

# UpFront

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Jon Lugbill on the  
James River's Belle  
Isle in Richmond.

## River Runner

**WORLD CHAMPION CANOE SLALOM RACER JON LUGBILL IS THAT RARE COMBINATION OF RISK-TAKER, LEADER AND VISIONARY, BUT HE'S NOT RESTING ON HIS LAURELS.**

It is 6 a.m. on a damp, gray April morning, and 50-year-old Jon Lugbill, a look-you-in-the-eye kind of guy and executive director of Richmond Sports Backers since 1991, is working up a sweat, paddling his racing canoe on the James River. This is his way of celebrating Richmond Sports Backers being named 2011 Sports Commission of the Year by the National Association of Sports Commissions—the third time in six years that Richmond Sports Backers has won this title. Richmond is the only city in the U.S. to have won this award three times, and Jon Lugbill is a big reason for this honor.

It's easy to see that Lugbill is a little different from you and me. He lives and breathes in that rarified air that comes with the title, "Champion." At the age of 18, he became the first American to win a gold medal in the men's C-1 individual World Championships in canoe slalom. (In a canoe slalom race, the canoeist must paddle his canoe or kayak through a series of 25 gates over a whitewater rapids course 300 yards long.) He went on to win the gold medal five times in this event (something that many thought was impossible until he did it) and is considered to be the greatest C-1 canoe slalom racer of all time. In 1986, his picture appeared on the most iconic and recognizable tribute to a sports hero—the Wheaties cereal box.

But Lugbill will be the first to admit, "Whitewater canoe racing is not a well-recognized sport," which made obtaining sponsorships and raising money for travel more challenging than for athletes competing in more mainstream sports. So, in 1991, who better to take the reins of a fledgling sports commission for a city that was not recognized as an enthusiastic sports town? And right away they set a lofty goal: to make Richmond Sports Backers the best sports commission in the U.S.

BY CLARKE C. JONES | PHOTOGRAPHY BY GLEN MCCLURE



"We did this by the non-traditional method of *creating* our own events, instead of the traditional way, which was bidding on events that would come to Richmond," explains Lugbill. He credits the organization's early success to then board of directors' members attorney Buddy Allen, former Governor George Allen and Bobby Ukrop. Says Lugbill: "These gentlemen took the organization from the luncheon social group we were and made it much more inspirational."

One of their first events was the still-going-strong Ukrop's Monument Avenue 10k. In 2000—its first year—the event drew 2,500 people. Lugbill notes, "There are a great many cities that can draw 2,500 people [to a 10k race], and my counterparts in other cities were sort of laughing at me. Then it grew to 20,000 people, and they were saying, 'Good for you, you have grown it into a nice event.' Now at 40,000 people, we are in a whole different game than most. At the last 10k, we had 12,000 people who had never run a 10k before. That is approximately 1 percent of the region's population!" (The National Association of Sports Commissions also gave Sports Backers the award for Outstanding Communication/Advertising Plan for the Ukrop's Monument Avenue 10k.)

"What has happened over the long haul," says Lugbill, "is that companies have seen our success and believe our organization can do what we set out to do, so they are inclined to invest in something that they feel has a high probability of success." A prime example of that is the Anthem Moonlight Bike Ride. Its inaugural event two years ago attracted 900 people. Last year, 1,400 people participated. Lugbill explains, "Nine hundred people, frankly, may not be worth Anthem's time, but they see value if they can be a part of a biking revolution that creates another physical activity in a fun way."

Having succeeded in reaching their goal of creating major events that help grow local sports tourism, Sports Backers recently mapped out a new strategic plan. Says Lugbill: "A measurement of our success will no longer be just how many visitors come to Richmond. It will be how active we can make the community." The collaborative effort underway between Sports Backers and the community, he says, will create a fitness culture in the area. "We think we will be a national model for making a community more physically active within the next five years," adding, "Richmond should be recognized as one of the most physically active communities in the country." If Lugbill has his way, someday a Wheaties box will read: Richmond—a CITY of Champions. [SportsBackers.org](http://SportsBackers.org)



NATIVES

## The Golden Vine

THE WILD GRAPE IS A RUNAWAY WITH POTENTIAL.

Whether you are inclined to regard the wild grape as a noxious weed with invasive tendencies or an underappreciated biological bounty depends on your perspective. Undeniably a vine that can get carried away with itself, wild grape is also a fruit-bearing native whose virtues may be long overdue for recognition.

There are a number of different species of wild grape native to Virginia, deciduous vines that share a rambling, twining, climbing habit. The vines sprout from seeds spread by birds and animals that feast upon the fruit. Then, as they grow, they extend forked, coiling tendrils that wrap themselves tenaciously around whatever is handy, allowing the plant to clamber over fences, snake through shrubbery and climb high into the tree canopy. The vines can form dense tangles and, left undisturbed, can stretch to 80 or more feet and grow thicker around than a man's thigh.

It is for these habits that the wild grape gets a bad rap.

"From a forest management per-

spective, wild grape is a weed," says Clifford Ambers, owner of Chateau Z Vineyard in Amherst County. "Because grapes are adapted to popping up and getting going when there is an opening in the forest, if you clear-cut or do a major thinning, the landscape just goes riot with grapes."

Where others see a problem, however, Ambers sees possibility. American wine-making depends heavily on *Vitis vinifera*, the care-intensive European wine grape that nevertheless produces grapes with just the right sugar content, juiciness and ineffable wine-ish-ness to which our wine-drinking palates have become accustomed. Native wild grapes are generally more robust and resistant to pests and diseases than *V. vinifera* grapes, but also tend to be less juicy and more acidic and have a more pronounced flavor. (If you really want to insult a wine made from native grapes, call it "foxy," a term that, Ambers says, denotes the grapey quality familiar to Americans as the taste of Welch's Grape Juice.)

But what if you could breed a hybrid that married the best qualities of native and *V. vinifera* to produce an exceptional, disease-and-pest-resistant wine grape? That's what Ambers is trying to do in his home vineyard; though he produces about 150 cases of wine each year, his real focus, he says, is "grape breeding." He roots cuttings from wild grape vines, pollinates them with pollen from one of the many cultivated grape varieties

he also grows, harvests the resulting grapes, plants their seeds, then waits a couple of years for the hybrid to bear fruit to see what he gets.

If he hasn't yet created the next cabernet sauvignon, he's had satisfying results over the years. "You can very easily take any nasty wild grape and, in one hybridization, produce grapes you would be happy to grow in your backyard," he says.

Michael Lachance, the extension agent for commercial horticulture for the Virginia Cooperative Extension, would like to see more people like Ambers exploring native grapes, bringing to winemaking the same kind of enthusiasm for the local and small-scale that has inspired the microbrewery revolution in beer. "I would love the day to come when county fairs have wine tastings not just of local wineries but also from families and individuals who have made incredible wines in their own homes," he says.

History suggests, moreover, that a world-class grape could be born of a Virginia native. Sometime around the 1820s, one Dr. Daniel Norborne Norton produced a hybrid grape in his Richmond garden from the native *Vitis aestivalis*, or "summer grape." The Norton grape was a hit and soon came to dominate American wine-making in the East and the Midwest: In 1873, a Norton wine even won a gold medal at the Vienna World Exposition. Though Prohibition destroyed America's nascent viticulture and many of its vineyards for a time, some Nortons survived to be reintroduced and are being grown again today in American vineyards like Chrysalis Vineyards in Middleburg, which produces several all-Norton wines.

So that grape vine running amok amidst your azalea? It could be a weed. Or it could be the future of American winemaking.

—Caroline Kettlewell