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Take Me to the River

By: [Kelli McElhinny](#)



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In one of Pittsburgh's grittiest neighborhoods, far from the elite universities and exclusive Northeast prep schools typically associated with crew programs, students at

Houston Harbaugh Attorneys at Law logo and advertisement banner. The banner features the text "For Over 25 Years" and "We are Your" at the bottom.

Westinghouse high school are learning to row in inflatable kayaks in the school's pool.



The Westinghouse students spend four 20-minute sessions in the water per week as a requirement for physical education class in a pilot program launched by the [Three Rivers Rowing Association](#), a local organization that helps rowers of all ages practice and perfect their craft.

If the pilot effort is successful, TRRA will take the program to additional schools, according to executive director Richard Butler, a Westinghouse

alumnus who grew up in Homewood. The Westinghouse program is just one of many youth rowing programs operated by the TRRA.

“We’re all about the kids,” says Mike Lambert, one of the organization’s founding members and its longtime executive director before he decided to scale back his duties and hand over that role to Butler.

In the two decades since Three Rivers Rowing introduced its first high school rowing program at North Allegheny, the organization has built a youth program that is 900 rowers strong and offers those students the opportunity to practice the sport on a traveling team or on an intramural level.



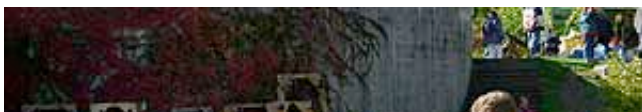
Three Rivers Rowing was responsible for launching rowing programs in local universities, as well, including Duquesne, which had the first local collegiate crew team, Pitt and Carnegie Mellon.

The youth and collegiate programs only illustrate one part of the reach of the organization, which started in 1984 when Lambert and some other rowing enthusiasts decided that the rivers were once again clean enough for recreation, and brought the sport back to a city that embraced it as a spectator sport in the Victorian era.

Impressive growth that led to the construction of two facilities – the original in Washington’s Landing, where the organization’s first boat still hangs from the ceiling, and the Millvale Rowing Center, which was completed in 2002 – resulted from attracting a good number of people to the sport.

“If you combined [all of the activities] and brought everyone down to the river on one day, you’d probably have about 1,700 people,” Lambert says. Even though Three Rivers Rowing’s youth programs are extensive, adults can join in the fun, too. In fact, there are plenty of ways for grown ups to get out on the water with the organization.

A league of one's own



The TRRA’s corporate rowing league, for example, might be an attractive alternative for someone who has signed up





for the company softball team year after year only to spend more time riding the bench than running the bases.

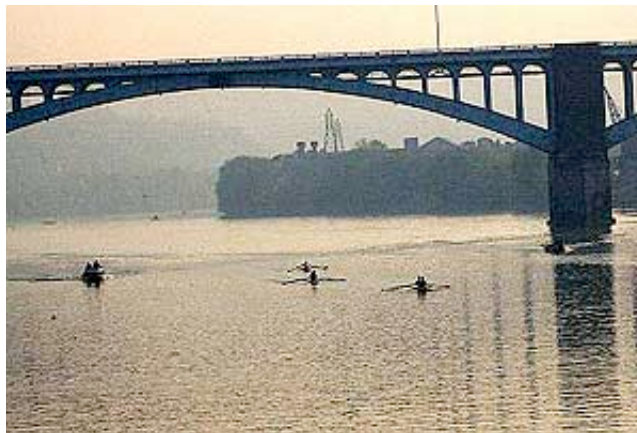
The league, which is entering its 10th season, attracts some 500 rowers in all to the Allegheny River every Monday through Thursday, offering two nights for beginners and two

nights for more experienced rowers. Eight-person teams from companies like PNC, Seagate and Mellon, as well as some from the region's smaller organizations, meet weekly for practice, informal races and a post-row barbecue complete with beer and hot dogs.

For rowers who don't have a company team to join, there is an option to register "unaffiliated." With various people missing because of vacations or other commitments, teams often find themselves in need of substitutes, and the unaffiliated rowers are a perfect fit.

Don't know a scull from an oar? Don't worry. According to Butler, no experience is necessary to have fun and even, with a little practice, to perform well in the sport. "It's easy to learn," says Butler, a Crafton resident who bikes to the organization's Washington Landing offices when the weather allows for it.

Second-year league participant Julia Clough, a Shadyside resident who rows with a team called "Jaggerbush," echoes that sentiment. "Even if you haven't rowed before, the TRRA is a great place to start because there are so many beginners. It is more laid back," she says.



Clough notes some other benefits of the league as well. "It's been a really good way to network and meet people that I never would have met before," she says.

The league's participants aren't the only ones reaping the benefits. Companies that sponsor employee teams can get a pretty good return on their investment as well, from the sport's reinforcement of teamwork. Ralston Jackson, a Mt. Lebanon resident and Cape Cod, Mass., native who rows in the men's masters program, touts the sport's capacity for promoting collaboration.

A rising tide lifts all boats

"It's a wonderful thing for corporations to do," Jackson says. "There are no stars, no primadonnas." Jackson also points out the advantages of rowing over other commonly used teambuilding activities, such as seminars and retreats, that often feel forced and unnatural. "There's nothing contrived about the teamwork in rowing. You're absolutely interdependent," he said.

Butler, too, realizes the sport's value in this area and includes the creation of a corporate training program in a list of projects the organization is exploring.



Some of the organization's other offerings include dragonboating, where 20



people share a boat in pairs, with each member of the pair paddling only on one side of the boat and kayak tours. The group is looking to add more – even quirky activities like kayak water polo.

In addition to providing a recreational outlet for Pittsburghers looking to take advantage of the region's top

natural resource, the various leagues are the purest form of social enterprise, generating revenue that supports many of the TRRA's other endeavors.

More than 80 percent of the youth rowers are able to participate in the program thanks to scholarships funded in part by the corporate rowing league.

There is also an adaptive program that allows people with mobility impairments or visual impairments to get on the water in modified boats that are wider and have stationary seats. This, too, is subsidized by the corporate league.

Three Rivers Rowing offers activities in a variety of levels of competition, from recreational to masters. If you're intrigued by the possibility of rowing but not yet willing to part with the cash to register for the league, the TRRA is offering a free Learn to Row and Paddle event at its Millvale boathouse on Wednesday, May 17 from 5:30 until 7 p.m. You might uncover a passion for an activity that you'll enjoy for years. Clough did.

"I definitely now see rowing as something I'll do as a lifelong activity, but I had never thought of it before."

Kelli McElhinny is a freelance writer and outdoors enthusiast who last wrote for Pop City about Venture Outdoors.

Photos:

Four seat crew rowing

Rowing tanks at Millvale Boathouse

Eight seat crew rowing

Taking a shell down to the water

Two seat crews rowing

Taking the shell to the boathouse

***all photos courtesy of TRRA,
except rowing tanks photo, copyright Jonathan Greene***

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