

## Get rowing: Pull yourself into shape

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By Jack Kelly, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Rowing was once as popular a sport in Pittsburgh as football is today.



Alyssa Cwanger, Post-Gazette

**Kathy Raymond, left, of Allison Park works out with others during a Three Rivers Rowing Association winter league session at the Millvale Training Facility.**

**Click photo for larger image.**

### More info

The first of three summer rowing seasons begins April 17. The first of three Dragon boat seasons begins in May. For more information, visit the Three Rivers Rowing Association Web site at: [www.threeriversrowing.org/rowing.html](http://www.threeriversrowing.org/rowing.html), or call 412-231-8772.

It may seem hard to believe, particularly since most of us associate rowing with the Ivy League. That is where Michael Lambert, who just stepped down as executive director of the Three Rivers Rowing Association, was introduced to the sport as a student at Dartmouth College in the 1960s.

But rowing was a working man's sport before it became popular in colleges. "Thousands of people would turn out to watch races on the Allegheny and the Monongahela," he said.

That was in the mid-19th century. The sport of rowing grew naturally from the fact that rowboats were a key factor in commerce and transportation in those days.

"There weren't so many bridges then," Mr. Lambert said. "A lot of people commuted by rowboat."

One of the most famous races in rowing history was a contest between Maggie Leu and Lottie McAlice, both of Pittsburgh, he said. Ms. McAlice, who won the race, learned to row by taking her father to and from Sawmill Run to Downtown Pittsburgh.

But as hours in the steel mills grew longer, pollution from the mills fouled the rivers, and baseball and football grew in popularity, interest in rowing waned.

The sport was just about dead in Pittsburgh when Mr. Lambert, now 61, arrived here in 1972 to attend graduate school at Pitt.

"It was so sad," he said. "The rivers were great, but they were fouled with effluent from the steel mills. Nobody would want to race in that gunk."

But by 1984, most of the steel mills were closed, and the rivers were much cleaner. So Mr. Lambert and a few others interested in promoting rowing borrowed \$4,000 from the YMCA to buy two used shells, as the racing boats are called, and the Three Rivers Rowing Association was born.



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**John Buck of Squirrel Hill, front, and Dianne Clark of Allison Park, behind him, row with others in a "tank" at the Three Rivers Rowing Association's Millvale facility.**

**Click photo for larger image.**

The rowing association, which is headquartered at Washington's Landing and has a boathouse in Millvale, now has \$3.8 million worth of real estate, and a budget this year of \$700,000. The U.S. Rowing Association has described the association's facilities and programs as among the best in the country.

Rowing will never again be as popular as football or baseball, but interest in the sport is growing among both genders and among all age groups and socioeconomic classes, Mr. Lambert said.

There was evidence of this last Saturday when hundreds of people filled the gymnasium at North Catholic High School to cheer people who were

"racing" on rowing machines hooked up to television monitors.

More than 500 people -- most of them students at 12 area high schools which have rowing programs -- took part in the "erg races." Erg is short for ergometer, which is what rowers call their rowing machines.

Americans would be healthier if more of them rowed, said Dr. Edward Snell, director of the sports medicine fellowship for Allegheny General Hospital, and the team physician for the Pittsburgh Pirates.

"People who row are in incredible shape in both their upper and lower body, which you don't see in other sports," he said.

But rowers who don't flex their knees properly before pulling on the oars can put too much strain on their lower backs, so it's best for novices to get proper instruction before taking up the sport, Dr. Snell said.

A good place to get that instruction is in the rowing association's winter rowing league.

The league is open to anyone age 21 or older, and has three seasons. Each season is six weeks long, with two one-hour sessions a week. All are conducted at the Millvale boat house. The current season ends Feb. 16, with the third and final season set for Feb. 28 through April 6.

The sessions are held from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Students spend half an hour on the rowing machines, and half an hour on mock shells suspended in water tanks. The registration fee is \$75.

Dave Hudson, 51, an electrician from Pleasant Hills, had never rowed before he signed up for Winter League.

"I needed to get more exercise," he said. "It's a good cardiovascular workout."

Others in the class had been introduced to rowing in one of the association's three summer leagues, and have signed up to practice the sport year round so they can be in shape when the summer season starts again.

Gerald Frankovich, 63, a civil engineer from Allison Park, started rowing in the summer league last year after recovering from heart bypass surgery.

"[Rowing] is something I'd thought about for a long time, and if I was ever going to do it, it was now," Mr. Frankovich said.

There are two types of rowing: sweeping and sculling. Sweepers man one oar; scullers have two. Most racing is done in shells that are nearly 60 feet long, weigh 235 lbs., and are manned by eight sweepers and a coxswain who steers the shell.

Three women who work as systems analysts for Childrens' Hospital got involved when Diana Heyward, 36, of Wilkins went on to the Web to search for kayaking lessons for her son.

She discovered the rowing association offered dragon boating, which Mr. Lambert said is the fastest growing water sport.

According to legend, the sport originated in China more than 2,000 years ago.

The colorfully painted dragon boats are 44 feet long, weigh 600 pounds, and typically have a crew of 20 paddlers, a coxswain to steer the boat, and a drummer. Dragon boat races are 500 meters (about a third of a mile) long.

Ms. Heyward and friends Debbie Bencowitz, 54, of Washington's Landing, and Janet Griffiths, 40, of Plum, took part in dragon boat races last summer, and signed up for Winter League this year.

"A lot of us are older," Ms. Bencowitz said. "It's a real challenge."

In addition to being a good workout, rowing and dragon boating are popular because they combine competition and collegiality, Mr. Lambert said.

Racing adds spice to a workout, and rowing may be the ultimate team sport, he said.

"In baseball, basketball and football, you have individual stars who often dominate," Mr. Lambert said. "But in rowing and dragon boating, victory or defeat depends on the output of the whole crew."

Another attraction of rowing is just being out on the water when the sun is coming up, Mr. Frankovich said.

"It's a really good experience," he said.

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