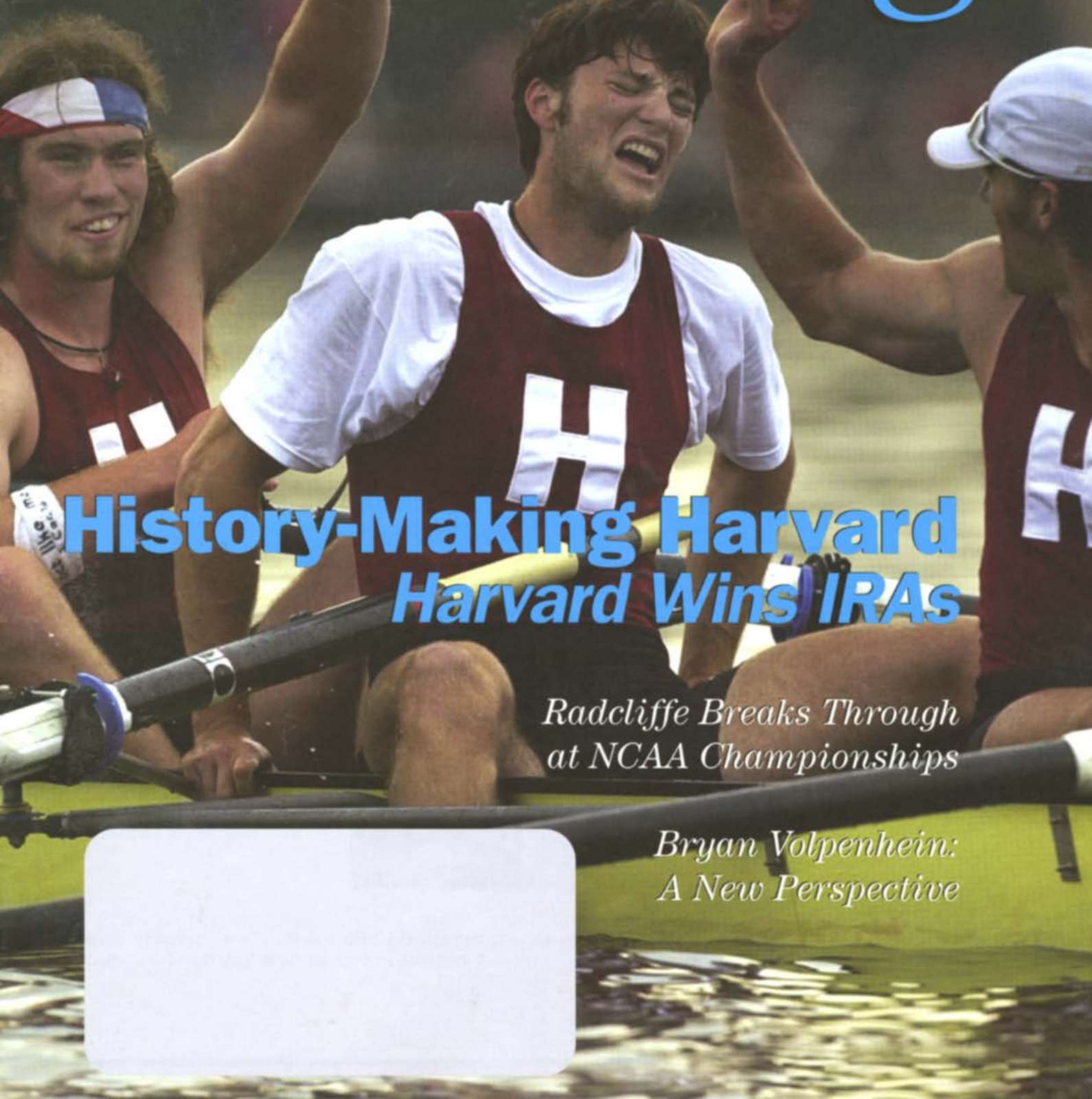




# USRowing

July 2003



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# Pioneering Spirit

Club Profile

By Brett Johnson | Photos provided by OAR

**Oklahoma. When most people think of the Sooner State, they think of University of Oklahoma football, the Rogers and Hammerstein musical, the Land Run, or country music superstar Garth Brooks. It's certainly not the first place that comes to mind when the sport of rowing is mentioned.**

But if Mike and Tempe Knopp, the Oklahoma Association for Rowing (OAR), and Oklahoma City itself have their way, Oklahoma City will be known as one of the great rowing cities in the United States.

Plans are in the final stages for the construction of a \$2 million, state-of-the-art boathouse. Located between the future sites of the Land Run Memorial and the Native American Cultural Center, a Smithsonian-linked museum that will attract international tourists, OAR's Chesapeake Energy Boathouse will be a core component of the city's North Canadian River revitalization project.

"We want to create a landmark along the bank of the river," said Rand Elliott, the architect of the new boathouse and president of Elliott + Associates architectural firm. "This is the first new project and I felt a responsibility to make it a good one."

With a landmark boathouse on the horizon, OAR has come a long way since the Knopps co-founded it in 1999. The couple became involved in rowing in Oklahoma in 1996 as members of the Oklahoma City Rowing Club, but they had a vision to develop a broad-based community rowing club with a downtown boathouse on the North Canadian River. Their mission was to promote the sport and provide opportunities for both youth and adult rowers.

At the time it was founded, the club only had a few members, one old quad and an older double. But through its various programs, OAR quickly generated interest in the sport.

"When we started talking about rowing in Oklahoma City, we would get these strange looks. People thought it was canoeing and didn't really understand what we were doing until we started going out actively recruiting people," Mike Knopp said. "We started going to local running events to promote the club. We tried to publicize the Learn to Row program through the newspapers, and we started our junior program and worked really hard to get the word out to the local high schools. It started kind of slow, but

once the word got out, we were surprised by the response."

Today, the club has more than 150 members and 40 boats, offers competitive junior and masters programs, runs an at-risk youth program called Power 10, houses two collegiate rowing programs from Oklahoma City College and the University of Oklahoma, and offers Learn to Row and continuing education programs for masters' rowers as well.

The junior program, which Tempe started in 2000, has grown from just a couple of kids to more than 35 athletes. The team practices

four times per week and has started to make an impact nationally. Last summer, Carly York made the 2002 U.S. Junior National Team as the spare.

York, who still has junior eligibility remaining, has been invited back to selection camp this year and a second rower, sophomore Katie-Jane Johnson, was invited to this summer's junior development camp.

"Carly's success has brought recognition to the program here in Oklahoma City and nationally," said Tempe about her Stanford-bound rower. "She and Katie train together, so that's been another positive. Carly's able to mentor kids that are coming up."

Tempe said the program is having success on the regional level and ultimately would like to become competitive at the national level. The program draws from several area schools and has had good success retaining kids from its annual two-week summer camp.

"We're continuing to grow," Tempe said. "We have a solid foundation. We've only been

around for three and a half years, so we're just starting to see the speed we need to compete nationally."

This year, the club added two new masters programs - OAR Sport and OAR Rec. OAR Sport is a competitive masters program that has the same kind of coaching and training structure as the junior program, while OAR Rec is a continuing education program for masters who want additional training and instruction but don't want to race competitively.

Another important program OAR has developed is Power 10, an at-risk youth program that teaches teamwork, dedication, and leadership skills through rowing. The club has partnered with Criminal Justice and Varsity Ministries to select kids for the program. Started in 1999, Power 10 will be a core program at the new downtown facility.

"What's so great about the new location

is that we're going to be much more accessible to those kids," Mike said. "The greatest thing we can envision is to see a kid from Power 10, someone who might not have access

to an activity that can get them into college, get involved in our junior program and eventually get the opportunity to use rowing to go to college."

As it has grown, OAR's mission of building a downtown boathouse has remained constant. Initially, the club rowed out of a small boathouse owned by the Oklahoma City Rowing Association on the North Canadian River in West Oklahoma City, miles away from downtown. But that didn't stop OAR from trying to sell the concept of a downtown boathouse to the city's movers and shakers.

From early on, the club worked with both the City of Oklahoma City and the Riverfront Redevelopment Authority on the concept of rowing as a main activity on the redeveloped river. It was an idea that the city embraced.



**"They really liked the idea of the sport and what it provides for the community and the image of the city,"** Mike said. "The river has been a drainage ditch for over 50 years, but it was an active river during the early days of Oklahoma City. It had a zoo and an amusement park and was a real social center in the 1920s, 30s and 40s."

The city passed a tax initiative called MAPS (Metropolitan Area Projects) to revitalize downtown. The initiative called for several projects including a new arena, a canal entertainment district similar to San Antonio's, a new civic center, and the redevelopment of the North Canadian River. The redevelopment included three new dams, which created three new river lakes. OAR's proposal called for bringing rowing to the main section of the redevelopment that runs right by downtown under Interstate 35 and building the boathouse on the section of land where the canal meets the river, a high-profile area.

"The city bought into it and granted us the piece of property," Mike said. "We started with a pretty modest expectation for what we were going to try to build. We went through several designs and were struggling with the budget and trying to build something that would be suitable for the club and the prime location."

The club initially settled on building a boathouse in the \$300,000 range and ended up attracting Aubrey McClendon, the CEO of Chesapeake Energy, as the primary local donor.

**"I think he saw what rowing could provide in terms of the opportunity for the community's youth, the health benefits for the community, and transforming the river into an area that attracts people to it like the river did back in the early days,"** Mike said. "Being the CEO of a major company, he wants to attract quality recruits from other parts of the country. He wants to make the city a place that people will want to come. He saw the river as a great place to do that."

Plans for the new boathouse were underway last September when the project reached a turning point. The club hosted the rowing portion of the Sooner State Games, a state-wide Olympic sport-style competition, as the first-ever event on the redeveloped North Canadian River. The event brought in rowers from all over the region: Texas, Kansas, Colorado and, of course, Oklahoma. It also attracted local politicians, city officials, donors and more than 3,500 spectators.

"When Aubrey came out and saw all of the boats on the river and all the people down there, I think he had a greater understanding of the potential impact of the boathouse and rowing on the river," Mike said.

In the aftermath, he suggested to McClendon that they should rethink the boathouse. Mike felt there were two options: go down the same road they had been traveling and get something built or build something that was bigger and could be more

of a centerpiece for the whole development. McClendon was sold on building something more spectacular.

McClendon hired Elliott, the architect that had built the buildings on Chesapeake Energy's campus, and commissioned a new design. In late March of this year, the design was completed and submitted to OAR for review.

Elliott, who spent weeks studying the history of the sport in order to shape his design, said the boathouse had five key architectural points: celebrate the history and tradition of the sport, celebrate the river, continue Oklahoma's tradition of being pioneers into the 21st Century, create a landmark, and make it "light, needle thin and fast."

The design is in the shape of a vessel. It includes 16 vertical elements that represent oars and it is translucent, so when the boathouse is lit up at night, it appears to float above the ground.

"It just blew us away," Mike said. "We thought maybe we were talking about a \$500,000 boathouse and now it's \$2 million. Aubrey has pledged to raise the rest of the money to get it built. Everyone is enthusiastic."

Today, fundraising continues and the boathouse project is going through final revisions and construction drawings. If everything goes according to plan, the nine-month construction project should begin sometime this fall.

Currently, the club rows out of two facilities. Two years ago, OAR purchased an old café and bait shop near its old facility in West Oklahoma City and turned it into a boathouse. OAR's second facility is a temporary "boathouse" on the future site of the Chesapeake Energy Boathouse. That temporary facility consists of two storage containers, racks, and a tent. In addition, the city put in a dock and ramp and purchased a championship race course for the downtown site.

Once the permanent downtown boathouse is completed, OAR will be able to do even more to bring rowing to the community. Mike believes that will require a change in how the club operates. Currently, the club is a volunteer-run organization with no full-time employees. Volunteers renovated the bait shop into a boathouse, keep the equipment in racing shape, teach lessons, and do all of the coaching. Mike knows that in order to make the next step, the club needs to hire a full-time staff. But with a good foundation and great community support, he thinks the sky is the limit for rowing in Oklahoma City.

"From an organizational standpoint, **our goal is to develop nationally recognized masters and juniors programs on the competitive side, as well as really develop our recreational program,**" Mike said. "Because we are in such a great place in terms of visibility, we want to open it up to the community as a whole and make rowing part of the culture

of Oklahoma City. It sounds like a vast statement to make, but I think that with the venue and the boathouse, we have the potential to really make inroads in the community with this sport." —



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