

History of Rowing in Cleveland

From 1989 to 1994 CRF was actually WRRRA (Western Reserve Rowing Association). Then WRRRA split into a member organization and WRRF (Western Reserve Rowing Foundation) was created. In 2003, the WRRF was renamed to Cleveland Rowing Foundation.

Did you know that rowing was the first sport ever played between colleges in the US? In 1852 the first intercollegiate sports competition in the nation's history took place when Harvard raced Yale. Three years later, the sport of rowing came to the mighty Cuyahoga. The Ivanhoe Boat Club and its Captain George W. Gardner were on the river in 1855 using shells built in Cleveland. The event stirred up local interest in such a unique use of our waterways that the Plain Dealer, in an article dated July 5th, 1855, offered a challenge to other crews:

“We hope next 4th of July, 1856, to have the pleasure of seeing a “Regatta on the Lake” between boats built here, and manned by Cleveland Boatman; and we do now promise a Silver Cup worth one hundred dollars to the victorious Club boat on that occasion.”

However, the initial days of rowing were numbered due to the increased commercial traffic brought on by growth and the Civil War...and the fragile racing craft were crowded off the river.

Organized rowing, sadly, did not reappear for another 125 years. In 1986, five gentlemen, who had either moved to Cleveland from the East Coast or had rowing experience from colleges in the East, began sculling on the Cuyahoga. They rented space for their shells and called themselves the “Cuyahoga Rowing Association.”

Then one Charles Mosley arrived on the local rowing scene. Part impresario, part entrepreneur, he was above all else, a super salesman: he thought there was money to be made from rowing. He solicited a major brewing distributor for overall sponsorship and went from bar to bar in the Flats seeking their sponsorship for each crew. Demonstrations of erging were held at Tri-C and other locations. In 1988 the for-profit “Flats Racing League” was up and running using second-hand shells purchased by Mosley. Practices and races were held at what is now called the Nautica area near the mouth of the Cuyahoga. At its height there were over 750 participants. Mosley promoted rowing in the high schools by forming a non-profit organization called the “Cleveland Rowing Federation:” Beaumont, St. Ignatius, and Benedictine High Schools were soon rowing.

Some of Mosley's rowers took to the sport with incredible zeal and soon learned about regattas being held in other cities. Mosley was reluctant to allow his shells to travel. At the same time the high schools wanted to go in a different direction. As a

result, five of those rowers set up the Western Reserve Rowing Association as a non-profit corporation. They rented space from the Cuyahoga Rowing Association in what is now our wooden boat house. While Benedictine dropped rowing, Beaumont and St. Ignatius continued the programs under the banner of the WRRRA.

They used the second floor to store their four-man shells and walked them down the ramp. By 1989 they had grown to 26 members plus the two high schools. That year the competitive group hosted the very first Cleveland Sprints Regatta inside the breakwall on Lake Erie.

The rowing scene in 1990 consisted of the Cuyahoga Rowing Association, WRRRA (focused on competition), with the high schools renting space from them and Mosley's Flats Rowing League, for recreational rowers. Around 1990 nearly 90 rowers left the Mosley organization and formed the North Coast Rowing Association. This group did not last long as some went back to the league and others joined the WRRRA.

Summer 1992 marked the official beginning of rowing as a city sport endorsed by the City of Cleveland Division of Recreation. At that time WRRRA entered into a formal contract with the city for 1992 and 1993 to sustain the Cleveland-WRRRA Summer Youth Rowing Program. The mission of this program was to use rowing as a non-traditional vehicle for reaching diverse high school youth. The two-year project served 40 boys and girls, approximately 50% minority. The 1993 program culminated in a regatta at FlatsFest '93 with youth teams visiting from Pittsburgh to compete. Due to a lack of City funding, the program was not continued in 1994.

A few dedicated students from John Carroll University met in the fall of 1992 and decided to start a rowing team. By the next year they were ready to compete in their first regatta. By the spring of 1996, forty-five members traveled on their first annual trip south for training.

In 1993 Charles Mosley ended his racing league. With so many rowers hooked on the sport, someone needed to step forward and organize a new recreational league. Three men, Dr. David Propp, John Fowler and Kevin Duden took over this responsibility, creating today's Summer Rowing League, one of the country's largest learn to row programs. The next year a strategic planning session brought together members of the rowing community.

In 1994, a strategic planning process reorganized this collection of adult, university and high school crew programs. An umbrella organization for these programs, the Western Reserve Rowing Foundation (WRRF), was established as a non-profit 501(c)3 dedicated to competitive and recreational racing and the expansion of the sport of rowing in the Greater Cleveland area, with a particular focus on youth rowing (ages 13 -18).

By 1995, teams from Kent State, Hathaway Brown, John Carroll, and Cleveland State were rowing out of the boathouse. After a one year hiatus, the Cleveland Sprints Regatta transformed itself in 1996 to the Head of the Cuyahoga Regatta. The venue was moved from the breakwall to the Cuyahoga River, and the distance was changed from a 2000 meter sprint to a 2.5 mile head race. The initial race, which was included as a Cleveland Bicentennial event, involved over 250 rowers and 3,000 spectators. The race has grown and has moved to the Nautica complex to accommodate the 1,100 plus rowers from over 30 organizations from schools and clubs throughout the Midwest.

In 1998, the Foundation ran a pilot summer youth program called City Crew. Approximately 20 youths from the Greater Cleveland Council for Economic Opportunities (GCCEO) Neighborhood centers and the Boys and Girls Club participated in the 6-week learn to row program.

In the fall of 2000, former St. Ignatius and University of Cincinnati coxswain Dan DiAngelo returned to the Cleveland rowing scene. He recruited enough Cleveland State University rowers to man two “eights” of men and women and thereby revive the college’s defunct rowing program. In their first race ever at the Head of the Cuyahoga, both boats took home the gold in the Novice classification.

Also in 2000, St. Ignatius High School won the Midwest Scholastic Rowing Association championship – its first of three. The MSRA is comprised of 50 schools from nine states and is considered the premier high school race in the Midwest.

The Cleveland Fire Department made an exciting and timely visit in August 2002 to the boathouse. A tenant at 1948 Carter Road that stored and repaired delivery vans in bays next to ours had an explosion involving a gas tank. The ensuing smoke and fire missed our shells by mere minutes. The tenant decided to service its delivery fleet elsewhere, leaving the Foundation and its landlords considering the possibility of an expanded, renovated home for rowers. Work began the following year.

In 2003, the WRRF changed its name and structure, becoming the Cleveland Rowing Foundation (CRF) and revising its governance structure to officers and a board of directors that includes rowing representatives as well as community and corporate directors. And in summer 2004, the CRF moved into a new 11,000 square foot facility directly adjacent to its existing boatbays. And history was made: the first chair to ever be used in the boathouse was now in place, not to mention running water, showers, staff offices, a workout facility, and a Common Room that could accommodate 100-plus.

In 2009, CRF began plans to purchase the former Commodore Club Marina. CRF partnered with The Trust for Public Land to purchase the site. CRF then began a

campaign to raise \$3 million to purchase the 6.5-acre property, one 19,000 sq. ft building and one 7,000 sq ft. building located on the property.

In June 2010, the Cleveland Foundation and the Gund Foundation donated a combined \$500,000 to the Rivergate Park campaign with the stipulation that two of the 6.5 acres would be set aside for public access. On September 13, 2010 CRF finalized the deal to purchase the site and ensure rowing will remain in Cleveland in perpetuity. Later that year, CRF completed the move from its former home on Carter Road to its current boathouse at Rivergate Park.

In 2011, CRF held its official Ribbon Cutting ceremony.

In 2012, CRF held the first USRowing Masters National Head Race Championships.

In 2013, CRF held the first “Friday Night Lights” event the evening before the Head of the Cuyahoga Regatta for scholastic rowing teams. Over 400 high school athletes participated in a 500 meter sprint style race whereby the river was completely illuminated between Center and Columbus Road Bridges.

In 2014, CRF hosted the 9th Annual Gay Games Rowing Regatta. This event was the largest rowing event in GG history; attracting 8 countries, 12 states, and over 175 participants.

Rowing continues to grow in Cleveland, and our vision of a larger Community Boathouse/ Recreation Center on the Cuyahoga continues to thrive. Visit our Long Range Plan section (coming soon) to learn more about our interest in partnering with other exciting recreation initiatives to enhance the health and recreation amenities of the Cuyahoga River.