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Revival of a River Alters a City's Course in Sports

By KATIE THOMAS

OKLAHOMA CITY — As the nation's top kayakers and canoeists dipped their paddles in the Oklahoma River over the weekend while competing for a spot on the United States Olympic team, it was possible to imagine that a few city leaders had something else on their minds.

Like, take that, [John Steinbeck](#).

Almost 70 years after Steinbeck popularized the plight of Oklahoma's Dust Bowl refugees in "The Grapes of Wrath," residents here still chafe at the city's reputation as a barren place. As recently as a decade ago, the river was a scar through the city's heart, at times a trickle of water in a ditch so overgrown it had to be mowed three times a year.

Civic leaders and politicians gambled millions that a rejuvenated river would attract investors to an economically struggling city known for its love of football and rodeo. But to the surprise of even those behind the effort, the river has spawned something else.

The city has become a mecca for elite water sports. Last fall, a crowd of 50,000 showed up for a rowing competition that drew Olympic athletes from Australia and the Czech Republic. Three local universities have begun varsity rowing programs, and a fourth is considering one.

"We completely did it by accident," Mayor Mick Cornett said.

After a series of floods devastated the area in the 1920s, Oklahoma City and the United States Army Corps of Engineers sought to prevent future catastrophes by straightening, widening and redirecting a stretch of the North Canadian River away from the population center.

"They said, 'That will never happen again,'" Cornett said. "And sure enough, they took all the water out of our river."

Talk of bringing the river back persisted for decades, especially as civic leaders and planners searched for ways to turn the city around after the oil bust of the 1980s left the local economy reeling. In 1993, taxpayers narrowly approved a sales tax dedicated to an ambitious redevelopment, including the creation of a ballpark, an arena, a library and a trolley system. The tax also included money for the river.

In 1999, engineers began erecting a series of dams and locks that transformed the ditch into a bona fide waterway. Along with the Corps of Engineers, the city planted thousands of trees and added wetlands and walking trails along the banks.

By the time the corridor opened to the public in December 2004, the city and the federal government had spent a combined \$54 million. State legislators renamed a seven-mile stretch the Oklahoma River, and private investors built a futuristic boathouse.

The city has since attracted an estimated \$700 million in new development. A Dell office complex is on the riverfront, and a multimillion-dollar American Indian Cultural Center is under construction.

Renaming the river was the idea of Ray Ackerman, an advertising executive from Oklahoma City who said he cringed whenever he flew over the ditch on his way home. Ackerman argued that the name North Canadian River would confuse out-of-towners, but the change drew grumbles from many longtime residents who worried history was being erased.

People like Ackerman saw economic opportunity in the river. Mike Knopp's view was more elemental — the newly filled waterway could now float a boat. Knopp, a rowing enthusiast, looked at one 2,000-meter stretch that was perfectly straight and realized the [Army Corps of Engineers](#) had unwittingly created an ideal location for a boat race.

"It's very spectator-friendly," he said. "And that is pretty unique, to have an urban venue like this."

In 1998, Knopp invited Pat Downes, a consultant to the Oklahoma City Riverfront Redevelopment Authority, to a regatta on a nearby lake. It was a cold, rainy day, Downes recalled, but he saw an opportunity. "The sight of those long, graceful rowing shells on a body of water is truly a remarkable sight," he said.

The river's potential as a sporting site has become an integral part of city leaders' dreams for the future. Of course, the city continues to pursue other sports projects. Last week, for example, N.B.A. owners approved the relocation of the Seattle Supersonics to Oklahoma City. Still, little has captured the community's imagination more than boating.

Knopp quit his job as a lawyer and became the rowing coach at Oklahoma City University, one of the three local universities that offer rowing as a varsity sport with athletic scholarships.

With the help of corporate donors like the locally based Chesapeake Energy Corporation, Knopp set about building a state-of-the-art boathouse. It filled almost immediately after opening in 2006.

Jim Abbott, the athletic director of Oklahoma City University, said he was skeptical when Knopp approached the institution.

"This is Oklahoma — we're football, we're rodeo," he said. "So rowing five years ago was nowhere on the minds of the average Oklahoman."

But he quickly saw the benefits. Since September 2003, when the team began, 70 athletes have enrolled at the university because of the rowing program.

"The four largest events in the history of our university are the four regattas that we've hosted," Abbott said. Those events now draw the nation's top rowing teams, including [Harvard](#), and attendance has quintupled since the first regatta was held in 2004, Abbott said.

The sport's popularity has grown so fast that the three university teams are planning to build boathouses along the river, and another university is considering erecting a fourth. There is even talk of constructing a white-water course near the new boathouses.

Kayakers at the weekend Olympic trials, which drew between 10,000 and 15,000 spectators, said they had heard about Oklahoma City through their friends in rowing. Aside from some concerns about the city's ferocious winds, the athletes said they were pleased.

"I think they've definitely proven that they can provide a solid race course and event," said Carrie Johnson, who earned a spot on the Olympic team in the 500-meter single kayak event on Friday.

Johnson was the only athlete over the weekend to be definitively selected for the United States team; the rest will be selected after races in Montreal and Szeged, Hungary.

"The actual boathouse is one of the best that I've seen," she said.

The Oklahoma River has also won over Norman Bellingham, the chief operating officer of the [United States Olympic Committee](#) and a gold medalist in kayaking.

"I was a little bit in disbelief," he said, recalling his initial reaction to rowing in Oklahoma City. "I had to come out and see it myself."

Then, at the USA Rowing World Challenge held in Oklahoma City last October, Bellingham spotted a top competitor from New Zealand. He said he knew the site had been accepted.

Perhaps the best test, he said, was that he got few questions when he told people where the Olympic trials were being held. In the boating world, "it seems like a very natural, logical statement to make," he said. "You don't get that second look like, did I hear that correctly?"