

Olympic effort

Years ago, as an amateur athlete and woodworker, I set out to compete on the United States National/Olympic Rowing Team.

Throughout those years of training, I supported myself by building furniture. Eventually, the simultaneous pursuit of these two very consuming endeavors helped scuttle my Olympic aspirations. After retiring from competitive rowing, I set out to achieve my alternate goal: to attend the furniture design program at the Wendell Castle School in Scottsville, N.Y.

Photo: Jonathan Bregman



“Olympic Effort” displays Puksta’s interests in skulling and woodworking.

Not surprisingly, my final school project blended both my interests into a chair entitled “Olympic Effort,” shown at left.

In a way, I shifted the energy and concentration I had been putting into my dream of rowing in the Olympics into designing and building this piece. It became an Olympic effort to resolve the technical and aesthetic challenges of my concept.

The concept was to take the ultra-light wooden framework depicting the unskinned hull of a rowing shell (boat) and “fold it” to produce a seat, then sever it to expose a cross section. It then seemed logical to construct a supporting base from a rowing shell’s outriggers that also had been folded.

The chair’s design and construction are intended to convey the characteristics of the sport of rowing—simplicity and sophistication, strength and technical ability.

The skeletal frame of the “shell” is constructed in fairly authentic boatbuilding fashion. The frame is solid mahogany. The back and gussets are ribbon-stripped mahogany-veneered plywood. The simulated rigger base is stainless-steel tubing. Jigs are made to cut the tubing at the correct bisecting angles as they lay in their respective intersecting planes. The same jigs also hold the tubing in position during welding. Bill Schaefer, a student from the nearby School for American Craftsmen at the Rochester Institute of Technology, collaborated on the welding. Completing the rigger motif are antique bronze oarlocks acquired from friend and retired Dartmouth College rigger (boatwright) Wendell Badger.

At the cross section of the piece, the frame terminates with hand-soldered brass ferrules. The upholstery is padded leather. The finish is clear lacquer. The piece stands 72 in. tall and is about 24 in. by 24 in. at the base.

The chair is the culmination of two very consuming and rewarding aspects of my life: rowing and furnituremaking. Through this piece of furniture, I have made a contribution toward the awareness of the sport of rowing, while extending myself as a furniture designer/craftsman.

—Fred Puksta, Scottsville, N.Y.