

35 years of rowing highlights in Oak Ridge

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on June 2, 2014)

Carolyn Krause wraps up her efforts to document the history of rowing in Oak Ridge in *Historically Speaking* and what a great series she has created. As we communicated about the series, she expressed her appreciation for the many resources she tapped into to gain the information.

As I mentioned early on, Jim Ramsey has been a source of many details and useful information. However, Carolyn also drew upon Chuck Coutant and Louise (Lou) Dunlop for a great deal of information. She also was quick to credit *The Oak Ridger* as a huge resource and expressed her thanks to writers such as Woody Cade and Peter Ellertson.

Now enjoy the results of Carolyn's research in this third and final article in the series:

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Dragon boat racing hosted by three Rotary clubs in Oak Ridge took place last Saturday on the Clinch River-Melton Hill Lake stretch by the Oak Ridge Marina. The inaugural Oak Ridge Dragon Boat Race Festival raised thousands of dollars for local nonprofit service organizations.

In the past an international canoeing and kayaking championship was held here. But the major events on one of the three best rowing venues in the country have been national rowing regattas and time trials for Olympic teams. And the introduction of state-of-the-art technology to the rowing course 10 years ago has preserved its top-notch status.

In 1979 the Oak Ridge Rowing Association (ORRA) was formed. By then it was recognized that the waterway by the Oak Ridge Marina was ideal for rowing. The hills protected the course, minimizing the wind and currents. Milfoil weed doesn't grow on the course because of the lake's constant 55-degree water temperature and lack of sunlight penetration.

The Tennessee Valley Authority controls the flow of water, the big channel doesn't silt up easily and the rowing course has one of the nation's few 2000-meter (one mile and a quarter) straightaways, allowing spectators good access to races along the bank.

Oak Ridge volunteers who helped build the rowing course were Dave Mason, Jeff Ginsburg, Hugh Nichols and hundreds of others.

The Oak Ridge venue has been the site for the annual Southern Intercollegiate Rowing Association (SIRA) Championships for 36 consecutive years, a process started by Jim Ramsey and Louise Dunlap.

"SIRA attracts rowing crews from all over the U.S. and is now one of the largest spring regattas in the country," said John Vitek, a past president of ORRA and an active volunteer.

Vitek recalls that he and his son handled registration for the 1988 USRowing Masters National Championships at Oak Ridge's venue. (A master rower has attained or will attain the age of 21 during the regatta year.).

In the 1990s the University of Tennessee Lady Vols varsity rowing team began using the Oak Ridge venue for dual meets and tournament regattas. "I coached several girls in the mid-90's who received the first rowing scholarships at UT," Vitek said. The daughter of John Iacovino, another ORRA past president, rowed at ORRA and later became the first head coach for the UT varsity women rowers.

To prepare for the 1996 Summer Olympic Games held in Atlanta, the U.S. Women's Rowing Team moved its headquarters from San Diego to Chattanooga. However, the coaches and Olympic team members spent many a summer weekend in Oak Ridge for their time trials in which they tested boats from different manufacturers and gauged their progress. The Swiss men's and

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women's rowing teams also trained in Oak Ridge before the Olympic events.

In 1997 ORRA formed a committee called Oak Ridge Pursuit of Rowing Excellence (ORPRO). Six months later ORPRO announced goals that ORRA must meet to ensure that Oak Ridge is recognized nationally as a great rowing town.

In 2000 UT-Battelle, which manages Oak Ridge National Laboratory for the Department of Energy, contributed \$30,000 toward a 60-foot finish-line tower. The city of Oak Ridge had already allocated \$140,000 for rowing course upgrades.

UT-Battelle's second gift to ORRA led to the construction of excellent starting docks. UT-Battelle donated \$140,000, its third gift to the waterfront, after the city developed a waterfront plan in 2009. The result: a new 2,400-square-foot pavilion in Melton Lake Park.

In 2004 ORRA hosted the Scholastic National Rowing Championship, sponsored by the Scholastic Rowing Association of America. High school teams compete in this event.

The same year ORRA celebrated its 25th anniversary. In 2005 ORRA was named the Rowing Club of the Year out of some 1300 rowing associations from cities such as Boston, Pittsburgh and San Diego.

Oak Ridge was awarded the NCAA Rowing Women's Championship competition, which was held May 25-28, 2007. Mary Jane Sill was ORRA president then. The event had its own set of complex rules. Spectators had to pay and sit on fenced-in bleachers. And ESPN televised the whole event.

ORRA was the first rowing club to host the USRowing Junior National Rowing Championship, which was held here in 2012 and 2013 for rowers under 19 years old.

ORRA has been facing increasing competition from other cities that have been establishing their own rowing courses, employing more staff, buying new boat fleets and building bigger boathouses. But deployment of digital technology in the past 10 years has kept the rowing course's high national ranking.

The UT-Battelle finish-line tower, which 15 persons can occupy, is the information and technology hub of regattas; its technology replaces stopwatches, paper and the naked eye. In 2004 the tower received a computer to collate the meet results.

It now has a finish line stop-action camera similar to the Accutrack timing device used at major track meets. The camera is especially useful for accurately determining winners in the increasing number of close races.

Other cameras line the course. During major regattas rowers and fans alike can watch races live and hear the play-by-play calls on four big-screen TVs placed on the Oak Ridge Marina peninsula. A select few regattas are videotaped and streamed live on USRowing's YouTube channel.

"Crews come to many of our events from all over, as far away as California and Canada," Vitek said. "ORRA was one of the first clubs to have an adaptive rowing program for the disabled and the Girl Scout troop my wife co-led won awards for helping to set up the first-ever Special Olympics rowing race."

In the six weeks of spring training for college and high school rowing teams, the numbers have grown from 200 to 12,000 young people a year. They usually return to their schools with a lasting, favorable impression of Oak Ridge, its people and its climate.

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Nowadays, athletic girls who learn to row have a chance for scholarships that many Division 1 colleges and universities offer. Looking ahead, the 2014 USRowing Club National Championships will be held July 16-20 on Melton Hill Lake. ORRA will host this event for the third time.

Rowing is the city's largest tourist attraction. According to information obtained by Katy Brown of the Convention and Visitors Bureau, about 16,000 visitors a year travel to Oak Ridge for rowing activities. "According to estimates from the state of Tennessee," she said, "total annual tax revenues generated from food and gasoline purchases, shopping, nights spent in hotel rooms, et cetera, are around \$600,000."

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Thanks Carolyn! Thanks also to State Representative, John Ragan, for his encouragement that initiated the research needed to tell the history of rowing in Oak Ridge and also for his desire to assist in the effort to add an eighth lane to take the rowing course to the next level. As I hope you can see, we are fortunate enough to have one of the best rowing venues in existence, but staying on top requires constant attention to the details.

Other cities are seeing our success and vying for their share of the potential revenue from rowing. Having 16,000 visitors, many of them college students, come to our town is great, but we could have the potential to substantially increase that number with the proper improvements and maintenance of the venue. We should NOT let our vigilance slip and began to take our success for granted.

Bringing more national championships with television coverage by ESPN should be in our future. Let's support rowing in Oak Ridge anyway needed and make it even more of a growth tourist attraction. We all benefit when tourism increases.

While this series has focused on rowing, other tourism initiatives such as Heritage Tourism should be promoted as well. With the passage of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park bill in the House and soon to be passed in the Senate (I hope), and with a fresh look at the potential for the American Museum of Science and Energy as well as the pending historical tourism efforts being planned for the East Tennessee Technology Park's Heritage Center, our future potential for increasing visitors should only increase.

However, it is up to us to assure that we do all we can to support these efforts. Thanks to City Manager, Mark Watson, for recommending an initiative to hold public forums to discuss the possible ways Oak Ridge can prepare for the national park and changes at AMSE. Be sure and participate and share your ideas.

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Dragon Boats practice as the teams prepare for Saturday's inaugural race



The UT-Battelle Finish Line Tower stands in the foreground of a view of the unique Oak Ridge Rowing Course on beautiful Melton Hill Lake/Clinch River with the scenic Cumberland Mountains on the horizon