

# Veterans Take On Grueling Race Around Manhattan

By STEFANI JACKENTHAL

The 79th Street Boat Basin Café buzzed Saturday morning with brunchgoers nibbling on omelets and sipping Bloody Marys under a sunny sky. On the pier below, the participants in the fifth annual Mayor's Cup Kayak Championships launched their boats into the Hudson River for the start of an arduous, 28-mile race around Manhattan.

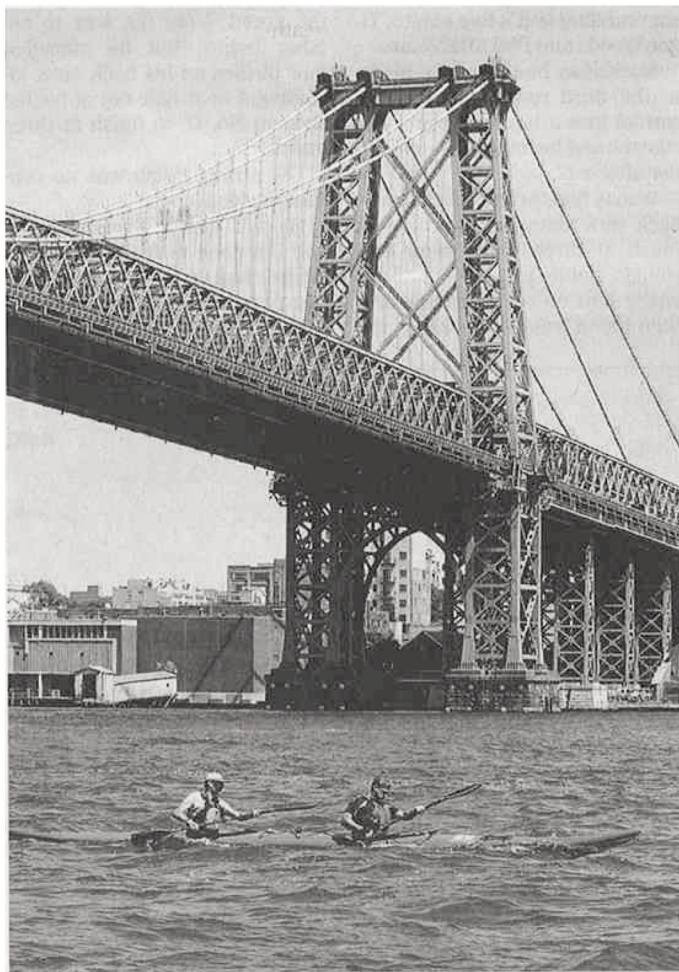
Following the clockwise route, paddlers headed north along the Hudson, savoring a swift pace with the current's assistance. Their return to 79th Street later in the day would be a struggle against a bullying flow. With a fish-eye's view of a little red lighthouse and the underbelly of the George Washington Bridge, covered in zooming cars, overhead, they continued north toward Spuyten Duyvil, where the Hudson and Harlem Rivers meet.

Among the 155 international, national and local racers, the elite group racing in sleek surf skis included the two-time Olympic gold medalist Greg Barton. But recreational racers made up the majority of the other divisions, including five boats from Achilles International, an organization for disabled athletes. Each Achilles member teamed with an able-bodied, experienced paddler in a double kayak. Three veterans from the Iraq and Vietnam Wars competed in the race.

"Kayaking is similar to long-distance running using a handcycle, as both use the same muscles," said Dick Traum, 69, a knee-down amputee, who started running marathons in the 1970s and founded Achilles International in 1983. His son Joe runs the three-year-old Achilles kayaking program.

"The beauty of this sport is that it levels the playing field for disabled and abled athletes," Dick Traum said.

This is the third year for a Challenged Athletes division in the Mayor's Cup, but it was the first time all of the competitors were able to do the complete course. In 2008, the event was canceled as racers approached the George Washington Bridge because of excessive winds and



JEFF CHEN/MAYOR'S CUP

Phil Warner, left, and Michael Blair passing under the Manhattan Bridge during the Mayor's Cup Kayak Championships.

dangerous water conditions. Last year, torrential weather limited starters to mostly elite racers with a few exceptions. Michael Blair, an Iraq veteran who lost the use of his legs from an explosion, was the only challenged athlete to race last year, and it was a memorable trip.

By the time he and his paddling partner last year, Marcus Demuth, 40, reached Hell Gate, they had missed the tides and were fighting against the wicked current and wind. Hell Gate — where the Long Island Sound, the Harlem River and the East River meet — is one of the trickier sections of the course. The convergence can often create standing

waves, whirlpools and chaotic water that can easily tip a kayak.

"They don't call it Hell's Gate for nothing," said Blair, who started paddling in 2007 with Team River Runner, an organization that offers kayaking for wounded soldiers and their families.

Dan O'Connor, a Vietnam veteran from St. Albans, W.Va., competed in his first Mayor's Cup this year.

"I love seeing the different neighborhoods during the marathon, and I'm excited to see the city by water," O'Connor, 63, said before the race.

He has competed in 22 marathons, mostly in a hand-crank

chair, including four New York City Marathons. O'Connor lost the use of his right leg in Vietnam from an explosion, and four and a half years ago he lost the bottom part of his leg in a motorcycle accident.

"This was my first kayak race, and it was grueling," he said. "With a hand crank, you get to rest on downhills, but today, it was total paddle."

Heading south on the East River, the kayakers faced a relentless headwind and side chops from ships and barges creating big swells. Many competitors stayed to the Manhattan side of the slowing channel for safety.

"I screamed like a little girl as we passed the Manhattan Bridge," O'Connor said. "There were big swells coming over our bow, and the waves were going in five different directions."

As the river widened, the wind increased, and the water was chaos, with swells coming from every direction as the competitors rounded the Battery. A few kayaks tipped, but the racers were quickly rescued by police boats and fellow racers.

In past years, the start and finish line was at North Cove in Battery Park, but this year, competitors had to go six miles against the current on the bouncy Hudson River, peppered with boats and personal watercraft, to the finish at the Boat Basin.

Blair said that last year, he loved rounding the corner of the Battery and seeing the Statue of Liberty, which gave him hope that he had almost made it. This time, he had a different landmark. "When I saw the Empire State, I knew we were halfway there from North Cove," he said.

Then came the hectic water ferry terminal, with police boats directing traffic to assure that racers were not run over by a rushing ferry and cruise ships pulling out of port. Blair finished first in the challenged athletes division in 4 hours 36 minutes and said he was already talking to Demuth, about paddling in next year's race.

"I almost forgot the Intrepid was there, and seeing it gave me a kick in the butt to get it going and to finish," Blair said.