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Rafters Enjoy Riotous Race on River

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HADDAM — Champagne corks popped aboard the Poquomock Placer as it crossed the finish line at the 11th Annual Connecticut River Raft Race Saturday. The crew did not win the race, but it finished better than last year, and for that it celebrated.

Last year, the Poquomock Placer finished 57th out of 58 rafts. Saturday, it finished 10th overall and third in its class, even though the raft hit a rock at the starting line.

"We had to pick up the raft and lift it over the rock," said Carmine Pellegrino, one of the raft's 20 crew members.

"I feel great," said captain Morton Robert, as he stood aboard the raft, made of plywood, iron and 16 55-gallon drums. "I hope more rafts come out next year. We need more competition."

This year, 45 rafts officially entered the annual race from Hurd State Park in East Hampton to Haddam Meadows State Park, 2½ miles downriver, said Charlene Maddocks, who timed the finishers. The competitive but good-natured event usually raises about \$2,000 for several children's charities, she said.

Rafts competed in one of two categories: Outer Limits, for "super technical rafts that people spend a lot of money on," and Horrendous and Cruising "for outrageous, non-motorized rafts," Maddocks said.

The Space Award, for most "technological" raft, was won by the Sar-racco Suicidal Cruisers. Captain Gary Koplak said he's wanted to enter his raft — made of roofing material and pipes to resemble a giant condominium — for five years. At least one crew entered the race hoping to lose.

John Baulski and his crew have

participated in the race for the past eight years and been disqualified eight times. As he awaited the decision, Baulski said the crew would be disappointed if that didn't happen again this year.

"Every year we try to do something outrageous. This year we had a fireworks display," said Baulski, who skippered the Red Dog Saloon.

Last year, the group used a hose to shower other crews as they passed. One year, they left the starting line just as the race ended, he said.

The event attracted about 1,000 spectators but not all of them were interested in the race.

"It's a good occasion, but I came here for the band, really," said Silvia Pascoe, who lives in New London.

The winner of the Outer Limits category for the third year in a row was the America, a 36-foot-long, red, white and blue-striped raft rowed by nine employees of Philips Park in Essex. The crew set a race record, finishing in 18 minutes and 21 seconds.

"We have not seen that before," Maddocks said of America's three-year sweep.

The Horrendous and Cruising class winner was the raft E.B. Exterminator.

The race began 11 years ago with seven rafts, said Kenn Fischburg of Norwich, the race director. "When you live on a river, you build a raft," he said. "A group of people [then] decided to get together and have a raft race."

As the race has grown, so has the number of awards. This year, organizers added The Governor's Award, a prize for the raft that best commemorated Connecticut's 350th anniversary. Its winner was the Insane, whose crew said it set out to win the award but not the race.

"We couldn't expect to win the race with 400 pounds of beer, 300 pounds of ice, 160 pounds of hot dogs and a grill on board," co-captain Edward Bruce said aboard the double-decked, steel raft that was painted red, white and blue and had green carpeting. Still, the Insane finished in 1 hour and 22 minutes, an improvement of almost an hour over last year's time.