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UC rowing event sparkles on the river

by **Jack Bogaczyk**
Daily Mail Sports Editor

Row, row, row your boat ... in collegiate crew competition, there's no "gently" about it.

So, as the University of Charleston muscles up its women's rowing program in hopes of bigger and better things like NCAA Division II competition, the Golden Eagles have more than one large advantage.

First is the campus. A river runs through it ... OK, next to it. How many other rowing programs have that?

Second, the West Virginia Governor's Cup Regatta -- the 34th is scheduled Saturday -- gives the school an anchor event in a setting that's as glorious as can be when the sunshine makes the river into glimmer glass.

Third, the UC crew program continues to be nurtured and watered by more than one Buckalew. That family's roots on the South Ruffner campus run deeper than that river.

Marshall Buckalew was the Morris Harvey College president from 1964-75, when the Governor's Cup event was started (in autumn 1974). His son, Jim, is the UC crew coach of multiple tenures, and a former MHC athlete (1971 alumnus) and former UC athletic director and coach (in other sports).

Now, the coach's daughter, Laura, is a sophomore on the 15-member UC crew team, a group that has a significant Kanawha Valley and West Virginia presence on the roster.

Jim Buckalew still has the silver medal, produced by the Franklin Mint and paid for from Gov. Arch Moore's office, from the first Governor's Cup, a '74 duel between the UC and Marietta College men.

The antiquated UC boathouse, at the foot on 22nd Street, offers a historical setting for Buckalew's program, too. It's the oldest building still standing on campus, edging the venerable Eddie King Gym next door for the honor. The boathouse began life as the Morris Harvey cafeteria.

The Buckalew family and close relatives have produced more than a dozen Morris Harvey/UC alumni, and Laura Buckalew said the historical tie to the school is important to her. However, getting into an eight-seat shell is not as important as something else athletically.

"I love volleyball," said Buckalew, who played that sport and basketball at Capital High and is on a volleyball scholarship at UC. "It's what I came to school for in athletics. I didn't plan at all to be on the (crew) team."

There are priorities.

"There's an agreement with Coach (Bren) Stevens," the rowing coach said. "(Laura) doesn't miss (spring) volleyball to row, except for races."

The UC coach, a former U.S. Rowing Association administrator who helped stage the 1996 Atlanta Olympics competition, said his daughter was around rowing "every regatta we did from the time she was born."

She's help run her father's events in the past -- but can no longer be an official since she competes.

Father drafted daughter to UC crew a winter ago, when the Golden Eagles had several rowers quit and the coach needed competitors. Laura brought two of her volleyball teammates to the crew team.

"They were such good athletes, they caught on pretty quick," Jim Buckalew said.

"I didn't know what to expect with my dad coaching me in rowing," said Laura Buckalew, 20, who first rowed in her future sport when she was in the fourth grade and went onto the Kanawha with a UC athlete and "just started rowing."

"I had a lot of fun with it and I've been around the sport all my life, but I never thought I'd be doing it competitively. It's a rush. It's kind of the same as volleyball for me, but the setting is totally different.

"When you get to the starting line you're really tense; it's like waiting for that first serve, or you're across the net, on the kill."

Buckalew, who mans the five-seat on UC's varsity eight and has a double major in business and sports administration, appreciates the family history at the university.

"The fact that my grandfather went here and was the president here and my dad went to school here and coached here, it's not like going to some other university for me," she said. "I really know the school. It's different for me from most student-athletes here."

Her father wants more rowers like her daughter -- from the area.

UC dropped men's crew in 2004 because of a lack of competitors, but Buckalew's team has women who are graduates of Capital, Charleston Catholic, South Charleston, Point Pleasant, Greenbrier East and Calhoun County high schools. He has incoming recruits from Nitro, Parkersburg and Capital.

"I love recruiting athletes in West Virginia," Buckalew said. "The neat thing is that for a lot of them, rowing is an opportunity to do something they've never done before competitively. It's probably the only sport one can learn competitively in college and compete for an NCAA national championship."

Recruiting his daughter wasn't as difficult as what his daughter had to decide to call her father during practice.

"It's weird to call him 'Coach,' so I just call him 'Dad,'" the UC sophomore said. "A couple of the other girls on the team -- they're all like my sisters -- so they call him 'Papa Coach' now."

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