

Origins of NAOWRC

In 2004 and 2005 Doug Kidder of Maas Boats and Steve Wells of Evergreen Rowing learned of the work of the FISA Rowing For All Commission. With the goal of developing greater participation in rowing, particularly in regions where few currently participate in rowing as sport, the Rowing For All Commission began promoting “coastal rowing”. Under the leadership of a French Chairman, and with the majority of the Commission being French, this effort settled on the use of French-style “yoles” in races based on the French ocean rowing format. They proposed limiting participation only to boats that met the length and weight standards of this singular class of boats. Those standards define boats much shorter and heavier than the open water racing shells built and used in North America.

Doug and Steve tried to influence the FISA process and proposed that the coastal rowing races be broadened to include two (or more) classes so that the championships being sponsored by FISA would truly be open to all. The Commission took the position that our style of boats is unsafe in ocean conditions and that having more than one class would limit development of coastal rowing rather than encourage it. Consequently, North American style open water boats are not eligible for FISA Coastal Rowing events.

For several months Maas considered shipping a Maas 24 to the 1st Coastal Rowing Championship race and sponsoring Robert Meenk to race it. They asked the Commission if Robert could race in the championship event as an exhibition and were denied. FISA finally agreed that Robert could row but only in the race for fixed-seat gigs the day before the championship. By the time we got that permission, it was too late to ensure the shell would reach France in time.

Meanwhile, Doug and Steve were increasingly aware that the regional races happening in North America were boringly predictable with outcomes largely known once entries were set. The fastest open water racers were going unchallenged. In San Francisco, Puget Sound and New England, there were a few very fast athletes, but they had no opportunity to meet head on. In addition, many other very strong scullers were unaware of the fun we were having and missing out on our races.

Given the intransigence at FISA and the apparent stagnation with regional racing in North America, Doug suggested we should simply forget about FISA and their heavy and slow boats and instead focus on making open water racing in North America stronger. He argued that our racing is so much fun, that in time, the world would come to us. With that, we began organizing the first North American Open Water Championship.

One of the first decisions was to admit there was no sanctioning body to make our race a championship. Given the priorities and emphases at US Rowing, it was unlikely we would get them to sanction the championship. There is no governing body for open water racing, and a strong case can be made that there shouldn't be one! Instead, we took the position that our winners would be the open water champions until someone could beat them!

A second key decision was made by Doug (with Steve's full support). He felt strongly that the event should not be solely a Maas Boat Company promotion. Rather, the goal was to promote the sport of open water racing by bringing the best racers together, building the open water community, and giving the sport greater visibility. At the same time, it was clear that the resources of Maas Boat Company would be critical at least until the pump was primed. From the beginning, Doug has reached out to Peinert, Echo and Wintech giving them every opportunity to sponsor the event and/or sponsor factory shells and athletes. Their interest and involvement in the event has been building.

A third key decision was also made by Doug, and that was to move the venue around the country much as is done with sailboat class championship racing. The goal is to make the event more accessible to everyone and minimize any home water advantages that may accrue. Certainly familiarity with the race course is much more an advantage in open water racing than is the case with flat water sprint races. The goal from the beginning has been to alternate between the coasts and to find neutral courses, as much as is possible.

Steve volunteered to get the sponsorship of Sound Rowers and Paddlers for the first NAOWRC. We felt that by incorporating the championship into an existing race, logistics would be minimized. We picked the Great Cross Sound race for several reasons:

- it was in Seattle so it was close to airports, hotels and restaurants
- there has always been a large turnout for this feature race in the Sound Rowers series
- the Race Director was agreeable to have us piggy-back on his event
- many club members lived nearby and were willing to serve as hosts for visiting athletes
- at 8 miles, the race seemed long enough to be of championship caliber

In the months leading up to the race, Doug published www.openwaterracing.com and included a pre-race registration form so that we could get a rough idea of who might be coming from afar and what might be their needs for boats or housing. The web site also published the first press release.

For this first race, we took several steps to make it easier for racers to come from around the country and be competitive.

- We lined up a fleet of about 25 singles and doubles that would be loaned to visitors for the race;
- we organized a row around the course the day before the race to familiarize visitors with landmarks and conditions;
- we lined up host families and identified nearby lodging to make visitors' stays affordable and/or convenient;
- Evergreen Rowing sponsored a catered dinner the evening before the race so that visitors, host families, race officials, and sponsors could meet each other;
- Maas Boat Company and Evergreen Rowing contributed funds toward travel expenses for several athletes coming across country; and,
- Maas Boat Company sponsored a catered picnic after the race and invited not only racers but their guests to eat.

Finally, for this first race, Doug hired a photographer experienced with both sailing and open water racing events to document the race. Doug lined up a launch for the photographer, and wonderful pictures were taken (without harassing the racers) on the course during the race.

By incorporating the championship racing into the Great Cross Sound Race, we did not need to separately arrange insurance, safety boats, timers and judges, Coast Guard coordination, or rental of the beach-front venue from Seattle Parks Department.

We got no coverage from local media for this event. Doug was able to persuade Rowing News to publish an article about the race, which was written by Topher Bordeau based on reports he received from those present. Row2K.com listed the event on their calendar and published the results we sent

them. We enjoyed the company of two racers from England, and one of them wrote of his experience in the lead rowing magazine of the UK.

The second race was contested at Gloucester, MA in conjunction with that year's Blackburn Challenge. The course is greater than 20 miles in length and is exposed, in part, to the ocean swells. It is a spectacular setting and offers many unique challenges, including thousands of lobster pot buoys. At the finish, racers are greeted by the sounds of a band, massage tables, and a beer garden. The overall concept for the NAOWRC was clearly refined by the addition of these wonderful attributes. Each year we've tried to make the event better.

The third year the race returned to the West Coast and was contested in San Francisco. The host clubs were the South End Rowing Club and the Open Water Rowing Center in Sausalito. This time, a new race was generated rather than piggy-backing on an existing race. The new race was called The Golden Gate Challenge, and the course featured a turn around the supports of the Golden Gate Bridge. A fantastic dinner was hosted the night before the race at the South End club's historic boathouse. Sound Rowers sent a trailer load of shells from Puget Sound and several strong athletes flew to San Francisco from the East Coast and rowed in loaned shells. By this time, one of the original goals was clearly being satisfied, as the best from the three centers of open water racing were building familiarity with each other and strong friendships were forming.

The fourth running was contested in Rhode Island. Dan Gorriaran did a tremendous amount of prep work to invent a new race called The Jamestown Counter Revolution. He coordinated with the local town officials, reserved beachfront sites for post-race partying, videotaped the course and posted that tape on the web so folks could see key waypoints, and created a web site that overflowed with information about the race and the locale. All was primed for a spectacular race, and then came Tropical Storm Danny. The day before the race, the Coast Guard strongly suggested the race be cancelled. In fact, the course was unrowable. In the remaining 24 hours, Dan organized a total shift in venues, and the race was successfully run from the boathouse of the Narragansett Boat Club in Providence. Though Danny's rains continued, the winds were calm and the race was fast.

Each year we have seen racers show up with flat water shells, and we have often questioned if these boats are safe enough to be allowed in the race. After all, the race is intended to be a significant challenge involving rough water. Safety is always a paramount concern. What attributes in a shell make the rower safe enough? Or put the other way, can we define necessary features and prohibit shells that lack them? The Jamestown race added further insight into that problem. Many racers showed up with flat water shells. The conditions on race day were consistent with their use, but if we'd raced at the original course under expected conditions, those same shells likely would have been judged unsafe. Is it fair to a racer to tell them on race day they cannot race in the boat they've brought? How can we give athletes advance notice so they show up at our race fully understanding the possibility they may not be allowed to race that day?

There are at least two dimensions to this problem. First, we have so far failed to come up with a list of attributes that definitely establish a distinction between a flat water and an open water shell. It seems there is a continuum rather than two clear classes. Second, there is growing agreement that safety is more a function of the sculler's skill and experience than a function of the boat and its attributes. As it stands, we feel the decision to disallow a boat on race day is in the hands of the Race Director. Safety must be assured. Open water racing implies that each racer assume responsibility for his or her decision to participate.

In returning once again to the West Coast, and with the experience of four prior events, we looked for a race venue that included:

- a length of 12-16 miles
- a course with significant seamanship challenges
- a course with a natural, largely undeveloped setting
- a fun host community offering the qualities of a destination worthy of a long trip
- a local host willing and able to maintain and add to the traditions of the race series.

We're convinced that the 5th version of the NAOWRC meets all those desired attributes and more!