

The Women



Ty Russell

in the Boats



As the oldest intercollegiate sport, rowing has made a quick impact on the OU campus with the opening of a \$6.5 million training facility and a team poised for national contention.

T BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

alk about a convincing sales pitch.

Start a rowing team from scratch, in a prairie state, with no facilities, a recruiting base of zero, very little scholarship money and, oh, yes, there is a river for training—and it's 25 minutes away.

Leeanne Crain was sold. She didn't flinch as she arrived in Norman in 2008 to begin building the women's rowing program at the University of Oklahoma. Crain knew in accepting the challenge that she was coming to one of the premiere athletics programs in the country, with an unrivaled fan base that supports the crimson and cream whether on the field, on the court, and now, on the river.

Since her arrival, when Crain fielded an initial team by circulating flyers on campus, the head coach of OU rowing has turned the Sooners into national contenders. This winter the team moved from its original training room in the depths of

The OU women's rowing team practices on the Oklahoma River near downtown Oklahoma City. Since Crain arrived at OU in 2008 to implement the sport, the team has captured six conference Rower of the Year awards, two Big 12 titles and five Coach of the Year awards for Crain.

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Hugh Scott

The 24,000-square-foot facility includes a 16-seat “moving water” tank that simulates being on the water. The proximity to her rowers gives Coach Crain a vantage point to critique each athlete’s technique and fine-tune accordingly.

The Gaylord Family–Oklahoma Memorial Stadium into a \$6.5 million training facility.

Located immediately south of the Lloyd Noble Center, the 24,000-square-foot building features a 16-seat “moving water” rowing tank, a 2,740-square-foot workout area, a sports medicine and hydrotherapy room, and team and locker rooms, as well as office and meeting spaces, laundry and storage areas. The venue is one of only a handful of on-campus rowing training facilities in the country.

“The new indoor facility will be a game changer for our program,” Crain says. “It includes state-of-the-art amenities that will allow us to train indoors during the cold winter months. The rowing tanks simulate being on the water so we can focus on technical skills that will translate directly to our training on the water.”

It’s been six seasons and a rather rapid rise to the top for Crain and her rowing Sooners. Along the way, the women have captured six conference Rower of the Year awards, five Coach of the Year honors for Crain. In May OU captured the team’s second title at the Conference USA Rowing Championship, earning a berth at the NCAA Rowing Championship—this in addition to two consecutive Big 12 titles.

Crain gives full credit to the team.

“I try to put together an overall training program that will allow each athlete to reach her potential, but then it is really up to the team to execute the plan,” she says. “We have had solid leadership from our upperclassmen the past few years, which has been a huge key to our success.”



Hugh Scott

Coxswain Lindsey McClure checks the rowing form of Abbie Griffith in the workout area of the new women’s rowing facility on the OU campus. With a proper warm-up, the coxswain, or cox, can help rowers prevent injuries before they even get in the boat.

Rowing is essentially a year-round sport. The fall season consists of a handful of distance races, known as “head races” in a time-trial format. In March on-the-road travel picks up with the start of the championship season and all-out sprints.

“We’ve got a very competitive schedule this year with races against many of the top 10 nationally ranked teams,” Crain says. “The athletes understand the importance of being at their best between March and May, so that’s the focus that keeps us motivated in the fall and winter months. We will continue to row on the river six mornings a week during most



Hugh Scott

Emmie Preskitt trains with the team in early December. The state-of-the-art facility allows rowers to practice even when outside temperatures are less than hospitable.

of the season, but the new facility will get a lot of use, especially between November and February.”

The team heads to the Oklahoma River each morning during the season by 5:30 a.m. where they lease the Exchange Boathouse from the Oklahoma City Boathouse Foundation, located in the Boathouse District. Far from luxurious, it’s a place to store their equipment but not much else. A plan for an OU boathouse is in the works but is not on the front burner at this time, according to Crain.

Those early morning workouts may be a deterrent to some, but for senior varsity rower Cassie Preskitt, starting her day on the Oklahoma River is what she enjoys about her adoptive sport.

“One of the best things about rowing is that I get to see the sun rise every morning on the river,” the Colorado native says. “When I got to OU, I did not know about rowing, or had ever even thought about it. I was a gymnast and ran track in high school and found rowing the perfect opportunity to be a Division I athlete.”

Preskitt answered the call for rowers her freshman year and walked on to the novice team, a teaching program of sorts, designed for first-year rowers with little to no experience. Approximately 50 rowers are on the novice roster each fall. After a year on the novice team, members may be elevated

to the varsity roster, which is comprised of more experienced rowers. Success in the boat is related to overall athletic ability, effort and, most importantly, a positive attitude.

“We will continue to have an open tryout at the start of each year,” Crain says. “We recruit top rowing talent from around the country and abroad, but we will always have spots on the team for out-of-sport athletes. We rely heavily upon on-campus recruiting and peruse the campus each year for potential talent. The NCAA limits the number of rowing scholarships to 20, but we typically carry up to 85 athletes on our roster.”

Junior Reagan Collins of Tulsa earned a full scholarship to row this year and says, like Preskitt, who is on partial scholarship, the sport allows her to remain an active athlete.

“I was a ballet dancer in high school, and I knew I could not con-



Hugh Scott

From left, Jalyn Yeakley, Victoria Baker, Hannah Kloppenburg and Natalie Grimes work out on stationary rowing equipment in the new practice facility. Even on the machines, the women strive for synchronicity with teammates.



Hugh Scott

Rowing is essentially a year-round sport, but the challenging Oklahoma weather made year-round training difficult for the OU women's team before completion of the new, \$6.5 million indoor facility immediately south of Lloyd Noble Center.

tinue that in college, but I wanted to stay active, so I walked on, joined the novice team and learned how to row. I love the competitiveness of it and being so close to the water. We are just inches away, and it is soothing to me, hearing the dip of the blades and the rhythm of us all pulling together in the boat."

Having an indoor training tank, Collins says, will give a definite boost to their regimen as they prepare for the long rowing season.

"Our coaches will be able to watch our technique up close on water," she says. "When we train on the ergs [a stationary rowing machine], our movements are very different than they are when we are in the boat. With our new training facility, we will get individual attention on our technique."


As the Sooners enter their seventh season of competition, Crain says her sights are set on breaking in to the Top 10 and becoming a national championship contender. She also places a high value on life off the river.

"We want to be known for more than our records and our stats," she says. "Having the opportunity to represent the University of Oklahoma is a great privilege that everyone on



Hugh Scott

From left, Abbie Seremek, Hannah Kloppenburg and Natalie Grimes take advantage of the team lounge to do some last-minute studying before fall semester finals.

our team takes very seriously. We are fortunate to be at an institution where we are provided with incredible resources. It is important that we give back to others in our community who support us and this great institution. As a team we want to be known as good ambassadors of our university." 

Susan Grossman is a freelance writer living in Norman.