

River Raft Race A Test of Ingenuity

By ELAINE BUDD

STRANGE craft have recently been pushing off from the shores of Connecticut River. Some are propelled by bicycle-driven paddle wheels. Others are moved by oars or handmade sails.

These craft, visible in river towns from Hartford to Old Saybrook, are preparing for the 10th annual Connecticut River Raft Race, which will begin at 10 A.M. on Saturday at Hurd State Park in East Hampton and end four and a half miles down the river at Haddam Meadows State Park in Haddam.

This year's "call to oars" will be for raft racers from five states in what the race chairman, Kenn Fishburg of Norwich, says is the largest self-funded charity raft race in the world. The major beneficiaries of the race proceeds are Big Brothers and Big Sisters and the Little White Schoolhouse, a school for cerebral palsy patients in Waterford. The captains pay registration fees of \$50 a raft and \$10 for each crew member. About a hundred entries are expected, and the crew sizes can vary from 3 to more than 20.

Three classes of rafts will race this year, Mr. Fishburg said. The Outer Limits Class, will comprise of the previous year's top three finishers, and any challenger who wants to take them on. The Cruising Class will consist of those who finished fourth or lower last year and new Cruising Class rafts. The Horrendous Class will consist of large pleasure craft "minimum size 10 feet by 24 feet, with a full deck; minimum crew 15, also with a full deck," according to the officials of the race.

Beer mugs will be awarded to the first-place winners in the three classes at 4 P.M. at Haddam Meadows State Park. Other awards will be the Mark Twain Award, for the most traditional craft; the Space Award for the most technologically advanced raft and the Pink Oar Award for the first-place all-woman raft.

The Outer Limits rafts will start first, one and a half miles upriver from the rest of the fleet. When the first Outer Limits raft crosses the Hurd Park starting line the rest of the fleet will begin racing.

in the women's division last year and 10th overall.

Last summer, rowing in the Thames River Raft Race, Mrs. Heller's group rowed so enthusiastically they swamped and sank three and a half miles into the race. With a new craft, six rowers and a coxswain and two two-hour practices a day Mrs. Heller, too, says she expects to finish first. "We had some design help this year," she said.

Another all-female crew, the River Queens, were in the first race 10 years ago. Captained by Marilyn Grote of Deep River, the group dropped out of competition for several years.

"We learned how to use tools; we learned now to design rudder systems," said Miss Grote. She is now designated "Admiral," a title earned by any captain who has had a raft in the race for five years.

The Coast Guard provides security on the water during the race, keeps recreational craft and commercial traffic clear of the course, and the Department of Environmental Protection provides the officers and personnel to keep order in the two state parks.

At the finish of the race in Haddam Meadows State Park, Haddam Jaycees will be selling hot dogs and T-shirts. By 4 P.M., it is hoped, the last of the stragglers will have drifted over the finish line. And there will be a special celebration on this 10th anniversary. At 2 P.M. Mr. Fishburg and Kimberly Wagner, the secretary of the race, are to be married on the raft Horrendous, after it completes the race. ■

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The secrecy and the psyching-out of rival captains in the raft race are reminiscent of that surrounding that more venerable boating competition, the America's Cup.

In the Outer Limits Class are the two captains who have been finishing one-two in the race for the last four years. The rivalry between Howard Rausch, an industrial designer at Phillips Park in Essex and Don Soja, president of Essex Cabinet Company, began after Mr. Rausch and his crew on the Legendary Last Chance won in 1980 and boasted that "no corporation can beat us."

The following year Mr. Soja and his crew launched a raft called No Corporation, which came in second to Mr. Rausch's craft. In 1982 No Corporation came in first and Last Chance came in second.

Last year Mr. Rausch had a crew practicing on the river in Last Chance, while off Madison he and Rich Nichols secretly prepared a new craft, America. America came in first, Soja's No Corporation was second and the other Philips boat, Last Chance, came in third.

Those three craft plus any other challengers will be in the Outer Limits Class. Mr. Rausch will captain an all-male crew on America.

Last Chance, renamed the First Try, will have an all-woman crew from Philips Park captained by Susan Delaporta of Deep River. She and her crew have been practicing every day on the river.

"I've got the blisters to prove it," she said. "We're not going for the Pink Oar Award. We're going for it all."

Also racing in the Outer Limits category is Linda Heller of Uncasville, who with her co-captain Kim Sanborn and their crew, came in first