

River Raft Race Is a Happening

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HADDAM — People throwing Frisbees, drinking beer, standing around, talking, enjoying a sunny Saturday. Not so unusual, right?

No, unless they're doing all this frolicking in waist-high water surrounded by homemade rafts, motor boats, canoes and just about any other type of flotation device you can think of.

That was part of the scene Saturday at the finish line of the Connecticut River Raft Race.

Ninety-two rafts were floated, paddlewheeled, rowed, and paddled from Harbor Park in Middletown to Haddam Meadow State Park under "absolutely glorious skies" as the seventh annual race got under way. All the rafts were homemade and constructed of combinations of Styrofoam, wood, metal drums and fiberglass.

Scheduled to start at 10 a.m., the official race cannon didn't sound until 10:30. Power boats filled with spectators held up the start while U.S. Coast Guard officials tried to keep the motor boats behind the starting lines and anchored.

The winning raft, "Last Chance," manned by employees of the Norelco Co. in Essex, rode into the finish at just under 30 minutes. Winners for two years in a row, the 15-man crew intends to "do it again next year. We liked this route better than last year's course. It's a lot safer without the island at Essex," one of the crew said. "But," he added, "the Coast Guard did everything to discourage the race. We had to row through too many wakes from the boats, and even broke an oar doing it."

The Coast Guard officials said they did have trouble keeping the spectator boats in line, but Lt. John Burdhoer said he didn't think they should have had the added burden of enforcing boating regulation among the racing entrants. "The racing committee should have made sure that all the crew members were wearing their life jackets," he said, adding that the committee should also have dealt with those rafts that had motors attached that weren't registered. "We just want the regulations enforced for safety," he said.

Second prize for two years in a row went to the "No Corporation," a group of 10 friends headquartered in Ivoryton. "We cut our time behind Norelco by 2½ minutes from last year, and next year we'll be over that line first," the captain of the raft shouted as they floated by. "Isn't this a great way for a poor guy to have a great time?"

Third prize went to "Wet Dream VII," the raft that race organizer Ken Fischburg called "the most prestigious and one of the originals when this thing all started."

It would probably be impossible to judge, but there could have been an award for the most bizarre name of these homebuilt concoctions, with choices like "Horrendous," "Fat Chance" and "The Ruptured Duct."

Entrants came from as far away as New Jersey and Maine to participate in an event Fischburg said is "dedicated to fun and charity. It's the only time of the year that most of these people can focus on the beauty of the Connecticut River."

This year, Fischburg donated \$4,000 to the various charities.

About 5,000 people spent the day at the state park listening to music provided by several bands.



COURANT PHOTOS BY RICHARD BERGEN

DIFFERENT STROKES — A team of contestants, riding in their paddlewheel raft (top), celebrate crossing the finish line during the 4.5-mile Connecticut River Raft Race Saturday. The race, from

Harbor Park in Middletown to Haddam Meadows State Park, attracted a motley assortment of 92 rafts. The crew from the "Fat Chance" (bottom) strains, while rowing down the river.



Enforcement officials and picnickers agreed that this year's site was a better choice for the finish line and day-long festivities. Last year's course was from Deep River to Essex with the after-race partying on Essex Island, causing some problems. "The fact that it's on the mainland makes it much

safer," Burdhoer said, "and eliminates some of the problems of last year."

Department of Environmental Protection conservation officers and state troopers were to monitor the activities and confiscate cans of beer, which aren't allowed in state parks.