

# Lake Lenape the home of crew in Atlantic County

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MAYS LANDING — Lake Lenape Park East looks like something on a postcard, with calm waters, trees, a small beach area and a lighthouse.

But on the weekends, the tranquility of the park is broken by the sounds of hundreds of fans cheering the power and precision of high school rowers.

Although only a couple of teams train there, the Atlantic County park is essentially the home course of all Cape-Atlantic League crew teams.

“Lake Lenape is about 30 minutes from the school, and it’s a great place to train,” said Courtney Reed, an 18-year-old Galloway Township resident and a member of the Absegami High School team. “It’s convenient. It’s very exciting to race there because the shore (where the crowd watches) is so close to the finish line. It’s easier for kids to come watch you race.”

On race day, parents and boosters of the various schools set up their tents and huts for outdoor cooking, just off the beach and near the lighthouse.

Several barbecues commence at the same time as the cooks make food for their school’s rowers. Following the races, rowers return to the tents to eat hot dogs, burgers and other things from the grill.

Christine Hutchinson, mother of St. Augustine Prep senior rower Nick Hutchinson, and Karen Cullman, mother of Prep senior rower Nick Cullman, are part of the Prep’s cooking team. They were busier than usual March 31, as St. Augustine did the cooking for all the teams at the Lake Lenape Invitational.

“This (cooking) team is close, like a second family, and everyone does their part,” Hutchinson said. “Today we’re feeding 350 rowers, a lot more than usual. We want the other teams to feel welcomed into our crew family.”

Despite being busy feeding everyone, the cooks and their helpers stop working long enough to cheer for their teams.

While much of the race is out of view, the final 500 meters bring much of the crowd to their feet. The voice of a P.A. announcer describes the races as the crews approach the finish line. Close races always draw a big roar.

Sue Peterson, president of the Southern New Jersey Scholastic Rowing Association, conducts the Lake Lenape events along with dozens of volunteers.

“Racing at Lake Lenape is good for so many people who can’t get to Philadelphia. Families all come and spend a day at the lake,” said Peterson, 57.

The park hosts several key events each spring, including the Atlantic County High School Rowing Championships on Mother’s Day — May 13 this spring.

“We were just trying to get our feet wet with the first Atlantic County championships in 2005, and it was the area’s largest high school (sports) event right away,” Peterson said. “In the beginning years, we had close to 900 athletes.”

The facility has also drawn rave reviews from participating teams outside the region, said St. Augustine coach Ray D’Amico.

“The other coaches love it,” D’Amico said. “It’s a very fair course, and fully buoyed. That was all done by the parents. People from out of town are just amazed.”

For competitors, the lake holds a special place in their hearts.

“Philly is far away, and it’s nice to have a local place to row,” said Emilie Karovic, 18, of Galloway Township, a member of the Absegami team. “You have more support that way. Lake Lenape has a great course, and it brings more attention to crew. Everyone in the crowd can see the finish line.”