



The Kamikaze Kanoers, a Rockland Girl Scout group of competitive canoers, started out nearly 30 years ago, but are no longer bumping into each other and smashing into trees. (Peter Carr/The Journal News)



## Rockland girls canoe group going strong after 29 years

BY JANE MCMANUS THE JOURNAL NEWS • MAY 18, 2008

PIERMONT - The sun is blazing down on the hot metal canoes as a group of Girl Scouts listens to their coach in a shady spot on the banks of the Hudson River. They are about to test themselves against a distance of five miles in preparation for a race.

They stand with their matching Kamikaze Kanoers T-shirts and soft kneepads. With teddy bears and a banner reading "Troop 96," the respect they have for coach Lois Gesner is evident. She notices one of the girls doesn't have a hat and lends her the red one on her own head.

"This is for your sake that we're here," Gesner said. "To see how well you're tolerating a five-mile paddle."

They were out on the water, on one of the first warm days of the spring, to participate in a grueling training exercise. The paddlers were at the Piermont waterfront to do their first five-mile endurance trial. If they can get a good rhythm, these girls can finish in an hour and 15 minutes.

"The idea today is to paddle all out," Stevens said.

That was made more strenuous given the difference between the river and the lakes with which the team members are more familiar.

"A lake is very calm so the Hudson you have more of a current," 14-year-old Jessica Stevens of Congers said, "and it's wider, so you have to paddle harder."

The Kamikazes will participate in the General Clinton Canoe Regatta this weekend on the Susquehanna River, as they have for 25 years. But the competition isn't the goal, as much as the process.

"You can make it as intense as you want, and we choose to make it pretty intense," said Ruby Zucker, 18, of Tappan.

This group is part of a tradition that stretches back nearly three decades.

"This is my 29th year," Gesner said. "When we got started we didn't have any uniforms, we didn't have a name."

The Rockland County Girl Scouts usually practice at Camp Addisone Boyce, and had a little difficulty navigating at first. When they couldn't seem to get out of each other's way, someone said Kamikaze Kanoers, and it stuck.

"They were banging into trees and banging into rocks," Gesner said.

You won't find that now. This group handles their crafts capably, and a dozen or so boats, each with two paddlers, were rowed straight out from the bank without colliding.

"Now what I really like about it is I like having two people in a boat and the connection between two people," said Ruby Zucker, 18, of Tappan. "I love being on this team because we're a big team with a lot of little teams."

Emily Treubig, 22, is a graduate of the Kamikazes. She is now a lifeguard and EMT and was on hand to help with the long paddle.

"It's a good place for training rides because it's a pier, so the current doesn't push you too much," Treubig said.

She said the group has had a big impact on her life, including the biology major she chose. Her time on the water gave her firsthand access to the environment, which spurred an interest in science and stewardship.

Gail McBride, the Camp Addisone Boyce manager and Rock Hill Girl Scout camp director, said engendering that love of nature is part of the goal, as is giving girls the space to form friendships and confidence.

"What you're creating is something marvelous on the other end," McBride said.

Marianne Brehl of New City has had three daughters take part in the club, and one of them, Rebecca, transferred the skills she learned to the University of Chicago crew team last year.

Not all the results are so tangible, but it was clear from the mood of the group of paddlers on the bank that this was something they looked forward to.

"It's basically we're getting the girls to do their personal best," Gesner said.

Reach Jane McManus at [jmcmamus@lohud.com](mailto:jmcmamus@lohud.com).

