

Talking with ... Richard T. Butler

His goal is to bring rowing to the masses

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By Joyce Gannon, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Nearly 30 years after graduating from Westinghouse High School, Richard T. Butler was back and on a mission: He wanted to put 14 kayaks in the pool not only to teach students to row to get in shape but also to show them rowing isn't "just an elitist sport for Ivy League students."

"You don't need just a basketball to combat obesity," said the new executive director of the [Three Rivers Rowing Association](#) after his recent visit to his alma mater. His goals for the nonprofit group include promoting rowing to schools and businesses both as a fitness tool and a way to boost self-confidence, discipline and teamwork.

Mr. Butler, 47, who has made a career in physical wellness and leadership coaching, was hired by the Three Rivers Rowing Association last month to replace founding executive director Mike Lambert, who is moving into a part-time role as director of development for the 20-year-old organization.

The association, headquartered on Washington's Landing on the Allegheny River, includes individual members as well as 15 high school teams, three local university teams -- the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon and Duquesne -- and corporate teams from local businesses including Alcoa, Mellon Financial, PNC Financial Services Group, Seagate Technology and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

Members train indoors and outdoors at Washington's Landing and another facility in Millvale. They compete in individual events and with other rowing



Andy Starnes, Post-Gazette

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Richard T. Butler

Job: Executive director, Three Rivers Rowing Association

Age: 47

Hometown: Homewood; now resides in Crafton Heights

Education: Bachelor's degree, communications, Slippery Rock University; master's degree, organizational leadership, Geneva College.

clubs in regional events.

Mr. Butler knew little about the organization until a few months ago when a friend who was an avid rower asked him to help train the group's women's master's team.

He turned down the offer but was curious about the group, clicked on its Web site and found a posting for the executive director's job. Mr. Butler, who at the time was coaching patients at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic in lifestyle skills, was attracted to the job because it combined his expertise in wellness, leadership and nonprofit management.

Career: 1983-90: director of fitness, Capitol Hill Squash and Fitness; 1990-93: strength training director, Greater Pittsburgh YMCA; 1993-2004: owner-president, Per-Fit Personal Fitness; 2004-2006: independent consultant, Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic; January 2006-present: executive director, Three Rivers Rowing Association.

Mr. Butler launched his career after college as a physical trainer and was director of fitness at the Capitol Hill Squash and Fitness, a Washington, D.C., health facility frequented by Supreme Court justices, members of Congress and lobbyists.

Mr. Butler's clients included Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. But despite the allure of powerful people he saw at the gym every day, Mr. Butler wanted to escape Washington's ultra-competitive pace.

"I knew I would be gobbled up or become world renowned."

He returned to Pittsburgh, took a job as a fitness trainer at the Downtown YMCA and soon was named strength training director. After three years, he struck out on his own and launched a private fitness training facility in Sewickley.

"Personal training was just hitting its traction" when he opened the business in 1993, Mr. Butler said.

Even though the Sewickley YMCA was a few blocks away, he attracted a steady clientele willing to pay for one-on-one training sessions with his staff of eight certified trainers. No one was permitted to work out on their own.

"The average customer spent \$11,000 to \$15,000 a year on training," Mr. Butler said.

His clients included a number of Fortune 500 executives who found his style inspiring and asked him to give motivational speeches to their employees. But feeling unqualified to talk about anything but physical wellness, Mr. Butler became certified in leadership coaching and eventually earned a master's in organizational leadership.

After speaking to sales teams and other employee groups, he usually walked away thinking, "they were de-motivated because of their leaders." So in 2002 Mr. Butler founded a consulting practice to help leaders and executives learn how "to transfer leadership instead of just managing."

He's tried to accomplish that in his own business ventures by avoiding an organizational outline that's top heavy with management.

In his office overlooking the river at the rowing club, boxes are stacked behind the desk and

a vacuum cleaner is in clear sight of visitors.

"My style of leadership is that you have to be able to vacuum and wipe finger prints off the window. I'm not interested in hierarchy; I want each person here to be stolen away to run a rowing club elsewhere ... then I'm doing my job."

One business lesson he learned after selling his fitness facility to a member in 2004 was not to stick around when you no longer own the place.

Mr. Butler had agreed to stay for one year as a consultant, but in retrospect believes "I impeded growth of the new director."

A natural athlete who walked on and made the track team at Slippery Rock University and has been nationally ranked in karate competitions, Mr. Butler has yet to try rowing. "But I'm looking forward to becoming a competitive rower."

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