

# Crew Racing For Everyone

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Crew racing has forever been shrouded in a kind of elitist mystique. There is the perception of garden parties for British royalty, fog rolling in over the River Thames and thick Cockney accents.

It is not exactly a sport recognized for its mainstream appeal.

But Christopher Blackwall, executive director of the United States Rowing Association, would like to change all of that.

In town to publicize the June 19 Cincinnati Regatta and Waterfest at East Fork State Park, Blackwall and other rowing officials are hoping to shatter the idea of rowing as a "sport of kings."

"Rowing has always been seen as a traditional sport with no room for growth. It is viewed as being esoteric," said Blackwall, former coach of the British National Rowing Team. "But we believe the sport has tremendous potential for everybody."

**THE CINCINNATI** Regatta, which will draw four regional collegiate champions, is being financed by \$20,000 in private donations collected by the Cincinnati Regatta Association. The winning team will receive a trip to the prestigious Henley Regatta in England. The event, with free admission, will benefit its sponsor, the Cincinnati Center for Developmental Disorders.

The organizers of the event hope that by bringing to Cincinnati the first-ever collegiate crew championship, they will be able to publicize the sport as having mass appeal.

"Rowing has always been something you may read about in the Olympics, or have seen on TV, like the Oxford-Cambridge race, but that's it," Blackwall said. "Unfortunately, it has never been something that everybody could experience personally.

"I would equate rowing right now with skiing years back. What was skiing? Just a few crazy people who could afford the equipment and could go off, climb up a mountain, and ski down it. Now, it's a billion-dollar industry.

"We have the same problems now as skiing did—it seems remote, untouchable and esoteric."

The ways to remedy that include popularizing the sport in more than just the East and West Coast, and making equipment and facilities available.

**CINCINNATI PRESENTS** a typical situation in this part of the country. There are few facilities, the expense of the equipment limits the accessibility of the sport and only Mariemont and Cincinnati Country Day have high school rowing programs.

According to Bill Engeman, head of the East Fork Water Sports Association, the sport is beginning from point zero here. The East Fork project, completed in 1979, is the only true rowing mecca in the area.

Further, the minimum one can expect to pay for a boat is about \$800, Engeman said, but costs are rapidly dropping. Also, the purchase of a boat is only necessary for involvement in rowing competition. Otherwise, East Fork has some equipment at its facility.

"I think something that will help the sport is the fact that a lot of boatbuilding manufacturers in the sailing sector are getting involved in recreational rowing shells, which anybody can use," Blackwall said. "It's important, then, for us to bring the sport to people through the medium of an easy boat."

Despite the economic limitations, though, Blackwall sees the American obsession with fitness as a sign that people are ready for rowing.

"Endurance sports are no longer considered a dirty word—just look at the numbers of joggers out on the streets," Blackwall said.

To appeal to children and weekend athletes, Blackwall said programs have been developed throughout the country for all age groups, including rehabilitation programs and competition for the disabled.

Collegiately, rowing is very popular on the East and West Coasts, but its spread has been limited because the sport is not recognized by the NCAA. Relegated to club sport status, athletic directors have not embraced it because it is non-revenue producing.