

# Rockville lawyer makes a splash for Olympians

By ANDREA CWIEKA

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When Olympic canoe and kayak competitors wanted Adam Van Grack to run for their training center's board of directors, he couldn't say no.

The civil litigator is an avid canoe sportsman and interim chairman of U.S. Canoe and Kayak, the sports' national governing body, in addition to his day job at Longman & Van Grack LLC in Rockville. When he's not helping clients, he is making sure Olympic canoe and kayak

athletes have funding and proper training facilities and also helps review their contracts, among other needs.

"It's something that I can do to make sure our sport focuses on athletes and what's best for them. That's important to me," said Van Grack, who will be cheer-

ing from home as the team competes in Rio de Janeiro this month. "Having been an athlete myself, there's often concern whether people who are organizing and orchestrating truly have that in mind."

Van Grack has been canoeing since he was a child — he first learned at Valley Mill Camp in Montgomery County. In 2004, he qualified for the Olympic team trials, but didn't make the team. Throughout the early 2000s he competed in other national

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Rockville lawyer Adam Van Grack, far right, joins members of the 2015 national canoe slalom team on the Potomac River, including 2016 Olympian Casey Eichfeld, second from right. Van Grack has served as interim chairman of the board of directors for U.S. Canoe and Kayak, the sports' national governing body, since last year. "It's something that I can do to make sure our sport focuses on athletes and what's best for them. That's important to me," he says.

POTOMAC WHITEWATER RACING CENTER

## Olympics >> Athletes praise attorney for legal mind and love of sport

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and international competitions for both canoe slalom and downriver racing. (He plans to compete in the U.S. championships later this year.)

Around 2004, however, he started to notice problems in the sport.

"When I first got involved, it was more a lack of concentration on what was best for the athletes," Van Grack said, adding that he felt like there were too many administrative issues and that the training centers had lost sight of putting the athletes first.

He successfully ran for a position on the board of directors at the Potomac Whitewater Racing Center in Bethesda, where many canoe and kayak Olympic hopefuls train. In 2008, he was elected chairman of the board.

Joe Jacobi, a former Olympian for the U.S. canoe slalom and winner of the country's first and only gold medal in the sport in 1992, worked with Van Grack while he was president of the Potomac center.

"Adam really thrived in that role of bringing a lot of different kind of white-water canoeing athletes together," said Jacobi, who served as CEO of U.S. Canoe and Kayak from 2009 to 2014.

Van Grack was elected to the board of directors for the national organization

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ROCKVILLE LAWYER ON BEING THE  
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF  
DIRECTORS FOR U.S. CANOE AND KAYAK

last year as director of canoe slalom, and received a leadership award for his work.

"The athletes asked me to run, knowing I was an advocate for them, I was familiar with interpreting bylaws, I had a lawyer's mind and could analyze problems," Van Grack said.

Within two months of being elected, he was promoted to chairman of the board after the former chair resigned.

"As much as it does take more time than might be ideal for someone who is also a full-time lawyer, it's something that I'm proud to be," Van Grack said.

Scott Parsons, a three-time canoe slalom Olympian, said despite the fact that there are a lot of "strong personalities" in the sport, Van Grack helps with all of the negotiations and is a "stand-up guy."

"His love of kayaking and the sport and the well-being of others has always been central to who he is as long as I've known him," said Parsons, who trained at the Potomac center.

Van Grack even opens his home to team members.

"If they need a place to stay, if they're training in Maryland, they don't even need to tell me — they have a code to my garage," he said.

### Athletes and 'patriots'

Unlike Olympic basketball players, swimmers or golfers, Van Grack said, Olympians in sports like canoeing don't get much money out of competing.

"Our Olympic athletes really and truly are not gaining financially as one might assume," Van Grack said. "Their image and personal reputation and their name is what they've got to sell... athletes need to protect themselves."

Canoe and kayak athletes and staff, like their counterparts in other Olympic sports, rely on private donations and sponsorships for funding. Jacobi, the gold medalist, said he finished his career \$10,000 in debt.

What drives the athletes to dedicate so much time and energy to training and funding, Van Grack said, is a love of sport and country. He even calls the athletes "patriots."

"I see it firsthand, not just those who have made it, but even the alternates have dedicated themselves tremendously," Van Grack said. "When the Olympics come around, they receive wonderful accolades. But for the other three years, they're dedicating themselves just as hard."

That is why, after deciding he "didn't want the organization to spend money" sending him to Rio, Van Grack gave his additional tickets to Olympians to give to their families.

"That's much more important than me going down there," he said. "I'll be cheering them on from over here."

Van Grack's work with the U.S. Canoe and Kayak organization has also spilled into his law firm, where one of their specialties is outdoor law. His firm has represented Olympians not only in canoe and kayak, but also in speedskating, swimming, gymnastics, and basketball.

"To ultimately help people access outdoors more safely, more responsibly — that is a unique set of skills and experiences that Adam brings to U.S. Canoe and Kayak that another attorney wouldn't bring," Jacobi said.