you know, how to come up with a good race.

The lightweight coach, Charlie Butt, he's now the heavyweight coach there, but he always says, as soon as you talk to him about being a good coach, he says, boy, you have to start with athletes. If you don't have good athletes, you're not going to be a successful coach.

JOE MCGONEGAL: Talk about how much geography was important to making him a great coach, being at Harvard. You have some lovely descriptions of the Charles River in this book. And would Harry have been Harry somewhere else other than on the Charles River?

AYER: I, I think he would have. I thought about him not even situating in Boston, I suppose, you know, other than the athletes. It is true. He really did settle in there and make it his own.

He knew Boston. His family had come from the Boston area. It's not like it was his river until he made it his river. And I think wherever he ended up, he would have made it his river.

Some things that I've thought about him as a person, in feeling like, here's this guy who-- I was feeling sort of envious of him being apparently so perfect for where he was, and what he was doing. But I think a lot of it was, he just decided to be as good as he could be at it, and figured out a way to do that, and made himself better. And if he had to learn that river, he was going

to learn that river.

And he did. Like, he was an expert at what was going on at every corner of that. But I think he would have done that if he'd stayed on the Schuylkill in Philadelphia. He would have done it there. Or on a lake somewhere.

I think he was an engineer, really, at heart and would look for the way to get things done. However it had to get done, he would he would become an expert at it and then implement it.

MCGONEGAL: You're writing this book, and then publishing it in a time when so many coaching icons in the United States have, if not fallen, been made more human, either through scandal or, you know, new data coming out of their sport, and so forth. How does Harry stand out against some of his peers across athletics?

AYER: One thing that's remarkable is that he-- I mean this is true of some others, obviously, but he's been compared to some other rowing coaches. He stayed in the same place. He didn't jump around like people-- there's a sort of regular rotation of coaching positions. But he, every once in awhile, he said someone would try to get him to move to a different university, but he stayed where he was.

He probably could have moved more towards doing national team sort of stuff, at some point, which he did do for awhile. But he liked coaching for the university team more than he liked dealing with the national and Olympic teams.

So that's different too. He didn't-- it's like he found, his life found his sweet spot and remained the absolute reference point for excellence.

MCGONEGAL: You said the club's four page profile of Harry from 1965, which was a remarkable year for the team, saying he is the man for the job, and he should be good more or less forever.

AYER: And isn't it amazing that when I read that, it's like they had no idea that they were so right about that. It was incredible when I read that.

MCGONEGAL: You have a lovely comparison between his coaching style and his last week of life, and how much he kind of followed his advice right up to the end.

AYER: It's interesting, yeah, when that happened, and going back and reading, there's an interview after the national championship, and great little interchange with a reporter where the reporter

is talking about, trying to push him to say what kind of strategy they have, and he's saying, no, you just keep going until you can't go anymore. That's, like, that's the racing strategy.

And he kept coaching. He clearly was like, his body was failing. He recovered and came back for a couple of years, and then the last year he was sort of in and out, kept coaching a couple of days a week all year long, kept driving his launch.

There are these stories of him having to crawl out of the coaching launch, and sort of not really being able to walk even, to follow the Harvard-Yale race. And then he's in the hospital, in Boston, and apparently checked himself out of the hospital to go coach on the river for this reunion of the 1980 Olympic group, who had remained close all those years.

So he was out on the river with them, and Bill Manning, is rowing in a boat, and his daughter, Abigail, is rowing in the boat, and he's switching people out in between crews. And I think he died three days later, or two days later, after that row.

MCGONEGAL: You mentioned Abigail. I love this anecdote you paint of her at his memorial, reading Tennyson, and the George Santayana quote, "what is there in the universe more fascinating than running water, and the possibility of moving over it. What better image of existence and possible triumph?"

Talk about the tribute in the river that--

AYER: They gathered, I mean, there were so many crews there you couldn't move. They emptied out both the Harvard boathouses, the men's and the women's boathouses.

And crews from over the 50 years, 50 plus years, they all got in boats and paddled down the river. And they all sort of processed past the boathouse. There was this big banner across the front of Newell Boathouse that just said, thank you Harry. It was a very moving service, with both remembrances, and obviously songs and poems.

And then almost all of the captains, I think, were there. I think there were maybe two missing. And they were all like as you left that church, they were standing by the door, and each one had an oar as you sort of walked out through the doors.

MCGONEGAL: How did Harry Parker make either your team at MIT, or MIT, a stronger crew program?

AYER: Well they were the reference point. The varsity, we never really-- you couldn't really say that

we raced them, because they were so much faster. I mean, we had a three-way race with Harvard, and Princeton, and MIT. We were never really in contention.

One year our second boat sort of did something crazy, and stayed at the head for the 1,000 meters, and then dropped way, way back. But they were like, we would see them practicing. It always seemed like they had these big eyes, to sort of rolling slowly, passed quietly, and there was like this sort of image of power and smoothness. But there [INAUDIBLE] I remember there was a whiteboard, and someone said, or they had written, Harvard is going down. Going down, like that was the goal. [INAUDIBLE] had to do to match at Harvard, even though it--

MCGONEGAL: --it was an elixir, always out of reach.

AYER: Yes.

MCGONEGAL: Talk about how Harry, even to this day, influences your own coaching.

AYER: I remember [INAUDIBLE] the blades are the most important thing. And then the other thing is, is that I try to find ways to have both side by side, and compete against each other in a useful way. That seemed like that was so much a part of what he did was-- and whatever cadence or whatever kind of a piece they're trying to do, if he could have both, trying to push each other.

It always seemed like that was the way to do it, was to try to get them head to head. Like he was always happiest when they were crews side by side, neither one quite being able to win. That would make him happy. So I try to do that as much as I can.

MCGONEGAL: Talk about reception to the book so far.

AYER: It's been great. I get emails from guys who rowed at Harvard, some who I know because I knew many years worth, really. Both the guys that were there 15 years ago, and then I met various alumni. So to get emails from them and other random Harvard alums from 30 years ago, who I've never met, and also even alums of the school I'm at now.

I just got an email from someone who rowed at my school 50 years ago, and he just read the book. So they always tell me stories, which is great. You know, you hear their own story of when they were at Harvard, or when they raced at Harvard, or they were aware of Harry. That's been great.

When they tell me that I got it right. It was really important to me to get it right.

MCGONEGAL: What else are you reading right now?

AYER: I have an 8-year-old son who read all the Harry Potter books last summer, and has been going through them again, so I've been I've been going through them again. So I'm in the middle of The Half-Blood Prince right now.

MCGONEGAL: We should say that the introduction to your book is Harry Parker and the Cauldron of Pain.

AYER: That's right. That was-- yes, so I was very happy to have found that. The publishers talked about using that for the overall title at one point. Otherwise, I just read Chris Hadfield's book, The Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth, which was fascinating.

MCGONEGAL: Toby Ayer's new book, is Sphinx of the Charles, a Year at Harvard with Harry Parker, available now online, or at your favorite bookstore. Toby, thanks for joining me.

AYER: Oh, you're welcome. Thanks for having me.

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