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SUBMITTED PHOTO

Morganton's David Benner takes part in the 2003 National Canoeing Championships. Benner recently finished second in the solo race and teamed with Jeff Owens of Maine to win the tandem race at the 2012 event on June 21-22.

UP THE CREEK

Morganton's Benner wins national canoe title

BY PAUL SCHENKEL
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MORGANTON — Many athletes struggle to shake off the rust after three weeks — or even three days — without participating in their sport.

But for Morganton resident David Benner, three years away wasn't even an obstacle.

On June 21 and 22, Benner finished second place out of close to 100 competitors in the solo down-river race at the 2012 National

Canoeing Championships on the Nantahala River. He then teamed with solo champion Jeff Owens of Maine to win the team down-river race.

Both races were run on a course that is eight miles long over class 2 and 3 rapids, a risky proposition for even experienced canoers. Benner enjoyed one advantage, he said, in that he is a former raft guide on the Nantahala.

"We're really blessed with paddling resources in this area. From Wilson Creek to Linville Gorge. Any direction you go from Morganton there's something. I think it's one of the best places in the eastern U.S. to do the sort of preparing you need to do for a race like this."

David Benner,
Morganton

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Benner

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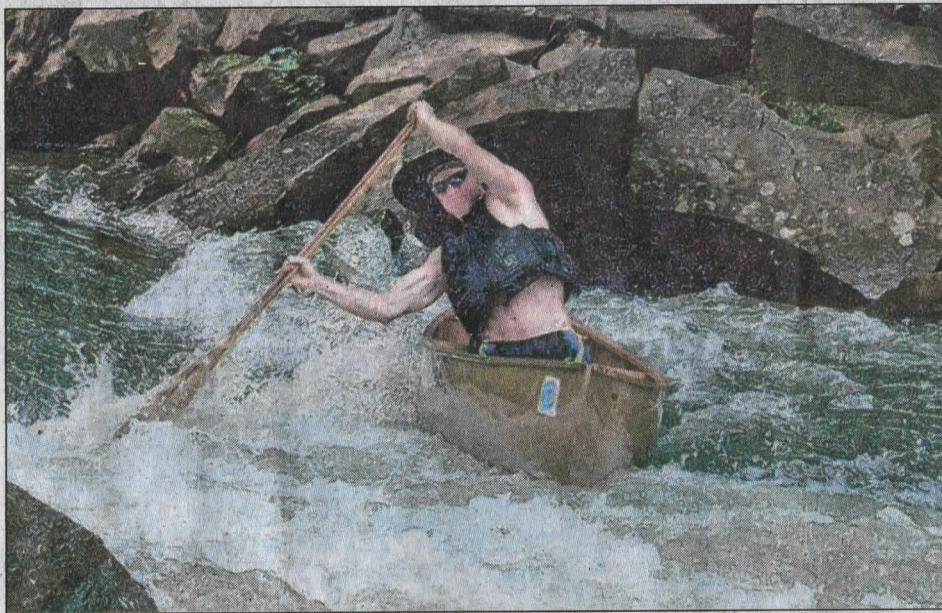
"You could say it's one of my home rivers," said Benner, a 1974 Freedom High graduate who currently teaches several outdoors-type physical education classes at Western Piedmont Community College.

Though Benner hadn't competitively raced canoes since the 2009 nationals on the nearby French Broad River, he began training months before this year's event to get himself ready.

"I started in February," he said, "and worked out four, five days a week in the boat and with weights. The workouts lasted anywhere from 30 minutes and an hour, 45 minutes. ... I'd honestly done more rock climbing lately than paddling before that."

In addition to the Nantahala, Benner trained on the Catawba and Johns rivers as well.

"We're really blessed with paddling resources in this area," he said. "From Wilson Creek to Linville



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Morganton's David Benner canoes down the Nantahala River through some heavy rapids in a practice run a few years ago.

Gorge. Any direction you go from Morganton there's something. I think it's one of the best places in the eastern U.S. to do the sort of preparing you need to do for a race like this."

The runner-up solo finish was more than he was expecting, Benner said. That's because not only is Owens the five-time defending champion of the event, but the rest of the

field was pretty tough as well. Benner said he was most proud of his time (53:30), which eclipsed his 2003 mark in the event on the same river by nine seconds.

Benner had already won "eight or nine" national canoe events in anything from slalom to down-river, solo and team. He also claimed the 1999 and 2003 titles in the

solo down-river.

He said there are two things canoers are trying to do in a race: maintain stamina and avoid water getting in the boat.

"If you start taking on any water whatsoever, you're battling that extra weight and getting slowed down because of it," Benner said. "So you have to avoid big waves and big holes. The other thing is thinking

about where you want to put the boat in each rapid to conserve energy and save time.

"Eight miles is different on a winding river than it is on land. It can take a lot

out of you."

Benner said the Nantahala will host the national slalom race in October, an event he hopes to participate in for the first time in "12 to 14 years."