

LIFEGUARDS / COMPETITORS TO BEGIN AROUND ISLAND ROW WEDNESDAY MORNING

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As usual, the fans of the North Wildwood Beach Patrol Around The Island Row will have to get up pretty early to see it.

The 24th annual, 21-mile row around Wildwood Island will begin 6:45 a.m. Wednesday with a floating start in the ocean at 15th Avenue beach in North Wildwood. Race director Charlie Iepson explained "the (starting) flag will drop somewhere between 6:45 and 7 a.m."

The event is being held late in the season, in order to get a favorable tide, and the field of 23 boats is the smallest in years.

"We put in a new rule that only the top 25 crews from the year before are eligible, plus any new crews," Iepson said. "That's to maintain that it's a race, not something you get in just to do. We want to keep it a competitive race."

"The only problem is that it's late in the season and we don't have enough crews. Next year, we're hoping to have it a week or two weeks earlier, but we won't get the tide charts until late January. We don't want to hold it in the afternoon because there are too many other things going on."

The two-man crews will row in a counter-clockwise direction around the island. The boats will first proceed north to the Hereford Inlet at the top of Wildwood, and then to the Stone Harbor Bridge. The Grassy Sound Bridge is the next checkpoint on the course and then the boats are in the back bay.

Heading south in the bay, the crews get to the West Wildwood Train Trestle, Rio Grande Bridge and then Cape May Bridge.

The Cold Spring Inlet at the bottom of Wildwood is next and the boats then turn and do the final exhausting, six-mile sprint back to the 15th Avenue finish line.

Defending champions Mike Alton and Ted Frankel of Atlantic City are not entered, and five-time winners Max Bilkins and Bick Murphy of Wildwood Crest won't be racing either.

Margate's Carl Smallwood Jr. and Rich Kugel should challenge. The two were third last year and won the Upper Township Six-Mile Bay Row on July 27.

The Ventnor alumni crew of Dennis Funk and George Miller surprised with a second-place finish in 1998 and they're entered again. The 47-year-old Funk is the father of current Ventnor rowers Andrew and David Funk.

Avalon's Craig Whitehead won the race in 1997 with Mark Wachlin, and Whitehead will team with Brendan Marzano on Wednesday.

LINEUPS

AVALON - Craig Whitehead-Brendan Marzano. CAPE MAY - Eric Mogck-Tim Fiocchi; Terry Randolph-Marty Franco; Jim Wadlow-John Swift. LONGPORT - B.J. Fox-Mike McGrath; Pat Armstrong-Jim Grimley; Nick Grasso-Brian Duffey. MARGATE - Carl Smallwood Jr.-Rich Kugel; Jim Swift-John Kelley (alumni). VENTNOR - Paul Money-Greg Smith; Jim McDevitt-Mike Skey; Scott Jones-Jim Mason (alumni), Dennis Funk-George Miller (alumni). WILDWOOD - Steve Stocks-Tom Killian; Steve McGuinn-Mike Regan; Ed Schneider-Collin Jessberger. WILDWOOD CREST - Rick Greco-Ron Ayres; Tom Pietrzak-Mike D'Amico; Tom Fredericks-Matt Babylski. NORTH WILDWOOD - Kevin Gross-Romolo Forcino; Tom Ogden-Dan McGuinn; Terry McGovern-Mike Reed. UPPER TOWNSHIP - Chris McCann-Brian O'Shea (alumni).

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Around the Island Row to reduce number of boats

By BRIAN CUNNIFF
Staff Writer

NORTH WILDWOOD -- The Around the Island Row has become one of the most popular lifeguard events over the past few years. In 1997, 42 boats, the most ever, participated in the event. This year, 35 boats made the 21-mile jaunt around the Wildwoods.

But while it is certainly encouraging that so many lifeguards want to participate in the event, it has become increasingly difficult for race organizers to keep the race running smoothly. So beginning with next year's race, crews will have to qualify in order to compete in an effort to keep the number of boats at somewhere between 30 and 35.

According to Race Director Charlie Iepson, only the top 25 boats from this year's race will be guaranteed a spot in the race next year. In addition, each beach patrol will be allowed to enter only three boats, excluding alumni crews, which will not count against a

beach patrol's number of entries.

Also, a rower who competed in this year's race and did not finish among the top 25, must sit out at least one year before being allowed to compete again. North Wildwood Beach Patrol Chief Tony Cavalier said he and Iepson have already gotten a few complaints about the new qualifying system, but added that he feels the patrol must implement the new system in order to have a more competitive race.

"It's just not fair to the top crews that we have to hold up the awards ceremony and luncheon for the crews that are finishing a half an hour to an hour and even more behind the top crews," Cavalier said. "There have been too many beaches, including my own, that have two guys jump in the boat to get a day off, a T-shirt and a luncheon because it's just something they want to do. My answer to that is: If you want to row around the island to say you did it, get up at 6:30 in the morning on your day off and go do it but you're not going to do it in the race

anymore.

"If I upset anyone, I'm sorry. But the bottom line is that this is a race and the bottom 10 to 15 crews are just not competitive. When you have 40-some crews in it, you have a lot of crews in it not to win it but just to say that they rowed around the island. For example, we just can't have these older, out-of-shape alumni guys not training at all and deciding they want to jump in a boat and row. It's not going to happen again as long we hold this race."

The new rule is certain to eliminate the participation of female crews. While that is not the intent, Cavalier said the rule will be the same for males and females.

"If the females feel that it's aimed at them, which it is not, then maybe another beach patrol can start an all-female Around the Island Row," he said.

Rowers who do not finish among the top 25 will be permitted to re-enter the race in two years if they wish. Cavalier and Iepson both

said rowers who do not finish among the top 25 cannot simply go out and find another partner. Any rower who does not finish among the top 25 will be disqualified from participating in the following year's race.

Cavalier said the only exception to the rule will be if a proven, formidable crew has one of its members get injured or, for example, has a problem getting through rough Hereford Inlet and does not finish among the top 25.

Iepson said the new rule will only help the top crews, which will not have to worry as much about getting interfered with by an inexperienced crew during the race.

"Our ideal number is to have 30 to 35 of the best crews in the race," Iepson said. "We want to keep the early start time (this year's race began at 6:45 a.m.) and get everyone out of here and home by 1 o'clock."

"We believe we're making the race more competitive and that's what we want. It started that way and that's how we want to keep it."

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LIFEGUARDS / FUNK, MILLER CELEBRATE VETERANS DAY

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Dennis Funk and George Miller, South Jersey Lifeguard doubles row champions of 1973- 75, had long since left the Ventnor Beach Patrol in 1987 when they won the North Wildwood Around The Island Row in record time. This was considered an amazing feat for a builder and lawyer, both in their mid-30s. OK, so how do you describe their feat Wednesday, when the two former Ventnor oarsmen again won the Around The Island Row, breaking their own 12-year-old record by 36 seconds?

That's right, the 48-year-old Miller, and Funk, now 47 and less famous than his rowing sons Andrew and David, dominated a field of 22 other crews to win the 21-mile row in 2 hours, 55 minutes, 30 seconds. Their old 1987 mark was 2:56:06.

Funk and Miller led from the early going in the counter-clockwise race around Wildwood island, and they finished about 150 yards ahead of North Wildwood's Kevin Gross and Romolo Forcino. The Ventnor team of Jim McDevitt and Mike Skey took third, six boat-lengths behind North Wildwood. Margate's Carl Smallwood Jr. and Rich Kugle placed fourth.

"The navigation job by Dennis was the best I've ever seen," sternman Miller said. "In all the races we've rowed, it's the best job he's ever done. The wind was tricky, and when it changed he moved the direction of the stern of the boat."

"We got second last year (to Mike Alton and Ted Frankel of Atlantic City) and that encouraged us. I've lifted weights for a year, and that's something I've never done."

The sandbar at the Hereford Inlet at the top of Wildwood was much less a factor in the race than in the past several years, and the Ventnor alumni crew cut right inside it.

"I was in North Wildwood early this summer, and I looked at the inlet and saw that the sandbar was gone," Funk said. "I went back and told George that this year there was going to be a record by someone. We trained harder this year than ever, especially in the last two months."

"After the year we won it in 1987, we always wanted to be top-five, because if you can do that you always give yourself a chance to win. Navigation is important. Sometimes the shortest distance between two points is not a straight line."

Funk and Miller and their trademark blue-bottom boat came ashore at 15th Avenue after the race, and Funk hugged son Andrew, who's now a two-time South Jersey champion rower himself.

"I'm really excited that he did this well," Andrew Funk, a spectator Wednesday, said. "I expected him to do well, but this is unbelievable. I'm proud of him, especially for getting the record. If he's still rowing, maybe I have that many years left, too."

Gross and Forcino had their best finish in the event. The two were fourth last year and seventh in 1997. "I've rowed it five times, and I keep learning," Forcino said. "We kept back around fifth or sixth and tried to make a good charge around the Cape May Bridge (about three-quarters of the way into the race, near the bottom of Wildwood). Margate (Smallwood and Kugel) and Ventnor (McDevitt and Skey) really battled with us for second in the ocean at the beginning of Wildwood (with three miles to go)."

McDevitt, who returned to the Ventnor patrol this summer after six years, has won several important doubles races in the past, including the Margate Memorials in 1989, 1992-93, and the Dutch Hoffman's in 1993. Skey was in an undefeated Harvard University freshman eight boat in

1998. He'll challenge this year for a varsity eight seat.

Funk and Miller weren't the only veterans in the race. Longport Beach Patrol co-captain Mike McGrath was in his 20th consecutive Around The Island Row. McGrath, who's been second three times and third twice, took fifth Wednesday with B.J. Fox.

RESULTS

1. Ventnor alumni (Dennis Funk-George Miller) 2:55.30; 2. North Wildwood (Kevin Gross-Romolo Forcino) 2:57.20; 3. Ventnor (Jim McDevitt-Mike Skey) 2:57.41; 4. Margate (Carl Smallwood Jr.-Rich Kugel) 2:59.06; 5. Longport (B.J. Fox-Mike McGrath) 3:01.07; 6. Upper Township alumni (Chris McCann-Brian O'Shea) 3:01.35; 7. Wildwood (Steve McGuinn-Mike Regan) 3:01.48; 8. North Wildwood (Tom Ogden-Dan McGuinn) 3:02.02; 9. Wildwood (Steve Stocks-Tom Kilian) 3:03.58; 10. Ventnor alumni (Scott Jones-Jim Mason) 3:04.46; 11. Margate alumni (Jim Swift-John Kelley) 3:05.46; 12. Cape May (Jim Wadlow-John Swift) 3:06.43; 13. Ventnor (Paul Money-Greg Smith) 3:09.01; 14. Avalon (Craig Whitehead-Brendan Marzano) 3:09.22; 15. Longport (Nick Grasso-Brian Duffey) 3:11.55; 16. Cape May (Eric Mogck-Tim Fiocchi) 3:12.30; 17. Wildwood Crest (Rick Greco-Ron Ayres) 3:13.47; 18. Jim Grimley-Pat Armstrong) 3:14.27; 19. North Wildwood (Terry McGovern-Mike Reed) 3:14.50; 20. Wildwood Crest (Tom Pietrzak-Mike D'Amico) 3:14.59. 21. Cape May (Terry Randolph-Marty Franco) 3:15.19; 22. Wildwood Crest (Tom Fredericks-Matt Bablyski) 3:16.34; 23. Wildwood (Ed Schneider-Collin Jessberger) 3:17.39.

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