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Paddling river racers to be out in force



5 MILES (P-D)

Post-Dispatch

Missouri River Races

- Clean Water Challenge: 9 a.m. start today at Weldon Spring Conservation Area; ends at Frontier Park in St. Charles, where organizers plan a festival of food and music.
- Race for the Rivers: 9 a.m. start today at Washington, Mo.; stops for the day at Frontier Park. Race resumes Sunday morning for the 27-mile dash to Columbia Bottom.

yesterday's most emailed

1. Four ears make cat an Internet star
2. My cat might be a vampire
3. 'Can you feel the spirit?'
4. Two dead in St. Charles crash
5. Yeow! A 7-pound hamburger
6. Is it time to "nationalize" Cahokia Mounds?
7. A father's instincts
8. College freshmen link up ahead of time, online
9. ST. LOUIS: Richard D. Todd Child psychiatrist and professor at Washington U.
10. Two men die in accidents Saturday



By **Tim Bryant**

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
08/23/2008

ST. CHARLES — Chuck McHenry, an elite ultramarathon kayaker, still winces when he thinks of the broken rib he suffered last summer during a nonstop 340-mile river race.

He sustained the injury in the middle of the night while trying to empty Missouri River water from his racing kayak. McHenry slipped on the muddy bank and his water-filled boat fell across his chest, snapping a rib.

Problem was, he was 120 miles from St. Charles and completing the Missouri 340 (the number drawn from the miles covered), said by organizers to be the world's longest nonstop river race for paddlers. McHenry eventually finished that race and came back this year to finish third.

Now, he and his wife, Di McHenry, also a long-distance kayak racer, plan to compete today and Sunday in the Race for the Rivers, a 65-mile trek on the Missouri from Washington, Mo., to Columbia Bottom, where the Big Muddy joins the Mississippi. Dozens of paddlers from around the region are registered to take part.

Despite the danger of kayak racing on rivers such as the Missouri, the sport is increasingly popular. Missouri 340 organizers expect more racers next year, and membership is growing in the U.S. Canoe Association, which promotes paddle sports nationwide.

For many, just competing in a grueling race is more alluring than prize money, said John Edwards, the association's executive director.

"They want to see if they can," said Edwards, 59, of St. Petersburg, Fla., "And then they want to see if they can do it faster than somebody else. There's always a level of competition you can't beat."

The Race for the Rivers and another race this weekend — the Clean Water Challenge — should be a breeze compared with the exhausting and sometimes dangerous Missouri 340.

Racers still talk of the couple whose boat was swept under a



barge tow in the middle of the night during the 2007 race. The pair clawed their way to a barge's side as the towboat's prop shredded the couple's boat. The towboat crew pulled the couple from the river.

The Missouri 340, begun in 2006 by paddling enthusiasts in the Kansas City area, is drawing nationwide attention from long-distance racers whose events are concentrated in the upper Midwest, Texas, the Northeast and Canada. The race starts near downtown Kansas City and ends at Frontier Park in St. Charles. A record 200 paddlers in nearly 150 boats took part in this year's race, which began July 16.

Some kayaking bigfoots took notice. For example, Carter Johnson of Sausalito, Calif., — who in 2006 set a world record of paddling 147 miles in 24 hours — won this year's Missouri 340 men's solo division in 37 hours, 46 minutes.

Lee Deviney, who describes himself as "a pretty serious marathon" canoe racer for 21 years, has entered all three Missouri 340s.

"There's some good competition," said Deviney, 48, of Austin, Texas. "There were some heavy hitters in this year's race."

Missouri 340 racers pay little attention to the scenery. The intensity of the race exceeds the meager prize money in importance. Six men from Texas split \$2,000 for winning the race's team division. Deviney and his paddling partner arrived from Texas and went home with a check for \$500. "It almost paid for our gasoline," he said.

Pain from his broken rib almost forced McHenry, 57, out of the 2007 race, but his support crew urged him on by pointing out he could reach St. Charles without paddling by drifting in the river's swift current.

McHenry, a dentist in Ironton, Mo., came back strong this year, completing the race in 48 hours, 24 minutes, good for third place among solo men paddlers.

Just completing the Missouri 340 is a big achievement. Of the 149 entries this year, 35 didn't finish.

Dehydration, sleep deprivation and plain old exhaustion are primary race hazards. Some racers report having hallucinations.

McHenry said he believed that in the early morning gloom — after 46 hours of nearly nonstop paddling — he passed the same group of riverbank spectators twice.

"I thought: 'Oh no. I'm in a Ground Hog Day,' " he said.

This year, Katie Pfefferkorn, 23, of Ottumwa, Iowa, won the women's solo division by reaching St. Charles in 50 hours. But she became disoriented before dawn on the final race day. Pfefferkorn, a triathlete who grew up in Chaffee, Mo., said she couldn't remember whether she had finished the race "or was just paddling for fun."

Because fatigue can lead to disorientation by nighttime lights on land, some racers resort to paddling with their eyes closed, she said.

She entered the first Missouri 340 almost on a whim and is now hooked on the event.

"I didn't realize how grueling it would be," said Pfefferkorn.

Deviney said barges are the river's biggest physical danger. Towboats are brightly lit at night but they push several hundred feet of nearly invisible barges, he said. Darkness and exhaustion may combine to foil racers trying to determine their distance from tows, and even detecting whether the barges are moving.

This weekend's races are daylight events.

Novices, or those seeking a few relaxing hours on the Missouri will push off today from the Weldon Spring Conservation Area for the Clean Water Challenge, a much shorter journey. Both it and Race for the Rivers are fundraisers for the Greenway Network.

James Fawcett, 30, of St. Peters, owner of an online marketing company and founder of Race for the Rivers, said the events are a good way for paddlers to experience the surprisingly remote Missouri River between Highway 40 and Interstate 70.

"All you see is water and trees and sky," Fawcett said.

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