

Westfield River canoe races return for 56th year

by The Republican Entertainment Desk

Wednesday April 15, 2009, 5:00 AM



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Canoeists from all over the area will once again gather along the banks of the Westfield River on Saturday and Sunday for the 56th annual Westfield River Whitewater Races. The oldest whitewater race in America attracts dozens of canoe enthusiasts, from beginners to advanced paddlers.

The race has gotten so big over the years that it's been expanded to two days and has a time trial start, in which racers start in one minute intervals.

"They go when the person in front of them is just out about out of sight," said Jeffrey M. DeFeo of Chester, race chairman. "You really need to know the river."

That's because unlike a mass start, canoeists can't just follow the racer in front of them. The time trial start means it takes as long as four hours for participants to complete the eight-mile race Saturday, which starts at the Department of Public Works yard in Huntington, at Routes 20 and 112

Sunday's race is 12 miles, and starts four miles further upstream, at the base of the Knightville Dam.

"The extra four miles is much more difficult," DeFeo said.

Still, participants in both races have to be able to paddle the flat water and the white water. Saturday's race consists of mostly class two rapids. There's one class three area but there's a bypass around it. Sunday's race has several class three sections and a couple of class fours.

"It's about the limit for open boat," said DeFeo.

With last year's great weather forecast, more than 250 racers turned out for Saturday's event.

"Saturday is more of a fun day, it's more of a festive atmosphere," DeFeo said. Most participants in Saturday's race are weekenders who don't take the whole thing too seriously.

On Sunday, the serious racers who have put a lot of time into training come out. Last year, 54 racers braved the more extreme rapids, for a chance at cash prizes and bragging rights.

Canoeists who want to improve their technique have been attending free clinics offered by race organizers in the weeks leading up to the race. In the clinics, several dozen boats have been going out in a group paddle and moving at a leisurely pace. DeFeo said the clinics help beginners and novices become more familiar with the rapids.

"The river is only as difficult as its easiest route," he said. "We say it's about 30 percent training, 30 percent equipment, 30 percent experience and 10 percent luck."

The luck part can go either way for a racer. Even without a mass start, canoeists can catch up to the person in front of them and be forced to slow down. But getting in behind someone else can work in a canoeist's favor as well.

"You can ride the draft and they pull you behind if they're fast," DeFeo said. "If you can get in beside or behind [someone], you can cut your effort by 25 percent."

Participants in the Westfield River Whitewater Races are encouraged to pre-register by downloading a registration form at www.westfieldriverraces.com

Registration can also be completed the day of the race, beginning at 8 a.m. Saturday's race begins at 10 a.m. and Sunday's starts at 11 a.m. The entry fee is \$15 per person.