

The Republican.

Wildwater fans prepare for races

A reunion of some of the originators of the Westfield River Wildwater Races is scheduled to kick off the 50th anniversary of the races.

03/31/2003

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HUNTINGTON - It was easy yesterday to convince Meg Breyman and her 16-year-old son, William, to wait for better weather before attempting their first wild water canoe ride.

It was not a day for first-timers on the Westfield River, members of the Westfield River Canoe Club told the handful of people who showed up here yesterday for the first of three clinics scheduled before the 50th anniversary of the Westfield River Wildwater Races.

"No fear," said Mark A. Zippin of Munson who, with his buddy Robert E. Richardson of Ellington, Conn., prepared to put their canoe in the river for their first run ever here.

"We've been practicing and were on the Scantic River last weekend," Zippin said.

"We wouldn't do this on our own on a day like this," Richardson said.

Zippin and Richardson were accompanied by experienced members of the canoe club in their practice run on the 8-mile course that will feature an estimated 250 canoes April 19 for the novice races. Professionals will race on April 20 this year.

Breyman of Worthington said, "We are recreational paddlers. We've only done flat water before. I would have canceled this morning, but Willy wanted to come and see."

Her son added, "We came to learn river canoeing. We may participate in the upcoming race."

Race organizer Jeffrey M. DeFeo said hypothermia would be the fear of the day "for those not properly dressed." Meg and William Breyman were not dressed to handle the estimated 30-degree water.

Race clinics are also scheduled at the Massachusetts Highway Department yard, off Route 112 here, April 6 and April 13 at 1 p.m., said DeFeo, coordinator of the race for the past 30 years.

The 50th anniversary race will include a reunion by some of the original founders of the contest.

Richard F. Langill, 71, now living in Crownsville, Md., plans to join John Tucker, Michael Vela and Frank Berdahowski, all of Westfield, and John Gorham of Northford, Conn., to help celebrate the 50th anniversary. Another organizer, Richard Waterhouse of Russell, died.

The races were the idea of six buddies that began with a search of something to do Sunday morning following a gathering one late Saturday night at the Whipperton Golf Course in Russell. The race was started the next day in Chester and ended at the Whipperton, a 13- or 14-mile trek that included at least two portages.

"For some reason we wanted something exciting to do the next day," Langill said last week from his Maryland home. "There was no practice. Just six of us in three canoes and off we went," he said.

There is a little confusion on the exact reason for starting the race according to Langill and Gorham, but both agreed that because of the effort the race is now considered the oldest consecutively run whitewater race in the country.

Gorham, who recalls "some planning for the first race," said the canoes in the first race were made of canvas and wood. "Maybe some aluminum ones were involved in the second year," he said.

Langill and Gorham said they may not paddle the river Easter weekend, but they are "excited about getting together" for the 50th anniversary of the race they help to start.

DeFeo said the original organizers will be asked to address canoers before the start of the race. "Their presence will allow us to review the history of this race," he said. Ted LaBorde can be reached at tlaborde@union-news.com