



COURANT FILE PHOTO

A raft rider resorting to drastic measures shows just how tough it can get in the raft race.

Crafty Rafterers Engaging In High-Seas High Jinks

River Raft Race Inspires Competition, Espionage

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The men seemed to be fishermen, floating serenely along the Connecticut River. But hidden in their tackle were two cameras, fitted with zoom lenses, and their catch was a picture not a pike.

The crew of "No Corporation" was trying to get information about its sworn enemies, the mates of the "Last Chance." Saturday, the highly competitive crews of the two homemade rafts will row it out in the eighth annual Connecticut River Raft Race.

"Don't tell them we've got these pictures," "No Corporation" crewman Donald Soja pleaded.

Howard Rauch, captain of the "Last Chance," claims his crew has been practicing on last year's raft, so the photos are worthless. "We're not saying if we built a new boat or not," Rauch said.

"They didn't build a new boat. I know they didn't. . . . Did they?" Soja said.

There's no honor among competitors. Late-night raids, name-calling and frantic work schedules are all part of the "fun" the two crews say they are having with one another.

The Connecticut River Raft Race began as a benign enough event, a couple of "No Corporation" crewmen recall. The first race pitted four modest crafts — two of which broke up mid-stream. Beer was served, and talk drifted to



COURANT FILE PHOTO

The Fat Chance II crew prepares to launch its craft in the 1978 Connecticut River Raft Race.

plans for another race the following summer.

This year, 100 to 125 homemade rafts are expected to race from Hurd Park in East Haddam to Haddam Meadows, five miles along the river.

Some rafterers come for good times and the raucous after-race party. Others spend months constructing sleek crafts designed to win. But none of the teams is as intent on winning, or at

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least on beating its rival, as "No Corporation" and "Last Chance."

"Last Chance" is sponsored by Phillips Park, maker of Norelco products in Essex. The crew of Norelco employees says the raft's name initially was a constant reminder of management's threats to withdraw its modest financial support if the raft didn't start finishing closer to the front of the fleet.

It did. In 1980, and again in 1981, the catamaran-style contraption paddled first across the finish line, winning the victor's prize, a keg of beer.

Close behind, in second place both years, was "No Corporation." The raft, also of catamaran design, was fashioned by area carpenters, masons and other workmen.

The raft's name was changed from "Spread Eagle" two years ago, when the crew heard the captain of the "Last Chance" say, "No corporation on the shoreline can beat the Norelco boat."

Rauch runs a tight raft. Twenty-five Norelco employees worked on the craft this year, but only 15 were chosen — by ballot — to form the crew. Their captain will call them at 10:30 p.m. Friday, as he did last year, to make a bed check, the crew complains.

Rauch, a product designer for Norelco, also designed this T-shirts for his