



USRowing

USRowing Strategic Plan August 2023



INTRODUCTION

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does.”

-Nelson Mandela

In the sporting sense, rowing is not unique, but in many ways this sport of boats, oars, water, wind, pain, and passion is vividly distinctive. No other sport asks its athletes to find perfect unison on water while demanding patience, balance, and grit. We believe it is the perfect teacher of life’s most important lessons – be persistent, work together, and be coachable.

At USRowing, we’ve applied those same lessons to this organization: persistence, teamwork, and coachability. We began the process in 2021 with a listening tour to start understanding the wants, needs, and hopes for USRowing. The message came back loud and clear – **our members want an organization that provides value to them, broadens access to the sport, supports a strong high performance program, and is well run.**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

USRowing has made tremendous progress as an organization over the last two years in terms of “getting fit” — putting strong staffing, systems, and structure in place to support growth that will serve our stakeholders. Now, it is imperative to lay out our priorities, plan, and path forward.

In 2022, we launched three planning processes – one for high performance, one for diversity and inclusion, and one holistic strategic planning process for the organization. The following overview integrates the aligned priorities and initiatives for our organization from these three plans

For 2023-26, we are focused on the most impactful opportunities across the following three pillars:

Experience

Ensure that we bring strong benefits to our members.

Inclusion

Help our sport grow and be welcoming, fair, and accessible to all.

Performance

Support our high-performance athletes to be the best in the world.



USRowing's Mission and Vision

Our Mission

To steward, strengthen, and grow American rowing by championing performance and igniting new passion for the sport.

Our Vision

To advance the legacy of rowing by extending its transformative rewards to all.

Our Values

Member Obsession

We work tirelessly to deliver transformative value to our members.

Athlete Care

We prioritize the wellbeing and success of our athletes.

Organizational Fitness

We insist upon financial and operational excellence in everything we do. We continuously improve the quality and scalability of our systems, processes, and data.

Accountability

We follow through on our commitments. We communicate clearly, transparently, and promptly with all stakeholders.

Access

We increase the opportunity for people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities to enjoy and succeed in the sport of rowing.

OUR PROCESS

Our strategy is the result of collaboration among USRowing leadership and rowing community leaders, and rooted in feedback from our members.

The organization-wide plan was led by Jan Kaderly of Brave Bird Consulting, specialists in advising nonprofits in strategy, growth, and engagement. The USRowing team included the senior leadership team as well as members of the Board and the DEI Committee Co-Chairs.

The High-Performance Plan was led by Josy Verdonkschot, our Chief High Performance Officer. The DEI Plan was led by the DEI Committee, in partnership with the Community Engagement staff at USRowing and the consulting firm, Truclusion.

Who did we hear from?

- ◉ More than 60 leaders within our rowing and vendor community
- ◉ 1:1 deep-dive interviews with board members and leaders
- ◉ 1,500 Member Survey respondents
- ◉ 6 DEI Committee Listening Tour sessions with stakeholders
- ◉ 800 DEI Assessment survey respondents

What we Learned

“ **Prioritize clubs and their standing within the world. Financial support is a must for these clubs to continue to promote the sport and continue to develop athletes.**

- USRowing member

Our members need more.

We must deeply understand our members' aspirations and challenges, translate them into clear priorities, then deliver against those at a world-class level by re-investing in their experience.

- ⦿ **Put member clubs first.** The pandemic laid bare systemic issues for rowing clubs that put our sport's long-term future at risk. Helping our organizational members thrive through meaningful long-term investments in learning and development, community, and advocacy must be a top priority.
- ⦿ **Raise the bar on competition.** Over 50% of our members rank competition as the first or second most important benefit we offer. They look to us to set the standards for safety, fairness, and experience, and to offer development opportunities to achieve their competition goals.

WHAT WE LEARNED

EXPERIENCE

- ⦿ **Support rowers for life.** One-third of our members cite well-being as the most important benefit we can offer them, including sustainable pathways for long-term development, safeguarding their physical and emotional health, and effective governance. Post-collegiate rowers are looking for ways to stay engaged as they enter a new phase of their lives. Masters rowers want more accessible opportunities to compete, learn, and share their love for the sport.
- ⦿ **Extend and evolve.** We must advance our legacy by supporting new race formats, embracing coastal and indoor disciplines, and making the sport more joyful with every stroke.
- ⦿ **Get local.** By connecting more deeply with grassroots efforts, we can better understand the unique opportunities and pain points of each rowing region and then build solutions to improve experience and unlock growth at scale.



95% of BIPOC rowers enjoy rowing, but 25% do not feel they “belong” on their team. 35% do not feel valued by their coach.

INCLUSION

Grow and become more accessible.

USRowing members, staff, and funders all recognize that rowing needs to be more accessible and inclusive to promote the growth and success of our sport across the country.

- ⦿ **Rowing is too expensive.** Equipment is costly, it’s difficult to achieve scaled infrastructure, and travel expenses are increasingly burdensome. If USRowing can break down barriers through support of clubs, coaches, and directly to access, more people will benefit from our sport. We must ensure rowing is a meritocracy and all athletes – no matter their socioeconomic level – have the opportunity to participate.
- ⦿ **A majority of BIPOC members (66%) surveyed have experienced race-based challenges** and/or do not openly show up with their full identity and culture. An even higher number (72%) of members with disabilities experience ability-based challenges and/or do not openly show up with their full identity.
- ⦿ **80% of female coaches report gender-based challenges**
- ⦿ **Black and African American rowers, LGBTQ+ rowers, and rowers with disabilities felt they did not belong at their club** at a rate 2x that of white females, and 3x more than white males.
- ⦿ **As inclusion improves we should expect to see retention increase** as members have a sense of belonging and feel valued by their team and coach. If USRowing can retain 4% more athletes than we currently lose, in seven years we will have grown by 30%. The cumulative impact is significant: 4% more retention means rowing organizations retaining two more athletes than would normally leave each year. This 30% increase in membership will result in more revenue for local organizations and the sport at large.

“ We are like the ‘sleeping giant’ in the international rowing sense. Wake us up and we will be unbeatable.

- USRowing National Team Member

PERFORMANCE

National Team Success

USRowing has historically achieved success in discrete boat classes (primarily the Women’s Eight) over the last several quadrennials and benefits from the largest collegiate rowing system in the world. However, substantial challenges have resulted in unsatisfactory results: only one medal in Tokyo (2021) at the Paralympics and just three medals in Rio (2016). The last men’s senior team medal at the Olympics was bronze in London 2012.



OUR PRIORITIES

The pillars have been applied to priorities across the next three years.

EXPERIENCE



INCLUSION



PERFORMANCE



Priorities

We must create more opportunities for leaders in our community to shape the priorities and direction of USRowing.

Regional Focus

Though we share a love of our sport and the values rowing inspires, **the needs of rowers and rowing organizations vary depending on location.** Culture, history, geography, and demographics drive unique challenges and opportunities by region.

For our sport to thrive, we need our membership to be informed, passionate, and engaged in determining the direction and experience of rowing in the United States. We also need to harmonize the national goals and greater good of our sport with the realities at the local level.

The most effective way to deliver our mission is to empower regions to partner with us on strategy and execution.

What are we going to do?

- **Create more effective feedback loops.** Improve active partnership between local organizations/rowers and USRowing, including region-building activities, pilot program investments, and state and local government support.
- **Regional leaders.** Put in place regional general managers (GMs) with the empowerment and accountability to drive experience and growth through boots-on-the-ground engagement.
- **Home bases.** Aggregate infrastructure and resources to get better leverage for our collective work, developing centers of gravity for competition, camps, outreach, and administration.

Where are we starting?

- Rationalize and provide clear expectations to councils and committees that serve as regional extensions of strategy and execution.
- Engage directly with regional leaders on the venue selection process for 2026+.
- Pilot regional GM model with guidance, authority, and guardrails.

Our sport needs more coaches if we are to attract and support more rowers. In turn, coaches need more support.

Coach Pipeline

Coaches are the linchpin in creating safe, productive, and positive experiences for all rowers.

However, there is a national shortage of coaches, especially female coaches and coaches of color. Programs across the country need more coaches who are trained and ready to jump in.

If we are to attract and support more rowers, coaches need more support, training, and connectivity within the rowing community.

What are we going to do?

USRowing will broaden the pipeline of coaches into our sport and provide them with more support. This program will:

- **Facilitate Coaching Opportunities.** Create more transparency around USRowing coaching opportunities and requirements.
- **Provide Mentorship and Community.** Host coaching meet-ups at the regional level to foster networking and community.
- **Provide Resources and Education.** Expand resources through the online learning platform and explore coaching stipends for coaches from underrepresented communities.

Where are we starting?

- Launch a database of coaches to facilitate connections with coaching opportunities.
- Build a Pipeline of Coaches. Develop a feasibility plan for USRowing Coaching Corps program to train and develop coaches in partnership with clubs.
- Launch mentorship for coaches from underrepresented communities.
- Launch online learning platform for coaches.

The success of our sport ultimately depends on the health and vitality of our clubs.

Club Success

Rowing clubs are the lifeblood of our sport. They provide the resources, access, training, and community that rowers depend on. Better-run clubs can drive better member experiences, higher member retention and acquisition, and overall growth of our sport. The success of rowing ultimately depends on the health and vitality of our clubs.

The pandemic highlighted the existential risks at many programs; making clubs more resilient is a prerequisite for the success of our sport. Over half of clubs have less than 100 members and struggle with leadership turnover, financial instability, and operational headaches. They may have gaps in safety, governance, fundraising, marketing, and inclusivity. They're worried about member retention and performance.

Scholastic and collegiate clubs often struggle to engage with school boards, athletic directors, parents, and young athletes. Rowing clubs in communities without an existing presence face greater challenges – reaching new rowers.

What are we going to do?

We will develop a self-service online platform with learning and development modules that address the challenges clubs tell us they are facing: club and staff management, fundraising, and inclusion. The platform will:

- **Provide lasting value through education.** Deliver both evergreen and topical learning and development modules that address the challenges clubs face, from safety and governance to staff management, fundraising, and DEI.
- **Offer real-world applications.** Continuously update relevant and practical resources, including club mentorship programs, planning and execution templates, and tool and technology recommendations.
- **Recognize and promote.** Incorporate a club awards program, Find-a-Club recognition badges, marketing support, and DEI acknowledgements to highlight engaged programs.

Where are we starting?

- Phase I launch of 10+ online courses.
- Launching mentorship programs in all seven racing regions.
- Driving engagement through platform features, including recognition, promotion, gamification, and consolidation with existing learning platforms.

When we ask members what they value most in rowing the answer is, without exception, **RACING**.

Competition

Every year when we ask members what they value most in rowing the answer is, without exception, **RACING**. While some rowers enjoy recreational rowing and don't feel compelled to get to the starting line, most are hungry for competition – from our novices to our Olympians and Paralympians. But regattas are about more than competition. They create an opportunity for teams to visit other towns and cities across the country, to set shared goals, and be a part of the larger rowing community.

At the same time, our community is asking for change to bring rowing closer to home (both in-person and virtual), to embrace new and more accessible racing formats, and create a more vibrant experience surrounding our competitions. They want our sport to evolve with them, so we will re-envision the regatta experience to be more accessible, welcoming, and fun.

What are we going to do?

- **Grow our venue pool to reach more rowers.** Develop more venues that prioritize safety, fairness, access, comfort, and delight for our youth, collegiate, and masters rowers.
- **Expand our regatta experience for competitors, the rowing community, and the general public.** Evolve race formats, integrate coastal and indoor rowing, and deliver immersive in-person and virtual spectating experiences.
- **Develop a durable infrastructure for competition at scale.** Create a long-term growth and execution model for operational support across hosted and registered regattas.

Where are we starting?

- Four new or revisited venues for 2023 competition season
- USRowing volunteer policy
- RowFest 2024 - new race formats, disciplines, and experiences
- Request for Proposal (RFP) process for 2026+ host venues
- Dedicated referee support and growth strategy
- Re-envisioned registered regatta experience for 2024+
- Coastal domestic competition evaluation

Relentless meritocracy ensures the best talent in this country, regardless of resources, can represent the U.S. on the world's stage.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

When we say “DEI” we are talking about expanding rowing to reach new audiences, ensuring every individual feels welcomed and valued, and breaking down barriers to the sport. It’s about spreading the love of rowing.

Our goal is to champion transformative change that **makes rowing accessible and welcoming for all current and future members.**

Boats don’t care where a rower was born, how much money they have, where they grew up, or whether the rower has a disability. They teach valuable life lessons like tenacity and teamwork that should be available to all.

Unfortunately, many people do not have the opportunity to row and talented athletes in the U.S. system fall through the cracks, not because they’re not fast and hard working, but because they don’t have the resources to continue training to make or stay in the high-performance pipeline.

What are we going to do?

- **Create a welcoming environment** for all current and potential rowers by making all levels of rowing and competition more inviting, fun, and accessible.
- **Support clubs and athletes** by investing in their efforts to make rowing more inclusive. Clubs that are working hard to make rowing a positive experience for all athletes need resources, templates, funding, and education. We will also provide athletes from underrepresented populations with scholarships to pursue their rowing dreams.
- **Invest in coaching and leadership** to better represent the diversity of the country, support coaches and referees from underrepresented backgrounds, and ensure they have the resources they need to excel.
- **Enhance the high-performance pipeline** through scholarships for collegiate athletes from underrepresented backgrounds, supporting athletes with Paralympic potential via developmental opportunities outside collegiate rowing, ensuring access and clarity on high-performance processes, and hosting camps for talented athletes of color.
- **Develop partnerships** to reach youth, exercise enthusiasts, indoor rowers, and the general public.

Relentless meritocracy ensures the best talent in this country, regardless of resources, can represent the U.S. on the world's stage

Want to go deeper?

The USRowing's DEI Committee and USRowing staff put together a comprehensive strategic plan.

Please [click here](#) to view this plan.

Where are we starting?

- ⦿ Updated coach training, educational resources, and templates for clubs and leaders.
- ⦿ Inclusion and accessibility training for regatta leaders and referees.
- ⦿ Mentorship program for coaches from underrepresented populations.
- ⦿ Increase visibility of BIPOC athletes and athletes with disabilities by sharing success stories of clubs, athletes, coaches, and referees.
- ⦿ Capacity limitations analysis for youth programs to better understand how to support growth.
- ⦿ Explore boat-sharing program to provide boat access to clubs and athletes who need it.
- ⦿ Adopt inclusive language across all of USRowing.
- ⦿ Track data and grow impact of STEM to Stern programs.
- ⦿ Grants to community rowing clubs working to make rowing more inclusive in their local area.

Our sport is missing out on competitive talent.

High Performance

Junior and Collegiate rowing are vitally important to our sport. They are the breeding ground for most of our finest Olympic and Paralympic athletes.

Currently, the pipeline to our national team predominantly begins with our high-caliber junior programs and college rowing programs. Yet, many colleges with talented rowers are not feeding into our national team. Often, these athletes have simply never considered the national team as part of their post-college prospects. Our sport is missing out on competitive talent.

Moreover, most rowers simply leave the sport after graduation. While a change of location and the demands of starting a career and family will relegate rowing to fond memories for some, there are others who would love to continue to train and compete but need support and direction. We are going to ensure that extraordinary individual talent, ability, and effort are the only things necessary to participate and succeed in our High-Performance system.



It's time for us to become
The best in the world.

Want to go deeper?

The High Performance team put together a strategy focused on athlete wellness and success as we head toward Paris 2024 and LA2028.

Please [click here](#) to view this plan.

What are we going to do?

- Create an **athlete-centered** system that develops, supports and cares about athletes. This involves discovery and integration of talents, retainment of established athletes, and facilitation of dual career and transition.
- The system will be **coach-driven**. We will develop and retain elite coaches and implement a common philosophy for the entire pipeline from youth to elite level. Prioritization of events for Olympics and Paralympics will be based upon opportunities, not on tradition.
- Our approach will be **sports science-based**: monitor and optimize training (physiology), analyze individual and crew performance (biomechanics), develop strength, power, mobility (strength & conditioning) and care for athlete health and wellness (nutrition, medical, and mental services).

Where are we starting?

- Propagate the common philosophy at all levels.
- Make supporting tools available for all programs.
- Align the pipeline from U19 to U23 and Elite.
- Invest in infrastructure to provide the environment our elite athletes deserve.

Coastal rowing is an exciting evolution in our sport that expands our footprint and helps our sport overcome its barriers to entry.

Coastal

Coastal rowing has a devoted following of enthusiasts and represents a significant opportunity to grow our sport. Coastal boats are less expensive and more accessible and safe for recreational rowers.

This discipline is an exciting evolution in our sport that expands our footprint beyond the idyllic waters for traditional flat water rowing to coasts, lakes, and oceans.

With beach sprints likely becoming an Olympic discipline in 2028 in Los Angeles, CA, we will have an opportunity to grow support for coastal rowing.

What are we going to do?

- **Develop and execute on plan for High-Performance support.** We will develop a sustainable approach that ensures our organization can commit the resources required for coastal rowing success on the international stage.
- **Extend infrastructure to coastal sub-disciplines.** From domestic competition to learning and development, we will scale our current platform to deliver new benefits for beach sprints, endurance, and ultimately tour formats.
- **Leverage coastal for sport growth.** We will embrace coastal characteristics – including its more approachable entry point for newcomers and the spectating excitement of beach sprints – to drive awareness and ultimately engagement for both competitive and recreational opportunities.

Where are we starting?

- Incorporate coastal intentionally across our marketing efforts and 2024+ experience roadmaps.
- Conduct feasibility study for priority investments in infrastructure, equipment, and other resources necessary to support growth of the discipline.
- Deliver training course and resources for adding a coastal program for our club success platform.

Our Operating Model & Structure

WHAT WILL CHANGE

The success of our sport will be the result of **Experience, Inclusion, and Performance.**

USRowing has changed its underlying business model to better support this strategy and its priorities.



WE WILL ADVANCE OUR OPERATING MODEL

To move closer towards our vision and enable our strategy, we must re-calibrate our operating model to:

- **Deliver lasting value to all members** through a lens of customer obsession, inclusion, and disciplined allocation of resources; and
- **Support our high-performance athletes** with the programs, tools, and experiences they need to succeed *sustainably* on the international stage

United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) grants currently fund ~30% of the investments needed to deliver on our promise to high-performance athletes. Historically, margin from membership dues has been deployed as needed to close any funding gaps not covered by fundraising or corporate sponsorships.

This model has resulted in disproportionate and unpredictable dependence on our broader member base before ensuring we are first re-investing in their experience.

We have an opportunity to develop a virtuous cycle where the experience of all our members, support for our high-performance athletes, and sport accessibility to new rowers are mutually reinforcing.

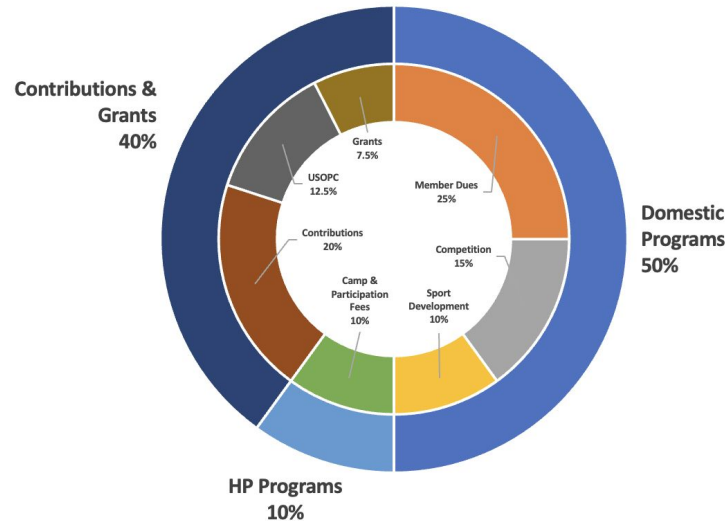
Building a flywheel like this takes time. So where do we start? In 2023, we are taking the following steps toward a more sustainable model:

- We will be disciplined about **using membership dues and other domestic programs revenue primarily to deliver value back to our members** and plan and communicate in advance our expected contributions to high performance, community programs, and administration (see chart on next page).
- We will redouble fundraising efforts that prioritize our high-performance and community programs. The driver of this effort is the **USRowing Foundation**, launched in late 2022. This group of 30 trustees and the development team will spearhead fundraising.

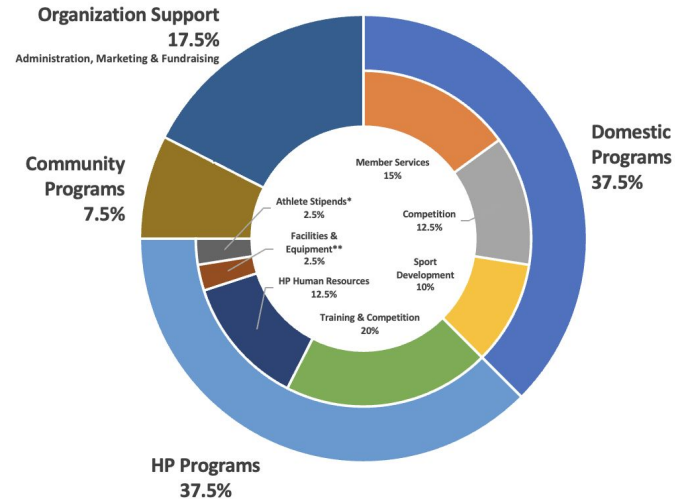
WE WILL ADVANCE OUR OPERATING MODEL

2023 Projected Revenue and Investments

Revenue



Investments



*Does not include Direct Athlete Support (DAS) provided by the USOPC directly to athletes

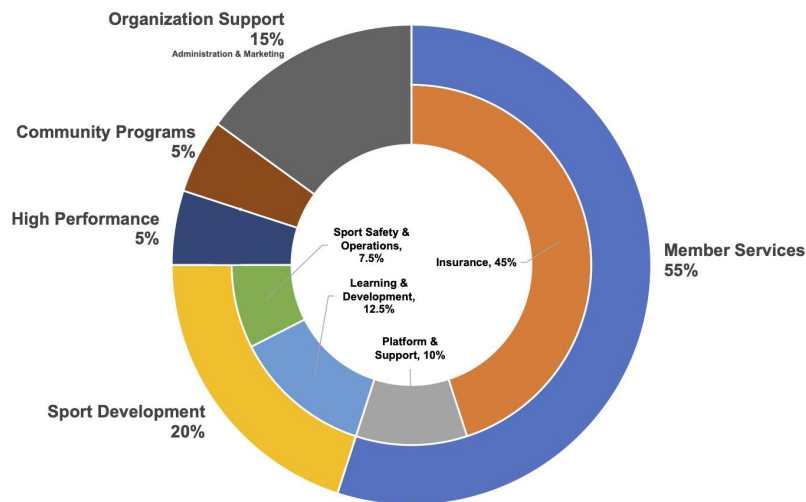
**Does not include Vendor-in-Kind (VIK) support from Filippi or Concept2



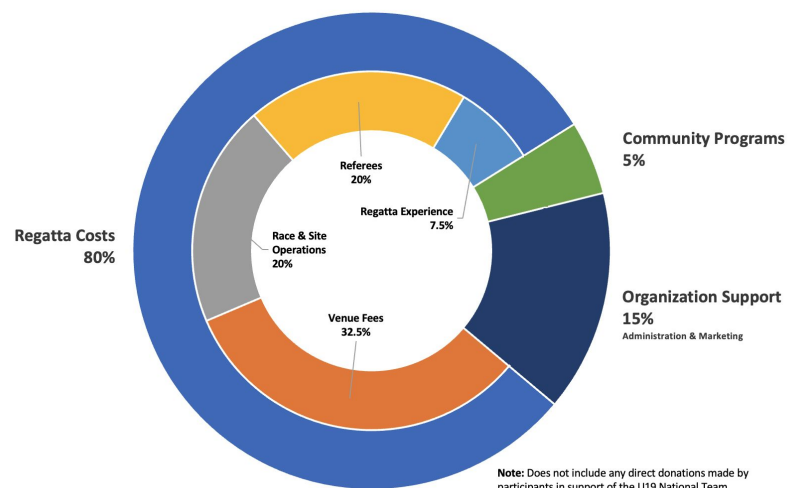
WE WILL ADVANCE OUR OPERATING MODEL

2023 Projected Investments, Membership & Competition

Membership



Competition



Note: Does not include any direct donations made by participants in support of the U19 National Team

WHAT WILL CHANGE

WE WILL ADVANCE OUR STRUCTURE

Over the next three years, we will advance the way USRowing works. While the details of the strategy bring our vision to life, there are **deeper structural changes** that are worth understanding.

We need to provide more value to more rowing organizations and rowers efficiently and effectively. Towards this end, we will:

Leverage technology, platforms, and durable processes to provide more support to our community. Building capacity to deliver at scale is essential to our strategy.

Work through others to multiply our impact. We will partner with clubs, vendors, gyms, youth camps, and other nonprofits to increase awareness of rowing, bring new people into our community, and deliver on our plans without having to build all necessary capabilities “in-house.”

Empower our sport at the local level. The passion and commitment our local rowing organizations and individuals are what drives our sport forward. We will empower the grassroots of our sport through clear and effective governance, advocacy where impactful, and direct support where it’s needed most. We will adapt our organizational structure to better align with our regional focus and provide more boots-on-the-ground partnership from USRowing.

Convene peer-to-peer networks for exchanging ideas, best practices, and challenges. We rowers rely heavily on teammates in front of and behind us. Why not turn to those teammates and a broader network to propel them forward to achieving their goals?

Embody a relentless meritocracy to ensure that extraordinary individual talent, ability, and effort are the only things necessary to participate and succeed in our High-Performance system.

In closing

Our commitment to you

This strategy represents our response to how we understand the needs of our community and sport. It represents disciplined decision making and steely eyed focus on what is most important for us to deliver. It details how we will adapt our capabilities to address your needs and deliver the greatest impact possible.

As we implement this strategy, we will engage our community and listen closely. We will learn about what works and what doesn't. We will continue to evolve our understanding of your needs and how we can best respond to them.

To do this well, the relationship between USRowing and its community must evolve.

We will hold ourselves accountable to an easy to understand measure: we will create more and deeper opportunities for our community to shape our organization and our sport.

At the end of the day, this strategy represents a simple promise: **we will listen and adapt to the needs of our community and sport.**

Wishing you all clean strokes, great fun, and fast boats.

A living document

This strategic plan is intended to be a living document that will evolve as the needs of our community and organizational capabilities change. Feedback on our strategy will continue to be essential as it must represent the needs and aspirations of the entire rowing community.

We will integrate this strategy across the organization and regularly re-evaluate it against the needs of our sport and the changing world around us.

We need your feedback.

Send comments and suggestions to:

ourfuture@usrowing.org.

