

A No-No In Canoe Class

You Can't Go Up Creek Without A Paddle

By DURWARD BUCK**News Herald Sports Editor**

The reputation of Western Piedmont Community College and its diversity of courses is spreading.

Did you know they even have a course on how to avoid getting caught up the creek without a paddle?

Bob Benner, who teaches the course, says there is only one basic rule for students taking the course — you are never supposed to stand up in class.

The course, of course, is canoeing.

And it's not even an ordinary canoeing course.

"This one is unique," said Benner. "Western Piedmont is the only community in the state — and maybe the nation — to have a canoeing course and there are not over five or six major colleges in North Carolina which teach canoeing.

Those five or six other schools are primarily directed to "flat-water" paddling in lakes and ponds and relatively still surfaces.

At Western Piedmont, they want the water running down hill, as fast as they can find it. It isn't the type of thing you would take a date, a ukulele and a picnic basket on.

The classroom is Wilson's creek, with all its boulders and rapids, and Johns River (swift-running portions of it), and Lake James.

Teaching the course for Benner is like Flipper giving swimming lessons. It's his thing.

"I don't know how long I've been interested in canoeing," he said. "Ever since I can remember; I think it started with the Boy Scouts. I like anything to do with water."

Benner owns three canoes himself and has a wide circle of friends who share in his love of white-water boating. He is a former president of the Carolina Canoe Club and his idea of a vacation is to put one of his canoes on top of his Volkswagen bus and head for mountains and streams.

"Wilson's Creek is the best stream around here," he said. "There are some really good ones in Pennsylvania, and in just a couple of hours you can drive from here to the Smokies where they have all kinds of creeks and rivers."

The course was offered for the first time during the fall quarter and will, hopefully, be expanded to two classes in the spring quarter. Western Piedmont officials are now searching for training aids — canoes. Benner didn't come right out and say so, but it would be nice if some considerate benefactor would donate a canoe or two (or six) to the cause. Or funds to buy some.

"We got canoes from a summer camp for our fall course, but they will be using the canoes during the spring season," so we won't be able to use them again."

The fall course has 12 students to sign up. That is, according to Benner, an ideal number. Prospective students have to pass a simple swimming test in order to take the course. They have to swim for 10 minutes fully clothed. "It's part of the Red Cross course. 'Most of the streams around here are the kind you could walk in."

"A part of the course is the Red Cross course too," said the instructor. "But we've taken it and gone far beyond it."

The students like the course so much that one of them has already bought his own canoe and several others are talking about purchases.

The course is almost entirely on water. "We had only one session on land and the rest of it was spent on the lake (Lake James) and on the river (Catawba or Johns).

"There is really nothing physically hard about it. It requires a fair amount of skill, but the main thing is learning to read the water and learning to use the correct stroke at the time it's needed.

"Most beginners have a tendency to paddle faster when they hit rapids. I think it's because they think you can get it over with faster.

"Actually, this kind of canoeing is more steering than power strokes. The canoe is a remarkable craft. All you have to remember is to keep your body weight low. In our course, we require the students to kneel and we provide knee pads for them.

"A lot of people thought we would be spending most of the time on dry land, but I don't know how in the world you can teach canoeing on land. We were on the water right from the start. We didn't have any problems at all. We had only two capsizes during the entire course."

There are far-reaching benefits from taking the course. "It's something that you can take with you and use," said Benner. "Anyone can participate in the sport of canoeing at any age, right up until you get too old to waddle down a bank. You can pick the difficulty of the stream you want."

The variety of streams and lakes is almost unlimited. There is a growing family of canoe buffs who compete regularly in races down mountain streams and the 1972 Olympics will include a slalom race for canoes.

"You race against the clock and in the slalom you have to go through gates going down stream, through the rapids, and then you have some gates going upstream."

The best canoes for white-water cruises, are the aluminum ones. A 15-foot, two-man canoe weighs only 69 pounds, and a 17-footer weighs only 75. "The fibre glass ones are not bad, but they are heavier and hardly anybody uses the wooden ones any more because they weigh too much."

Benner also has a one-man canoe called a C-1, and a kayak. "You use a double paddle with the kayak and a single paddle with the C-1."

The one-man canoes are practically unsinkable and skilled white-water veterans can right themselves in the craft without getting out of the canoe. "I've done it a few times," said Benner. "It's just a matter of knowing how to use the paddle." "I watched this guy in a slalom one time and he lost control and went through the gate upside down. Of course, he didn't know he was going through the gate at the time."

Benner and canoeing friends plan several major cruises a year in their leisure time and they may travel across several states to get to a fast river with a reputation. "I usually get a topo map to get the gradient scale and you can tell a lot by that. "If it's too great, then you have too little water. If it's too little, then it's almost like flat water."

A feeling for the outdoors and for the beauty of nature goes with the sport. So does a sense of responsibility toward water pollution.

"A lot of people are concerned about the pollution of water by motor-driven boats and I think that canoeing is one answer. I'm sure the Carolina Canoe Club feels a definite responsibility to take care of the natural riches we have.

"There have been tremendous increases in canoe sales in the nation over the last few years — I haven't seen the figures, but I know they are great."

During the entire interview, Benner never mentioned that speeding down a rugged mountain creek or river can be a little dangerous.

Maybe he just doesn't see it that way.

"You can make it as hard or as easy as you want to," he said. "It's all a matter of picking the right place."

The speeds on a stream will vary greatly. "You don't go nearly as fast as it seems." "Generally you can cover around two-and-a-half miles in an hour. If you are with a group of people, you have to slow down when you get to the rapids and go through them one at a time and there are occasions when you might have to carry the canoe (they call it portage).

"The scenery from a canoe is different. "You'll see some breath-taking sights you've never seen before and it gives you an appreciation of what we have."

Canoe people are very big on conservation and that is reason enough to want to entice others to take up the sport.

Western Piedmont's canoeing class is a portion of the physical education course required of college-level students. There are tentative plans, however, to offer an adult course if they can get the canoes.

Benner isn't worried about getting the students. "I already have three times as many requests from students wanting to take the course than we can fill right now."

The reason they can't fill the requests is because they don't have the craft. They are sort of up the creek with a paddle — and no canoes.



Bob Benner, Tony Wommack Maneuver In Rapids