



Sarasota County's Nathan Benderson Park to Host Time Trials for Olympics

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SARASOTA COUNTY - Screaming parents cheered during a USRowing Youth National Championships race Friday and almost interrupted a major announcement on the shoreline — Nathan Benderson Park will host a United States Olympic time trial for rowing next spring.

Rowing officials announced Friday that the Sarasota venue has been chosen to host time trials for seven of the 14 boat classes that will be featured in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Roughly 150 of the nation's best scullers — rowers who use two oars to maneuver, one-, two- and four-seat boats — will compete April 18-24 in televised races. Also featured in Sarasota will be several qualifiers for the 2016 Paralympic Games, also held in Rio next year.

It's been almost two decades since USRowing has held Olympic time trials outside its Princeton, New Jersey, headquarters. In 1996, American competitors crowded the shores of Lake Lanier, where the rowing events for the Olympics Games in Atlanta would eventually be held. And to the competitors' surprise, community members came out to watch...and participate.

"We literally had a guy show up with cut-off shorts and recreational rowing single," USRowing Chief Executive Officer Glenn Merry said. "He finished and he was able to say, 'I rowed in an Olympic trial.'"

While the hoops for participating in the Olympic trials are higher now than in 1996 (Have you been on an anti-doping registry for at least a year?), rowing representatives and local officials with both Sarasota and Manatee counties have a similar reaction when scullers compete for spots on the Olympic team in April 2016. Sarasota County Commissioner Carolyn Mason called the park a "regional asset" after a press conference on Friday that included Sarasota County Administrator Tom Harmer and Manatee County Commissioner John Chappie.

"People will come here and then they will go out all around," Mason said. "For hotels. For restaurants. For shopping."

While the Mercer Lake venue, near the USRowing headquarters, also put in a bid for the trials next year, Sarasota was chosen for a race course that many believe is more appealing to a television network. The park's floating road makes the event more conducive to a broadcast, Merry said, and that was appealing to USRowing board members.

"That's one of the reasons that Sarasota is so attractive its much more amenable to television and the ability to film the entire race," said USRowing High Performance Coach Curtis Jordan, who is a board member of the Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center Associates, which operates the park.



USRowing CEO Glenn Merry announcing Sarasota has host of the 2016 Olympic Trials in rowing.

STAFF PHOTO / KATY BERGEN

NBC is expected to broadcast next year's trials, an event that is owned by the United States Olympic Committee, though USRowing typically determines the venue. SANCA officials worked closely with USRowing officials earlier this year to help Sarasota-Bradenton become host.

"This is a tremendous opportunity. It's a step closer to Olympic status," park operating manager Paul Blacketter said prior to the press conference. "This is one of the biggest opportunities that we will ever have."

There is more than one avenue to the Olympics for U.S. rowers. The competitors who race the nation's largest boats, where coaches have to find the right combination of people for eight- and four-seat boats, are chosen in selection camps. Automatic spots for both sweep (one oar per athlete) and sculling (two oars per athlete) boats can be secured at the 2015 World Championships, scheduled to be held in Aiguebelette, France, this August.

In rowing, boats, not competitors, earn spots in the Olympic Games, scheduled for Aug. 5-21, 2016, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. If America cannot qualify for the Olympics in certain boat classes at the world championships, competitors in those classes will likely bypass the Sarasota trials for another spring qualifier in Switzerland. The Olympic committee and USRowing will use the Sarasota event to determine the scullers who will represent the United States in events the country has already qualified for. The classes that will compete here include the men's and women's single sculls, men's and women's double sculls, lightweight men's and women's double sculls and men's quadruple sculls.

"By the time we get to the Olympic year, we have a good idea of the top athletes in these categories," Merry said. "There is a long pathway."

While the rowing time trial is scheduled for late April, Sarasota-Bradenton is expected to host another Olympic trial next spring. An Olympic qualifier for United States modern pentathletes will be held here in 2016, in addition to an international World Cup Final within the sport.