

POWER BOAT

A rowing competition on a green lake. In the foreground, a four-person rowing team in red tank tops and dark shorts is rowing a black boat. Behind them, another four-person team in red and white tank tops is rowing a black boat. Further back, a single sculler in a white shirt is rowing a yellow boat. The water is green with red buoys. The text 'POWER BOAT' is written in large white letters at the top. Below it, a teal wavy line separates the title from the text. The text describes the event on Sept. 24 at Nathan Benderson Park. The author is Ryan Kohn, a contributor. The background image shows rowers in action on a green lake with red buoys.

On Sept. 24, the best rowers on earth will converge on the waters of Nathan Benderson Park. From where to watch to rowing lingo (what the heck is ‘catching a crab’ anyway?), read on to ensure you get the most out of this world-class event.

BY RYAN KOHN | CONTRIBUTOR



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Nearly four years after the Federation of Rowing Associations awarded the 2017 World Rowing Championships to Nathan Benderson Park, the event is almost here, with the first race beginning at 10 a.m. Sept. 24.

In case you're wondering what all the hubbub is about — from redoing an entire intersection to finishing a \$5 million finish tower — this is the Super Bowl of rowing. Which means for those eight days, we're kind of a big deal.

Everyone can find something to love about rowing, but it can be tedious if you don't know what you're watching.

We're here to help. We've put together a handy guide to the World Rowing Championships, including what to watch and where, a quick dive into the sport's global history, and a breakdown of the event's can't-miss races. Read on to brush up on your knowledge and talk like a true sculler.

HOW WE GOT HERE

The beautiful lake before you at Nathan Benderson Park got its start as something a little less glamorous than a world-class rowing facility. It was a borrow pit for construction. Which means it was basically the remnant of digging to provide fill dirt for the area's development. Sexy, huh?

In the early 1990s, the area, then known as Cooper Creek Park, was purchased by Sarasota County for

parkland. There it remained until 2007, when the Benderson family (which runs the development company sharing the same name) donated \$1 million to the county to transform the park into a health and wellness destination. Voila, Nathan Benderson Park was born, named after the family's patriarch.

For the past 10 years, the park has attracted more and more rowers, leading to the more developed vision it has today. Check out the timeline below to see how it progressed.



2007

The Benderson family donates \$1 million to Sarasota County to transform the park into a health and wellness destination. The park is subsequently renamed Nathan Benderson Park.

NATHAN BENDERSON PARK TIMELINE

2009

The park holds two regattas as a test. They go swimmingly.

2010

Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center Associates Inc. (SANCA), a not-for-profit 501c3, is created to manage Nathan Benderson Park.

2011

Sarasota County commits \$19.5 million of Tourist Development Tax funds to the park's development. This includes extending the race course from 1,500 meters to 2,000 meters (FISA-regulation size). Development of the park begins, with the goal of becoming FISA-approved.



File photos

HISTORY OF ROWING

HOW THEY GOT HERE

How athletes qualify for the championships isn't as complicated as you may think. FISA rules state the event is open to any elite-level rower/team of rowers from a FISA-member nation, meaning there aren't traditional qualification events like there are for the Olympic games. Any member nation that wants to submit a team for an event is welcome to do so.

The trick, then, is getting selected by your country. There are two ways to be selected for Team USA: trials, and selection camps. All boat classifications, except the men's and women's pairs, had their trials Aug. 6-9 in Princeton, N.J. The winning boats at these trials automatically qualified for the WRC.

Pairs qualify for the WRC by winning their race at the National Selection Regatta, then finishing in the top-four at either the second or third race of the 2017 World Cup Series, the latter of which was held July 7-9 in Lucerne, Switzerland.

Then, there are the selection camps. National team coaches can send out invites to these camps for myriad reasons, including past international performance, training camp performance, a style or attitude fit, or even a "coach's recommendation," which really could mean anything. Some rowers also earn automatic invites to the camps.

These camps are also held in Princeton, and will continue until coaches figure out the combinations they want. They'll test different combinations and orders of rowers, trying to maximize a boat's speed. Coaches will make team recommendations to a selection committee, and the committee has final say in who comes to Nathan Benderson Park and who stays home.

Selection camps can potentially run until Aug. 28, the day USRowing will name its full WRC roster. The roster will be a combination of boats from the two qualification routes.

Rowing is one of the oldest sports in the world, with its history tracing back ... well, we don't know its exact origin, but there's record of the Egyptian warrior Amenhotep II's feats as an oarsman on his 1430 B.C. funerary inscription. In other words, it's ancient.

In the 13th century, the Venetians threw festivals called "regatas" (with one "t") which included boat races on the city's canals. Those festivals slowly evolved into the regattas we know and love today.

The oldest annual rowing race in the world, Doggett's Coat and Badge, was first held in 1715 on Thames River in London. It ran, as it still runs today, from London Bridge to Cadogan Pier in Chelsea. The race is named after the prize awarded to the winners: a traditional red coat, with a silver badge depicting the horse of the House of Hanover and the word "Liberty," both references to King George I taking the throne.

The first big American race took place in 1762, on Pennsylvania's Schuylkill River, and in 1823, the Knickerbocker Club became the first boat club in the United States. The Narragansett Boat Club, the oldest rowing club (and oldest athletic club, period) still active in the U.S. today, was founded in 1838. The club sent six boats to the 2017 USRowing Youth National Championships, held at Nathan Benderson Park in June.

The Federation of Rowing Associations, or FISA, was established on June 25, 1892, in Turin, Italy, and was the first international sports federation to join the Olympic movement. Rowing has been featured at every iteration of the modern Olympic Games, except in 1896 — it was on the docket, but strong storms forced a cancellation. Women's rowing didn't enter the Olympics until the 1976 Games in Montreal.

2012

Phase I of development (dredging and filling the lake) is completed in July.

2013

The park is awarded the 2017 World Rowing Championships in September. Phase II of development (installation of park amenities, hardscaping and landscaping) is completed in December. The park is FISA-approved.

2014

The International Breast Cancer Paddlers Commission Dragon Boat Festival comes to NBP. It's the first international competition the park has hosted.

2017

The park's five-story finish tower, left, opens just in time for the USRowing Youth National Championships in June. **Sept. 24:** The park will host the daddy of 'em all, the World Rowing Championships.

IN SYNC

The more people in the boat, the greater the chance for error. Here's how rowers in the eight keep it together.

1,2. Bow pair: These two rowers affect the stability and direction of the boat. Therefore, they need to be technically sound and adaptable. They are usually the smallest rowers in the boat.

8. Stroke: The rower who sits closest to the stern and in front of the coxswain. Communicates with the coxswain and sets the cadence for other rowers to follow and the rate of strokes for the boat. This position requires great responsibility and leadership.



3,4,5,6. Engine room: Rowers in the middle affect the steering less, so they're counted on for power. As the biggest and strongest rowers, their job is to simply to pull — as hard as they can.

7. Buffer: Sits behind the stroke. Follows the stroke carefully to make sure the cadence is followed by the crew behind her. Needs to be technically sound.

***Coxswain:** Position which steers the shell and acts at the crew's coach during the race.

SOUND LIKE A ROWING PRO

Catch: Part of the rowing stroke in which the oar blade is set in the water.

Catching a crab: When an oar gets stuck in the water at the finish of a stroke.

Check it down: A call from the coxswain for all rowers to square their blades and drag them through the water to slow down or stop the boat.

Missing water: Failing to get the blade in the water soon enough, missing part of the beginning of the stroke.

Oars: Used to drive the boat forward. Don't make the mistake of calling them paddles.

Power 10: A call from the coxswain for rowers to do 10 strokes in a row with full power.

Repechage: "Second chance;" the second round of competition that ensures everyone has two chances to advance from the preliminary heats.

Run: The distance the shell travels during one full stroke.

Rushing the slide: Returning to the catch too quickly, causing one's weight to be thrown toward the stern. This forces the boat to slow down.

Shell: The boat. The two words are used interchangeably.

Stern: The rear of the boat, and the direction the rowers face.

Sweep: Type of rowing in which rowers use one oar.

Swing: When all rowers in a shell are perfectly synchronized and the shell's speed is maximized.

Washing out: Raising the blade out of the water before finishing the stroke.

KINDS OF RACES

Scull: Type of rowing in which rowers use two oars.

Double (2x): One scull rower per shell.

Pair (2+/2-): Two sweep rowers per shell. Can either have a coxswain (2+) or not (2-).

Quad (4x): Four scull rowers per shell.

Four (4+/4-): Four sweep rowers per shell. Can either have a coxswain (4+) or not (4-).

Eight (8+): Eight sweep rowers per shell. Will always have a coxswain.

*A NOTE ON THE COXSWAIN

It's easy enough for spectators to see what rowers are doing during races. It's more difficult to parse what the coxswain is doing. In reality, this is perhaps the most difficult job, says David Wyant, a local attorney and former Sarasota Crew member who will be announcing races at the World Rowing Championships.

"The coxswain is the ultimate sports multitasker," Wyant says, kind of like a quarterback in football. The position's main job is to keep the boat straight. Traveling a degree or two off-kilter can be the difference between first and second place. Beyond that, the coxswain is also the on-board coach. In rowing, coaches can't be in direct contact with their teams during races, so it's up to the coxswain to keep rowers motivated and execute the boat's race plan, mostly by yelling. The coxswain is also the team's eyes and ears. If a boat port side passes them, the coxswain lets them know how much water they must regain.

While you won't be able to physically see their impact at the WRC, know that the people crouched down in the stern of the boat are working hard, too.

WHAT TO WATCH

If you want to know the ins and outs of rowing, there's no better person to listen to than David Wyant. The attorney at Schumaker, Loop & Kendrick LLC was a coxswain for Sarasota Crew in his younger days. He now helps coach coxswains in his free time (rarer these days) and is also an in-house announcer for rowing events at Nathan Benderson Park. He'll be calling races for the WRC.

There are a few things Wyant says people new to rowing can watch for during races, the biggest of which is how the teams physically row. Their legs compress then fire back with each stroke. Some teams prefer rowers sit upright, while others will have their rowers' upper halves at an angle. The reasons for that decision vary: Sometimes a shell simply feels more comfortable rowing a certain way, and sometimes the boat classification plays a part (a single scull versus a quad, for example). There's no "one way" that's certifiably better, Wyant says, but the differences by country and team give each race a unique flavor.

A smaller thing to observe: How rowers get their oars in and out of the water. At the end of a stroke, rowers will turn the blades of their oars parallel to the water, in a technique called "feathering." This allows the blade to slice through the air, creating less wind resistance. The rub, though, is rowers have to get the blade perpendicular to the water before the start of the next stroke. If they mess up the timing of the maneuver, it can ruin the stroke for the whole boat.

"It's fascinatingly complicated," Wyant says. "Coaches are trying everything to maximize boat speed."

Shells implement different strategies during races as well. Some prefer to get a big lead early and hold on at the end, while others only attempt to stay competitive early, and give a big push as the race comes to a close. All of these strategies depend on what other shells do as well, and thus can change on the fly. Unfortunately, unless you know a shell's plan beforehand, it's difficult to decipher them while watching a race.



TEAMS TO WATCH

If there's one category, and one team, spectators will not want to miss, it's the U.S. Women's 8+. The United States has won the category at the World Rowing Championships (or the Olympic Games) 11 years in a row. Yes, 11. The last time the U.S. lost this event at a major competition, the 2004 Olympics in Greece, Facebook was 6 months old.

This year's World Rowing Championships might find the U.S. in its most precarious position since those Olympics, however. The rosters for the WRC are not yet set, but it's expected that at least a few members of the 2016 Gold Medal shell will not participate in the championships. If that does turn out to be the case, the U.S. could find itself tested, or worse. The event is closing out the championships on Oct. 1, at approximately 11:42 a.m.

Great Britain, New Zealand and Germany are other recent rowing powers to watch to see if they can continue their success. Really, though, every race will be contested at a high level. Spectators will never see better rowing than this, in terms of both technique and pure drive. If you'll ever enjoy the sport, you'll enjoy it here, no matter who is in the water.

WHERE TO WATCH

Often, rowing spectators get frustrated by not being able to see the whole race, and it's an understandable complaint. Wyant is adamant about one thing: Make sure you watch a few races from the starting line. It's his personal favorite section to watch. Shells go from a dead stop to top speed in five strokes, and it's incredible to watch, he says. You can hear the coxswain, yelling his or her commands to the rest of the crew. The energy of the moment is palpable.

Conversely, the middle section of the race is the least interesting, Wyant admits. Spectators are fine to simply catch a gaze of that section while walking from the finish line to the start, or vice versa. Once you've seen a few races from the beginning, you're probably fine to spend the rest of the afternoon at the finish, he said.

Up for a more athletic viewing challenge? Try bringing a bike, roller skates, skateboard or scooter with you, and ride along the park's west-side pathway, keeping pace with the rowers. You'll get to see the whole race, and watch teams implement their strategies. You'll also be farther away, so noticing little things like feathering may be hard to do (and you won't be able to hear Wyant's vibrant vocals on the race call), but it makes for a unique experience.

SCHEDULE HIGHLIGHTS

SATURDAY, SEPT. 23 OPENING CEREMONY

Enjoy the kickoff celebration to start the WRC, including live music, family-friendly activities, food from local restaurants, and more. Starts at 5:30 p.m. at Nathan Benderson Park. Free.

SUNDAY, SEPT. 24 TO WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 27

- Men's and women's heats begin Sept. 24-25.
- Para-rowing heats begin Sept. 26.
- Repechage begins Sept. 26, runs through Sept. 27.

THURSDAY, SEPT. 28

- Semifinals begin
- Finals for para-rowing
- Men's and women's 8+ repechage



FRIDAY, SEPT. 29 TO SUNDAY, OCT. 1

- Finals for all men's, women's and lightweight races
- Races start at 9 a.m. Saturday and Sunday

*Races start at 10 a.m., unless otherwise noted. All races take place at Nathan Benderson Park, 5851 Nathan Benderson Circle, Sarasota. For a full schedule, visit wrch2017.com

FOLLOW FROM HOME

- NBC Sports will broadcast some of the championships, starting on Sept. 28.
- Live audio commentary and live race tracker will be available for all races on worldrowing.com, along with some video streaming for select races.



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