

DRAGON BOATS MAKE A SPLASH

45 vessels are expected for Saturday's festival

Originally published in The Blade on Thursday, July 24, 2008

BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

When a dragon starts to look more like a caterpillar, you know you're in trouble — especially if you're taking part in the seventh annual Great Maumee River Dragon Boat Festival, where more than 1,100 people are expected to compete in races on Saturday.

The long, colorful boats with dragon heads and tails are supposed to slither gracefully across the water. When the 20 paddlers powering them get out of sync, however, they acquire more of a herky-jerky appearance that some call the "caterpillar effect."

For some boats, especially the winning ones, there can be an even greater faux pas after the race is over. Joanne McElheney, a volunteer and former participant for McElheney Locksmiths, has witnessed it before.

"Don't put your paddles up in the air and get all excited because the boat will tip over," she said. "You get awful wet."

The annual festival at International Park, whose racers zip past the Docks as part of the 500-meter races, expects to make a splash by drawing 45 boats this year. The competition begins at 8 a.m. and is scheduled to last until about 5 p.m.

It is presented by BP with additional support from members of the Toledo Rowing Club. Proceeds benefit Partners In Education, a nonprofit group that promotes partnerships between area schools and businesses, government agencies, organizations, and churches.

VIDEO

[See video from last year's race](#)

Teams come from a variety of local companies and groups that pay a minimum of \$2,000 to enter each boat, which hold 20 paddlers, a drummer to set the pace, and a steersman. Past races have drawn enthusiastic participants and crowds of spectators to the free event.

"It's really fun to watch," said Steve Frushour, a referee for U.S. Rowing from Bowling Green who has helped out with past races. "It's frantic, as you can imagine."

Gretchen LeBoutillier, program coordinator for Partners In Education, said the races are an unusual happening in a place like Toledo.

"I think people come because it's something they've never seen before," she said.

While the local festivities only go back seven years, the practice of dragon boat racing is one that can be traced back more than two millennia.

According to the International Dragon Boat Federation, the boats were used in ancient China for religious purposes to appease the rain gods. More than 2,000 years ago, a great warrior poet committed suicide in a river to protest political corruption and people organized dragon boat races to commemorate his sacrifice. Modern competitions date to 1976 when the Hong Kong Tourist Association staged a dragon boat festival.

Those who come for the races in Toledo can stay for plenty of other entertainment at International Park,



Each boat at the Great Maumee River Dragon Boat Festival has 20 paddlers. (THE BLADE)

LeBoutillier said. There will be food vendors, live music, and a children's area with inflatables, games, a craft tent, and more. Additionally, the Chinese Association of Greater Toledo will provide various cultural activities, including martial arts demonstrations.

The centerpiece, though, remains the races. McElheney remembers the amazing feel of being out in the water, skimming along in a 40-foot boat on an all-women team.

"I can not tell you how exhilarating it was," she said.

The company has two teams signed up to compete this year, one all-women and one mixed. McElheney said the women have a special trick up their sleeves as they not only try to perform well during the day's races, but look good too.

"We have a second outfit that we change into, just for grins."

The seventh annual Great Maumee River Dragon Boat Festival takes place Saturday beginning at 8 a.m. at International Park across from downtown Toledo. Admission is free. Information: 419-242-2122 or www.partnerstoledo.org.

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)