

Wildwater canoes brave big chill
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HUNTINGTON - On warm sunny days when the water is calm and the levels are low, an eight-mile trip down the Westfield River is a pleasant one.

Novices hesitant about the water can drift down the river, taking time to figure out calmer and quicker routes. But when the 53rd Westfield Wildwater races, sponsored by The Republican, get under way, the eight-mile ride will be very different.

"It's a lot faster on race day," said Jeffrey M. DeFeo, organizer of the event and longtime competitor as well. "There's over a foot more water and the rapids are stronger."

Every year before the races, paddling clinics are held to give novices and experts a chance to try out the water. Low water levels caused the cancellation of the first paddling clinic last week. For the second clinic yesterday, the weather was perfect. Experienced paddlers and some who had never been in a canoe floated down the river in groups, some getting a dunking but most cruising along.

Jared M. Lubarsky, 8, of Agawam, in a canoe for the first time, was happy to not get wet. He will compete with his dad in the novice race April 22.

"Today was a great day for him to try it," said his dad, Eric Lubarsky, who has participated in the race for several years.

"It was fun going down the rocky parts," Jared said.

"There are a lot more parents doing the race with their kids, and a lot more women doing the races too," DeFeo said. "Before, we used to do them earlier in April, but sometimes there was still snow and ice, so many people didn't come out. Moving it to the third weekend in April has made a really big difference."

Richard Smalls of Chester will be in the novice race with his girlfriend, Sue Touchet of Westhampton. It will be Touchet's first time out, but Smalls has competed for 12 years, and remembers the more treacherous weather conditions.

"It's a different experience coming out here when it's that cold," he said. "I remember sometimes having to paddle around icebergs while it was snowing."

On the corner of his canoe there is a decal of a pink ribbon, the sign of cancer survivors. "My sister and my godmother had cancer, and all the events I do like this and Rays of Hope are in their honor and in honor of all the women struggling with cancer," he said.

One more clinic is set for April 15 at 1 p.m. at the Department of Public Works in Huntington.

The novice race April 22 begins at the state Department of Public Works yard at the intersection of routes 20 and 112. Professionals and experts compete in a 12-mile race that begins Sunday at the base of Knightville Dam, located off Route 112.

This year's races are dedicated to Jurgen G. Igel, a longtime co-chairman of the event who passed away in July.

For more information on the races and registration, call DeFeo at (413) 354-9684.