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 April 22, 2008

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## Unsafe conditions halt Ohio Rowing Regatta

Sunday, October 08, 2000

By Rich Emert, Tri-State Sports & News Service

The wind was a factor ... the deciding factor.

The Head of the Ohio rowing regatta, the second biggest event of its kind in the country, was canceled about halfway through the competition yesterday. Unsafe conditions on the Allegheny River race course prompted officials to stop the action at 1:15 p.m.



**Rowers compete yesterday on the Allegheny River before the event was called off. (Franka Bruns, Post-Gazette)**

The Can/Am High School Challenge Sprints, that featured a number of the top area high school rowers, was caught in the wake of the cancellation.

The wind was steady from the west with gusts up to 20 mph at times, turning the Allegheny into roiling whitecaps. The narrow and low sculls had problems plowing through the choppy surface. Many could not avoid taking on water, and 11 boats were swamped, race director Mike Lambert said.

"More boats were swamped than originally I had thought," he said. "There weren't any injuries, and most of the ones that were swamped were singles."

The rough water made for an interesting morning for rowers and volunteers helping stage the event.

"I pulled nine people out of the water, said Peter Froehlke of O'Hara, who was in one of the race monitoring boats at the finish line across from Point State Park.

"It was the worst conditions I've rowed in since college," said Thornton Lothrop, 43, of Columbus, Ohio. He took part in the senior masters men's singles. "I was plowing through the waves. Plowing and surfing, that's what I was doing."

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"I saw one of the guys in a safety boat give a guy an empty coffee can so he could bail out his boat," said Heather Schofield of the Fox Chapel Rowing Club. "His boat was that low in the water."

The decision to cancel the afternoon events came after Lambert met with the course referee and many of the rowing team coaches. They agreed the water was too rough to continue.

"In rowing the two things that concern you are lightning and high winds," Lambert said. "It's easy to make a decision about getting out of the water if you see lightning. Wind is a little tougher to gauge."

This was the 14th year for the Head of the Ohio. The field was the largest with 5,222 entries and 952 sculls expected to compete. That's a 20 percent increase from last year's field.

This was also the first year racing had to be canceled.

"We had a break in the racing to open the river to traffic, and it was a wise decision to cancel it then," said Brian Smith, U.S. Coast Guard Chief Petty Officer who is with the Marine Safety Office. "It would have been our recommendation to cancel it. They checked with the weather service and the conditions were just going to deteriorate."

"The problem was the wind was out of west. From that direction, it comes down the Ohio, and when it gets to the West End Bridge there's a big area where it can pick up speed. That's why the conditions were worse at the finish line than they were up river."

Dave Figgins, chairman of the board of governors for the Three Rivers Rowing Association, said the conditions were not good, but manageable for older rowers. But the Head of the Ohio has high school and novice events. Rowers such as Matt Fignar, a first-year member of the Robert Morris College team, said scuttling the races was a good thing. He was on a mixed-novice 8s that participated in the morning.

"We had some experienced people in the boat I was in, which was good," he said. "We had another 8 that didn't compete because it was all inexperienced people like me. They would have had problems."

Perhaps the most disappointed rowers were the area high school athletes who were going to represent the United States in the two Can/Am High School Challenge Sprint races. They had to go through a rigorous tryout process to be picked for the team. They had their sculls in the water when word came that racing had been canceled.

"It would have been neat to been in a short, sprint race against Canada," Meaghan Froehlke of O'Hara said. "We wanted to get out there and go, although it would have been interesting to see what would have happened given the conditions."

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