

features

regatta revival: rowing advocates say sport is poised for greatness

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SAINT IGNATIUS WILDCATS AT THE RIVERGATE ROWING PARK - PHOTO BOB PERKOSKI

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There's nothing straightforward about rowing through the Flats on the Cuyahoga River. Just ask Caitlin Bowerman, president of Case Western Reserve Crew Club, which started its spring training on the river earlier this month.

"You won't find a river that's as curvy as the Cuyahoga," says the Minneapolis native.

And then there are the massive freighters, which dwarf the slender racing shells by about 550 feet and a few thousand tons.

"The other day we spent time waiting for the Pathfinder to go by," adds Bowerman. "The first time you sit through that experience, it's a little scary."

Rowing on the Cuyahoga certainly is not for the faint of heart. Yet each year, more and more recreation seekers take to the twisty river in their long, narrow boats, slicing through the water like peaceful projectiles. Facing their trusty coxswain in the rear, the rowers synchronize their actions so precisely that they look like a single, multi-limbed organism.

Local rowing advocates say their beloved sport is about to get even bigger thanks to the Cleveland Rowing Foundation's recent acquisition of Rivergate Park, a former marina on the East Bank of the Flats, for \$3 million. [Cleveland Rowing](#) (CRF) is the umbrella organization for nine area rowing clubs, including Case Western. It operates the only boathouse on the Cuyahoga.

Jeff Zabor, president of the [Western Reserve Rowing Association](#), believes that the sport is on the verge of "doubling or even tripling" in Cleveland. "It's just the right place at the right time."

Over the next two years, CRF will redevelop Rivergate into a seven-acre riverside recreation venue, with two acres of the property being set aside for a public park. The organization will operate its boathouse and other rowing facilities on the remaining five acres. Down the line, a second larger boathouse will be added to the complex.

With all the extra room -- Rivergate is more than twice the size of the previous location on the Scranton Road Peninsula -- the organization plans to expand in a big way. Over the next five years, CRF plans to double its membership to 1,500 while enlarging its annual Head of the Cuyahoga Regatta, says Theresa Gang, executive director for CRF.

Last year's Head of the Cuyahoga brought in 1,000 competitors from six

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states and Canada, not to mention coaches, friends, family and fans, notes Gang. In 2012, CRF will also host an additional event through a partnership with U.S. Rowing, which will be at least as big as the Head of the Cuyahoga.

"[That event] will easily have 1,000 competitors," says Gang. And there still is plenty of room to grow. Boston's Head of the Charles Regatta, for example, is the most popular rowing event in the world, attracting more than 9,000 athletes and several hundred thousand spectators per year. Picture the East and West banks of the Flats teeming with fans cheering on dozens of crew teams from all over the country.

That's good news for portions of the Flats, which have been struggling to regain its popularity as a place where Clevelanders want to hang out.

"You'll get more people coming by, and the more people you have around, the better it is," says Louie Sainato, owner of [Sainato's Restaurant](#), which is steps from Rivergate's entrance.

To better take advantage of the summer crowds, Sainato plans to add a patio in hopes of luring rowers to stop by after practices. "After rowing, hopefully they come in and eat and drink," he says.

He has good reason to be optimistic.

"I know Louie and I told him our kids are going to eat him out of house and home," jokes Matt Previts, coach of the Saint Ignatius Wildcats, whose 75 team members are on the river most afternoons.

It wouldn't be the first time rowers have helped revitalize an industrial area along a river in a Rust Belt town. Two decades ago, Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Rowing Club built a boathouse on an island in the Allegheny River. Today, that island boasts some of the toniest condos in the city. Milwaukee too has seen similar development along former industrial stretches of its river since building a boathouse almost a decade ago.

"It's a natural draw for people and so little shops and restaurants start popping up," explains Gang, adding that the majority of the organization's members are young professionals between the ages of 20 and 40, who are hungry for outdoor recreational activities.

Indeed, Rivergate sits at the epicenter of an emerging recreation district in the Flats. Starting this summer, the public will be able to rent kayaks at Rivergate. Just next door, the city plans to construct a 15,000-square-foot, \$550,000 skate park. Across the river, on Irishtown Bend, the Lake Link Trail will connect the Towpath Trail to Whiskey Island. The [Ohio City Bicycle Co-op](#) is also in the neighborhood.

"There is tremendous potential," promises Saint Ignatius' Previts. "If you've ever been to Boston or seen Philadelphia's Boathouse Row, that's what we can have in Cleveland."

Photography by [Bob Perkoski](#)

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