

WPCC to host canoe races

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Unstable. Odd-shaped. Often even brown. Fond memories of lake vacations resurface with thoughts of canoes. Peaceful paddling, fishing on the cove. But in Morganton Saturday, those canoes will race two-and-half Whitewater miles. At relatively high speeds, they'll maneuver forward, sideways and backward between hanging poles.

No, these are not your grandfather's canoes.

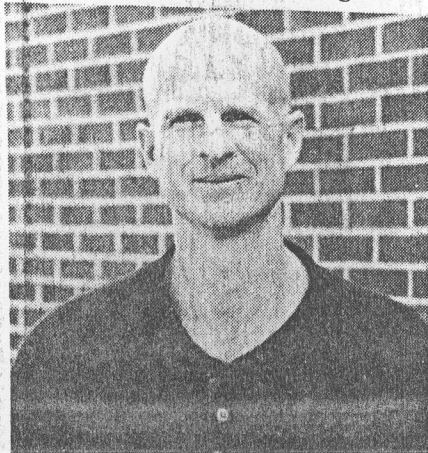
Actually, the canoes used in the 27th annual Southeastern Intercollegiate canoe races held on the Catawba River will in fact be recreational canoes, the same type used in camps across the country. After five years away from its original site, the race will again be hosted by Western Piedmont Community College and run by David Benner.

Athletes from Western Carolina, Davidson and Warren Wilson will compete in a field of at least 75 racers and an open division will feature those 15 and over and not in college.

The race, which has seen several U.S. team members and national champions, is competitive but low key, according to Benner.

"The race is really oriented, ... I don't want to say social event but it's not a high-powered competitive

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Canoe races

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event," he says. "There is a nice rivalry between the schools that compete, but it's not cut-throat."

Benner hopes to have 100 participants this year, although in past years the athletes have numbered 150.

"Having changed the venue of the race," says Benner, "I don't know what to expect with the Open class but the numbers are probably going to be down."

Both the slalom and downriver events will have Open and Collegiate divisions. Canoers can compete in the Open class if they are over 15 and not enrolled in college. Divisions also vary among men's and women's singles, doubles and a mixed doubles category.

While the event is dubbed "low-key" by its coordinator, the races aren't without danger. Ben-

ner says that several guidelines are set up to monitor the downriver races, which can not be watched for the entire 2 1/2 miles.

In addition to life jackets, ropes and other precautionary methods, the athletes are required to assist other racers if they need it. Any canoes passing a racer or racers in need of assistance will be disqualified and any canoe that stops to help will be rewarded with another run.

"The river runs along quickly for a mile or so," says Benner, who's been guaranteed that water will be released from the powerhouse for the race. "It's not an event for someone that's never done any paddling before."

The decision to use recreational boats as opposed to racing canoes was made to level the competition. According to Benner, the Southeasterns are one of the first races to do that. The races are also the only intercollegiate canoe races in the

country.

WPCC will not field a team but Benner hopes interest piques in the future.

"Unfortunately, we don't have a population for that," Benner explains. "Most of our population is working full- or part-time. They don't have the time that a four-year college student does."

Because the downriver races cover 2 1/2 miles in about 20 minutes, Benner offers advice to potential viewers: Watch the slalom races.

"They're the most spectator-oriented," he says. "It will run a quarter-mile long with 13 gates, poles strung over the river to go between. It's the one of the two races where you'll have to go downstream, side-ways and reverse up stream over an elapsed time."

The slalom races will start at 9 a.m. and the downriver races will follow at 1 p.m.