

Sprints '97: Behind the Scenes at a Local Regatta by Peggy Nauts

The Lake Merritt Rowing Club's Sprints regatta, held annually in Oakland, California, is always a challenge to bring off. Like any other regatta, it entails the logistical conundrum of how to juggle late entries, deal with motor breakdowns, fill positions when the personnel keep jumping into boats and rowing away, and still make the races run on time--or as on time as is possible without turning into Mussolini.

But the Sprints, now in its 19th year, has a few added complications. First, there's the small matter of providing parking for 60-foot vehicles in downtown Oakland, California. Next, the critical detail of adjusting the lake level--which must be low enough so the lane lines can be installed the day before the regatta and high enough at race time to bury any stray shopping carts well below skeg level, enable the docks to be used easily, and showcase the lake's beauty. Finally, the need to share the waterfront with the local running club and the rest of the community, taking care not to ruin anyone's wedding at the adjoining Victorian Camron-Stanford House with poorly located Port-A-Potties.

Somehow, with all hands on deck, the regatta happens: Club members pitch in, with some stalwart workhorses toiling for weeks beforehand designing databases, assembling equipment, deciphering and tabulating entries, installing lane lines, and lining up personnel. Officials come from all over California to lend LMRC their expertise; the city of Oakland loans pontoon boats and staff and lowers and raises the lake on request; the Stanford Rowing Club supplies its lane lines; Summer Youth rowers man the stakeboats; whaleboat rowers assist on the finish line.

Big Fun, Stiff Competition

LMRC views the regatta, held every year on the last Sunday in July, as both a serious racing opportunity and a chance to have some serious fun. The regatta draws top-flight competition from around California, and rowers can jump into as many boats as they have the energy to row.

For many years the Sprints attracted mostly masters, says Doug Dove, who has spearheaded the regatta committee for the past few years, but now more open boats are entering, and Dove hopes to see still more of them in '98. "It's a good tuneup for Nationals," says Dove.

This year's Sprints was extremely well attended: Registrar Kimberly Hart tallied 440 competitors, 215 boats, and 51 races including heats, although many Southern California crews had attended regionals in Los Gatos the week before and couldn't make the trip north again so soon.

Race announcer Ron Hudson found the open men's heavyweight single, the women's open eight, the women's open single, and the women's open pair to be the most exciting events of the day. The men's single, won by Erik Pearson of Humboldt Bay Rowing, was notable "for the intensity of the competition--there were two heats, so all six rowers in the

final were really good," says Hudson. The winner of the women's single, Catriona Fallon of Stanford Rowing Club, a former National Team eight rower, "just got herself an Empacher and started rowing a single last fall," Hudson says. The women's eight final was a Los Gatos sandwich, with Los Gatos boats taking first and third and knocking frequent winner Marin into second. The men's eight final stood out, according to Hudson, only because of the huge margin Stanford Rowing Club won it by. And "the women's pairs races are usually nonevents," says Hudson, "but this one was actually very competitive--all three boats stayed in their lanes, and they pushed each other all the way down the course."

One race that proved thrilling for its 6' 2" cox, Stuart Fogg, was the intermediate mixed eight. "In the last 200 meters, the LMRC-B boat came from fourth to win by three seconds. This was in the Spirit [a heavy wooden boat that reportedly hasn't won a race in 14 years], with the crew set an hour and a half before the start, the stroke stroking for the first time, and a 165-pound cox. On the way to the start line, we invented a start we could all do: two at half slide, two at three-quarter, then settle. Nobody thought we'd need a victory dance."

Competitors Rule

Miklos Kossa, regatta committee member, sums up the Sprints philosophy as, "Everything is for the competitors--good officiating, good courses--what matters most is to provide an environment that's conducive to competition." Lake Merritt's sheltered water generally is smooth in the mornings, and Kossa says that that, combined with the club's increasingly sophisticated course equipment, makes for "almost a class A course. Most local regattas have a class B or C course, by USRA standards, but with the exception of a few minor variations, such as the lack of a split-screen TV at the start, we have a Class A course."

Dove says LMRC is "working the kinks out" in running the regatta and assembling a manual for next year's volunteers--something that should improve efficiency. Wilma Gray, volunteers coordinator, put up sign-up sheets early this year and subsequently called everyone in the club who hadn't signed up for a job to urge them to participate. "Some of the ones who row on their own were a little shy about whether they could help--once they had a job, they enjoyed coming down," she says. Gray's strategy for mobilizing an army of volunteers? "Give them clear instructions so they understand the job, set limits for the amount of time they have to spend on it, and they're more than happy to pitch in." Since many volunteers also race multiple races, scheduling can get tricky: Gray had to pull official John Disney off the starting platform whenever he advanced out of his heats to a final.

Course Upgrade

LMRC used to tally dozens of hours of volunteer labor prior to the Sprints untangling garbage bag upon garbage bag of decaying buoys and snarls of line, loading them and the anchors on a dock, and motoring at painfully slow speeds across the lake. Like Sisyphus, lane-line volunteers seemed doomed to repetitive tasks for all eternity: One person sorted buoys while another slowly rolled the immense spools of slippery synthetic line on

sawhorses and still others hooked on a weight and a buoy every 20 meters. LMRC is gradually upgrading its course equipment to a full Albano course of stainless steel cable with clips, a big savings in both time and effort over the old method. Says Stuart Fogg, veteran lane-line installer, "Jill McIntire [LMRC's city liaison] figured out most of the details. We now use just a few weights near the ends of the lines to keep them out of the way of launch propellers. The cables sink to the correct depth, and we use .095" Weed-Eater line to attach the buoys to the lane lines--it doesn't snarl. The Weed-Eater line is looped through the buoy at one end and a clip at the other end and secured with crimps cut from a roll of inexpensive 1/4" copper tubing. We wind the lines on garden hose reels--they're small enough to be installed or removed one at a time from a launch." For clubs considering starting their own regatta, Kossa recommends contacting Bill Smoke (Albano Specialties, Inc.: 616/695-9637), who supplies complete course equipment from cables to clips. But clubs that need to create a course on a shoestring can do it the way LMRC traditionally has--by cutting odds and ends of Styrofoam for buoys, using inexpensive synthetic line, and generally winging it.

Oars Opera

The Sprints evolved out of a women's regatta in the late '70s called the Bay Area Rowing Festival, aka BARF. When women began to race 2,000-meter distances in the mid-'80s, the regatta was run for a couple of years under the somewhat grandiose name The Pacific Rim Invitational. It was almost disbanded in the late '80s, but Kossa, "little knowing the consequences," said he'd take the lead and directed the regatta until 1990, when it started being run by committee.

Kossa describes running a regatta as "like an opera production--many different disciplines are involved. The singing, the props, the orchestra, the conducting all have to work together--and it never happens exactly right. At a regatta, you figure out at 5 a.m. on race day what went wrong." Kossa recalls a year in the late '80s when the club had new medals designed, only to discover close to regatta day that the diemaker had misinterpreted the sketch of two crossed oars as two crossed brooms. LMRC dispensed the medals with the advice that they were "particularly appropriate for sweep rowers." Who knows, maybe they've become collector's items by now.

In July '98, the Sprints will turn 20: LMRC hopes to celebrate that birthday with the biggest, best-run regatta yet.