

Wildwater races relatively tame
Sunday, April 23, 2006
By STEPHANIE BARRY
sbarry@repub.com

HUNTINGTON - Waters were less than wild during yesterday's 53rd annual Westfield River Wildwater Races.

A relatively snowless late winter and previously dry conditions made for low water levels and nonexistent rapids down the eight-mile course. Still, nearly 200 paddling teams registered for the event, the longest consecutively running race of its kind in America, according to organizers.

"It was scratchy," said Rick Boudreau of Huntington, a 17-year race veteran who was first to launch yesterday and first to cross the finish line along with son Nathan, 14. Boudreau's wife, Judy, and 6-year-old daughter, Heather, dutifully cheered the duo on from the sidelines, despite the sleet and rain.

"I've been here in every kind of weather," Judy Boudreau said. "One year I watched him in the snow."

Like Boudreau, many have made the race, sponsored by The Republican and MassLive.com, a tradition.

Second-place finisher Steven Gauthier of West Springfield and Laurie Carosello of Chicopee have raced in the amateur event for six years.

"Rain or shine, it doesn't matter," Carosello said. "It really doesn't matter if you're first or dead last. It's nice to hear the cheers when you cross the finish line."

The amateur event precedes the expert run today, which offers \$5,000 in total prize money. Organizer Jeffrey M. DeFeo said the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released water from the Littleville Dam yesterday and reserved a second release from Knightville Dam for today.

DeFeo noted the experienced racers were clad in wet suits and rain gear while novices shivered in shorts.

"They'll learn," he said with a laugh.

The race kicked off with presentations of a scholarship and service award in memory of longtime race co-chairman Jurgen G. Igel, who died from pulmonary disease June 30.

Igel's widow, Debbie, sat with the time-keeping team - Bruce and Robert Duval, and Linda Burzdak - at the finish line in Russell. The couple were married 34 years.

Yesterday, Debbie Igel eyed a backpack that had been a constant presence in their lives as her husband's condition worsened. For months, the pack held medications and other supplies required to manage his sickness. She considered packing her race supplies in it, but couldn't pick it up in the end.

"It's been very difficult. This is the first year I've come here without him, and I expect him to come walking out of the woods any time," she said tearfully.

Today's 12-mile race begins at the base of Knightville Dam, off Route 112. Registration begins at 9:30 a.m. and the race begins at 11 a.m.