

Local rowing duo Bigler and Rasmussen win U.S. Rowing title

Gabriella Bigler, who is legally blind, earned an invite to U.S. Rowing's Paralympic Development Camp

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Two local students and rowers Gabriella Bigler and Kate Rasmussen won a national championship at the 2025 US Rowing Youth Nationals this June in Sarasota, Florida.

Gabriella, a 16-year-old junior at Canyon Crest Academy, and Kate, a 16-year-old junior at Cathedral Catholic High School, are both members of the San Diego Rowing Club based in Mission Bay. Together they raced and won in the Women's Youth PR3 Inclusive 2X division. In the inclusive division, an athlete with a physical or visual impairment is paired with an able-bodied rower in a 2,000-meter double skulls rowing race. Gabriella, who goes by Gabby, was born with Aniridia, a rare eye condition where the iris and other eye functions are not developed—she is legally blind.

While both rowers had qualified for Nationals by competing in regional regattas in Sacramento earlier in the year, Nationals marked the first time Gabby ever partnered with Kate, a converted cross country runner who has been rowing for the past three years.

Together, they made for a strong team.

That day in Florida it was not only hot and muggy but it was windy, which can make a smaller skulls boat harder to steer.

"There was a decent amount of wind, which made things really tricky but we kept our composure in the boat and rowed well through the conditions, it didn't stop us from having a good race," said Gabby.

"This team and that experience helped me realize the love I have for this sport. I



Gabriella Bigler and Kate Rasmussen win a National Championship at the 2025 US Rowing Youth Nationals. PHOTOS BY KANDISS BIGLER



Gabriella Bigler at US Rowing's Paralympic Development Camp in Boston.

enjoyed the opportunity to row together to the finish line," Kate said. "After we crossed the finish line, Gabby and I just hugged, and it

is something I will always remember."

The teammates also competed in the able-bodied women's youth second

varsity 8+ division for San Diego Rowing Club and finished 18th. In the 2,000-meter 8+ race, Kate and Gabby shared the boat with

a total of eight rowers plus a coxswain who steers the boat and sets the cadence.

"This really was something to cheer about, for our club and for Gabriella and Kate winning a gold medal at Nationals, especially as they were competing in two races and the conditions were challenging," said San Diego Rowing Club Coach Patrick Kington.

A former competitive swimmer, Gabby found rowing when she was 13 years old. She had wanted to try a new sport after her family moved to San Diego from Bakersfield.

"At first like every new thing you're not the best at it, it's a pretty big learning curve. I got a lot better and fell in love with the sport," Gabby said. "It's a very rewarding sport in the sense that you get to push your mind and body to its absolute limits, and the feeling of knowing that you've done that is very, very euphoric. It can be a team sport or individual sport but when you're in the boat and suffering, it's a very

special feeling where you just feel horrible but also amazing because you're feeling horrible with some of your best friends."

With San Diego Rowing Club, she is on the water training four to five days a week, balancing school work and sleep. On her own, she is training every day, lifting, biking and running to make sure her legs are strong and in shape. While Gabby has competed individually, in a pair, and in the 8+ boat she doesn't really have a preference for what she's racing: "I love to row any boat and I love to row any seat in any boat."

After the Nationals, Gabby experienced the huge honor of being invited to attend U.S. Rowing's Paralympic Development Camp in Boston to train with fellow athletes who share the goal of making the national team and eventually competing at the 2028 Paralympic Games in Los Angeles.

She was the youngest of 11 camp invitees and spent a week training twice a day on the Charles River, absorbing the experience of accomplished para athletes.

"It was definitely hard, but the people and the coaches were pretty amazing," Gabby said. "It gave me a very clear roadmap of what I need to do to achieve my goals and what I need to work on. I came out of it very, very excited to race and to continue to better my technique and speed so that I can do these big things."

As a young disability advocate, Gabby's summer vacation also included attending the California Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities, where she connected with peers and met state policymakers. While her eyesight comes with its struggles, Gabby said she has managed to thrive despite everything. In addition to her achievements as a rower, she is also an artist, making and selling her own art on Etsy with her shop, Bodacious Bigler Art.

"I'm not held back at all," Gabby said.

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