

SCHOLASTIC ROWING IN THE NORTHERN VIRGINIA AREA

Origins

Now one of the largest high school rowing associations in the US, the Virginia Scholastic Rowing Association (VASRA) is an all-volunteer, not-for-profit organization established to promote rowing and sponsor regattas. Rapid growth in numbers of teams and rowers has created a vibrant, well-supported, regional program of high school competition. VASRA has a nationwide reputation as a Local Organizing Committee (LOC), and has run regattas for other organizations, including many Scholastic Rowing Association of America "Nationals", Women's Collegiate Nationals, Mid-Atlantic Master's, and, in 2002, the Masters National Championship Regatta. VASRA was the 'Rowing Partner' for this Washington/Baltimore bid to be the US host for the 2012 Olympics (the preferred venue for which would have been Beaverdam Reservoir).

Scholastic rowing began in the Washington area in 1947 with George Washington HS in Alexandria, followed the next year by Hammond HS in Alexandria and Washington-Lee HS in Arlington. T C Williams began in 1964, JEB Stuart in 1965, Yorktown and Fort Hunt in 1968. Hammond and George Washington merged with T C Williams in 1972.

On June 10, 1979, the five Northern Virginia public high schools with rowing programs (Fort Hunt, JEB Stuart, T C Williams, Washington-Lee, Yorktown) founded the Association as the Northern Virginia Rowing Association. "Scholastic" was added to the name in 1986 and in 1999, with 39 total members in VA, MD, and DC, "Northern Virginia" became "National Capital Area". In 2008, after many of the VASRA teams in MD and DC formed their own Washington Interscholastic Rowing Association, the name was changed to Virginia Scholastic Rowing Association. Members are primarily from Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax, Prince William, Loudoun, and Stafford counties. Associate members are outside this area and have lesser responsibilities. VASRA conducts up to 10 regattas each spring season, entirely with volunteer support, for 1000 to 1500 rowers each.

VASRA Mission and Organization

The VASRA by-laws state "The purpose of the Association is to promote, encourage and support rowing at secondary schools in the Commonwealth of Virginia and in particular the Northern Virginia area; to provide for communication and coordination amongst its member and associate teams, the Local Organizing Committees, the Crew Council, and the Coaches Committee; and to sponsor and conduct scholastic rowing competitions." In practical terms, VASRA encompasses and represents all the teams, coaches, school officials, parent booster organizations, park authorities, and volunteers who support scholastic rowing. Together, all of these groups recruit, support and train rowers, organize and fund the sport, build and maintain the race courses, and manage the regattas.

The VASRA Board of Directors is comprised of a representative from each member Booster organization, four elected officers, three appointed members At-Large, a coaches' representative, a judge referee representative and local park representatives. The size and geographical reach of the VASRA together pose a special challenge to sustaining a single organization with a coherent structure, and it is not difficult for the Board, schools, coaches and boosters to get out of touch with one another. Improved communication among all these constituencies is critical to the organization's capabilities to serve its members and maintain regatta management strength equal to the needs of nearly 2200 young athletes.

Member Organizations

Each member booster organization has significant responsibilities. Primarily, it is to manage the sport of rowing for their athletes. The boosters are responsible for all of the day-to-day operation of its team, including practices, travel, and funding. VASRA primarily deals with the funding and management of regattas and liaison with other organizations.

To compete in Association regattas and vote on Association issues, a team must be in good standing. "Good standing" requires; (1) regular meeting attendance; (2) financial requirements fulfillment; (3) submission of the Crew Council Rule Book Certification, Insurance Waiver Certification, and Master Eligibility Certificates; (4) providing required personnel support; and (5) compliance with Association rules and policies contained in the VASRA Operations Manual.

VASRA and School Authorities

Whether crew is a varsity sport, such as in the city of Alexandria and Arlington and Prince William Counties, or a club sport with little school involvement, the teams must depend upon a large volunteer base for the conduct of competition. The reality is that the "playing field" for rowing is never adjacent to the schools, the property belongs to other organizations, and the resources and management necessary to conduct the sport are, with one exception, totally provided by other organizations (the exception is the T C Williams boathouse). It also means that schools take on responsibility with often limited control.

To strengthen the schools role as the institutions with ultimate responsibility, VASRA asked, and the school authorities agreed, that the schools would form a governing council. In the mid 1980's, the Crew Council was formed as the VASRA governing body. Its members are the Directors of Student Activities (representing the Principals) of the VASRA schools and it meets up to four times a year to consider and approve the regatta schedule, changes to the Rule Book Supplement, and address issues relevant to the management of the sport in the region. The VASRA President and Coaches' Committee Chairman are nonvoting members. Schools with rowing programs in this region must be members of the Crew Council and remain in "good standing" with the organization.

Coaches

The Coaches' Committee puts together the regatta schedule for Crew Council approval and, with VASRA, annually recommends rules changes to the Crew Council. The Committee also provides mutual assistance and has concerns about safety and preparedness. This is a very diverse group, ranging from experienced coaches with decades of participation in scholastic rowing to novice coaches with new perspectives.

Regatta Management

The Occoquan LOC (Local organizing Committee) focus is running regattas at Sandy Run Regional Park, a well-developed rowing facility started in the 1970's. VASRA LOC also runs the Charlie Butt regatta on the Potomac. In addition, T C Williams boosters conduct dual-meet regattas on the Potomac from the Alexandria Community Boathouse.

The LOC is responsible for regatta management and safety. The volunteer staff, coaches, regatta directors, and referees are the heart of the LOC effort. Regatta Directors, and their core staff, are volunteers who sign on for every regatta all season, have in-depth expertise, and maintain

management consistency. While many have children active in crew, many others participate simply for the love of the sport and interest in the development of youth. They maintain the courses and organize and oversee every aspect of these logistically intensive weekly events. They, in turn, are supported by a small army of weekly parent volunteers from the participating teams.

Referees

The United States Rowing Association's (USRowing) Referee Corps are licensed sports officials who provide all competitor supervision for VASRA on race days. VASRA uses the USRowing Rules of Rowing as its primary authority for racing rules; the USRowing Referees are responsible for enforcing those rules. The Referees' concerns are that weather conditions are safe, the athletes' equipment is safe and adequately maintained, competition is fair, sufficient emergency and medical personnel are available, and athletes' exhibit good sportsmanlike conduct at all times. Referees are unpaid volunteers, most of who either rowed earlier in their lives or are/were parents of rowers. VASRA is one the largest 'consumer' of Referee resources in the United States and, therefore, has a special responsibility to recruit and support the Referee community.

Rowing Sites and Park Authorities

Regatta sites are in public parks whose authorities are concerned that regattas are run safely, that other park users are not adversely affected, that the site is well managed, and that environmental concerns are addressed.

The course at Sandy Run Regional Park on the Occoquan is under the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (NVRPA). The relationship between NVRPA and VASRA is one of extremely close cooperation and support. Sandy Run is unique in that the park is totally dedicated to the sport of rowing ... scholastic, collegiate, and community rowing programs all are resident there. No other uses are permitted at Sandy Run. This facility, however, is at maximum capacity and cannot absorb additional teams.

NVRPA supports additional practice sites at Bull Run Regional Park and Occoquan Regional Park on the Occoquan River.

The Georgetown site on the Potomac River is centered at Thompson Boat Center operated by General Services Inc. (GSI) under contract to the National Park Service (NPS). This facility is now beyond capacity, which causes problems for equipment storage and dock space. The Georgetown Waterfront Commission and the NPS are working to develop additional boathouse locations on the Potomac. Georgetown University has long sought to break ground for its new boathouse – it has been in planning since the early 90's. The Arlington Boathouse Coalition has been trying for over fifteen years to build a boathouse on the Potomac to provide opportunity for scholastic and community rowing. VASRA now holds one regatta annually on the Potomac, the Charlie Butt regatta.

The Anacostia site is up river from the Sousa Bridge (Pennsylvania Ave NE). The river itself is a wonderful place to row, with little current and wind. However, VASRA no longer holds regattas here because of logistics issues, confined space, and personnel support shortages.

At the Alexandria Community Boathouse, maintained by the Alexandria City Schools, cooperation is excellent. The boathouse supports both T C Williams rowing and a very large community rowing program. As a race site, its use is limited because of difficult water conditions (windy) and river traffic.