

# The Crew Behind the Head of the Charles

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By Erika Agbi

BOSTON – The world’s largest two-day rowing event took place on the Charles River October 17-18, where participants from all over the world were competing against each other. For the 51<sup>st</sup> time, the Head of the Charles Regatta gathered masses of people in Boston and Cambridge.



Charles River during the Head of the Charles Regatta 2015. Photo by Erika Agbi.

The regatta is obviously a large and well-known event. What may be less well-known is the role that the volunteers play. “It wouldn’t happen without them,” said Courtney Wilson. She was a volunteer coordinator in the Head of the Charles Regatta for 10 years, and is now in the Race Committee. “It’s ten thousand athletes, three thousand boats. On a warm day we’ll have upwards of three hundred thousand spectators. And everyone here is a volunteer. We have a five-person office staff. They are the only paid positions.”

This says something about the role the volunteers play in the event. According to Wilson, around 1,900 people worked voluntarily during this year’s regatta. Their responsibility ranged from checking in other volunteers and handing out jackets to working on emergency services crews. They had volunteers on the water directing traffic and some working as referees, others were timing the races. Volunteers were also packing and distributing lunches. “So everything that you see is pretty much done by volunteers,” Wilson said in an interview outside the volunteer tent on the Saturday of the event.

Wilson estimated that two-thirds of the year’s volunteers have volunteered for the regatta previously. She said she thinks that is great because it means less training and more familiarity with the regatta and how it operates. Among the volunteers, there were people who just visited for the weekend, a lot of parents whose children were rowing, and many locals. Some of the voluntary workers were up in their 80s, and the youngest one might be Wilson’s own 8-year-old son, who helped with the jacket distribution.

Volunteers get their own Head of the Charles jacket, which they get to keep. Brooks Brothers, the official premium apparel sponsor of the event, provides the jackets for all volunteers.

Wilson said there are two things that make it easy for the regatta to get great volunteers. One of the reasons she mentioned is the generous sponsors. But also, it is the love people have for the event. “People love rowing,” said Wilson. “Head of the Charles is a very, very special event for all of us. We call it Rower Christmas, because it’s the most wonderful time of the year for us.”

People are so eager to participate, that the regatta affords to turn away volunteers, because there are not enough positions to be filled. Wilson explained that they maintain a waitlist. And already during the first day of this year’s event, a number of people had been asking when they could sign up for next year.

A person who was not turned away is Bert Ruiter. During this year’s regatta, Ruiter worked voluntarily at the Singles and Doubles Launch (SADL) at Magazine Beach. SADL is the launching dock for the single and double boats. There the volunteers tried to make sure that the boats were launched efficiently, that they were placed in the right direction, that people did not get in each other’s way etc. Volunteers may also assist the contestants in carrying the boats and oars, and help them stabilize the boat when entering it.



Volunteer Bert Ruiter. Photo by Marwa Abdelhaimd.

Because the regatta made sure there were plenty of volunteers, Ruiter said he thinks the workload was shared in a good way, so it was not a too challenging job. “I think it’s a little bit about being proactive too, because these people are not really used to asking for help.”

Because the contestants normally are very self-supportive, the volunteers may want to offer help if they see contestants struggling with something, to jump in and be assertive.

Ruiter, who works as a research scientist at Massachusetts General Hospital, also volunteered at the regatta in 2010. “I really like the event. I think it’s one of the most fun sports events in this city,” Ruiter said in an interview at Magazine Beach during the first day of this year’s regatta. He also mentioned that the race course is an interesting one, and pretty challenging too. Even though Ruiter himself is not a rower, he has still been exposed a lot to the rowing

world, as his wife is a competitive rower. She competed in this year's Head of the Charles Regatta.

"The Head of the Charles is awesome," Ruiter concluded. "It's just a great event, and it's a lot of fun volunteering." Besides, he said, there are also the fine jackets, "a very prized possession."



Some volunteer workers at Magazine Beach wearing their volunteer jackets. Photo by Erika Agbi.