

Record entries for Southern 80

THE Southern 80 was first run 17 years ago with the aim of giving Victorian and Riverina waterskiers a local equivalent of the Bridge-to-Bridge.

It has had a chequered history, mainly because of the problems posed by the 80km course on the Murray River upstream from Torrumbarry Weir to Echuca.

Unlike the Hawkesbury, there are massive variations in the water level of the Murray, from flood to drought and depending on whether or not water is being released from the Hume Weir and now Dartmouth Dam, further upstream.

A variation of a metre or two in water level can bring hidden snags close to the surface. As a consequence, a record of broken boats and injured skiers tended to make the Southern 80 a race which only the most daring, or the most dedicated, would attempt.

Eight years ago, however, the Moama Water Sports Club, based on Echuca's twin town across the river, took over the event and since then, it has never looked back.

To begin with, the club made the Southern 80 its one big annual event and began working at it on a year-round basis.

Part of the job consisted of attacking the most dangerous snags with chain-saws when the river was low and marking those which could not be dealt with.

This, combined with persistent

promotion, scheduling the event for mid-February, when water is always coming down the river to serve irrigators downstream and an increasingly efficient back-up has resurrected the Southern 80.

It has now become something like the Bridge-to-Bridge, with a strong following of competitors who never miss it, even though they may not compete regularly or at all on the VWSA and VSTC circuits.

Over the last few years, there's been steady but significant progress.

Last year, entries totalled 91; this year, the club gained a major sponsor, Glastron Boats and the Glastron Southern 80 attracted a record 128 entries.

The race, run on Sunday, February 14, in perfect weather, was a resounding success; a big crowd watched the finish from the river bank at Echuca's Victoria Park launching ramp, which makes a magnificent natural grandstand and catering by the local service clubs was first-class.

Last year's winner and race record-holder, Peter Waterhouse's LOCOMO-

TION, started favorite with Neil Sherritt and Mick Walker on the skis. They were first away and first home in a scorching 40min six seconds; and celebratory cans were being consumed until the late Bob Luxford's old boat, ROLCO IV, arrived having taken only 38min 25sec for the journey.

ROLCO IV is now owned by Ted Hurley; Brett Staenuiter and Mick Foott were his skiers.

Bob Luxford, one of the pioneers of the Southern 80, would have loved to have seen the win.

A record of less than 40min to shoot at will obviously tempt some of the hotshots next year, who were inclined to pass up the Southern 80 this time because of the demands of the busiest few weeks in a fiercely competitive season.

It will be quite a while before the Southern 80 commands fields such as those in the Bridge-to-Bridge, but the writing could be on the wall.

The event has a lot to offer. The Murray winds like a concertina below Echuca and the 80 river kilometres are only about 25km by road.



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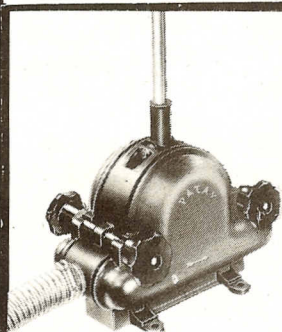
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Support parties can see their boat away and get to the finish in time to watch it come in.

And Echuca is an ideal base — a major resort town of the Murray Valley, only a shade over 200km from Melbourne, adequately equipped with hotels and motels and boasting what is claimed to be the best caravan park in Australia.

The safety problem appears to have been largely solved by the involvement of the organisations which provide the coverage for the huge field of canoeists in the annual Red Cross Murray marathon.

The North-Central Victoria Division of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol, supported by the mobile Trailer Division, put no fewer than 14 boats into the operation, supported by land-based radio stations of the WICEN (Wireless Institute of Australia) emergency network.

Race organiser Barrie Beehag said: "All we need now is for the government to undertake the snagging of the river.

"There has been some opposition to this idea, locally, on the argument that it would lead to erosion of the banks.

"That, of course, is nonsense. The snags could be taken from the river without removing those on the banks."

Snagging the Murray River both downstream and upstream from Echuca would not only guarantee the future growth of the Glastron Southern 80 ski race, but be of year-round benefit to Echuca, as a major boating and tourist centre.

Glastron Southern 80 results

UNLIMITED: 1, ROLCO IV 38.25; 2, LOCOMOTION, 40.06; 3, INVADER 42.22.

UNDER SIX-LITRE I/B & 200hp O/B: 1, TERROFIRE 41.50; 2, RIP OFF 41.57; 3, SUM TOY 45.22.

UNDER 5.2 LITRE & SIX CYL I/B: 1, THUNDERDUCK 42.50; 2, CITATION 47.51; 3, GRUMPY 49.06.

O/B SMOC 235hp: 1, TENNESSEE SUE 46.17; 2, COMMODORE 52.30; 3, MAMA 60.05.

BOYS & GIRLS 16-19: 1, CONTAX 43.52; 2, DESTINY 44.26; 3, JAWS 44.52.

JUNIOR (UNDER 16): 1, SOLVOGN 61.00.

NOVICE UNLIMITED: 1, GL-252 53.24; 2, JACKAL 58.44; 3, SILVER SCREW 59.04.

NOVICE UNDER SIX-LITRE V-DRIVE I/B & 200hp: 1, MAGNUM (o/b) 51.36; 2, BOB JANE T-MART 52.39; 3, BLUES 2 (o/b) 52.49.

NOVICE UNDER 5.2 LITRE V-DRIVE & SIX-LITRE CENTRE MOUNT I/B: 1, NIGHT STALKER 53.04; 2, MIDNIGHT 54.31; 3, DONZI 55.17.

NOVICE UNDER FIVE-LITRE CENTRE MOUNT I/B & 155hp O/B: 1, SMOKEY (o/b) 54.47; 2, HANG ON-ON 58.33; 3, CAMINO (o/b) 58.41.

NOVICE JUNIOR (UNDER 16): 1, EQUALITY 60.27; 2, SEEYAH 61.46; 3, MEAN MACHINE 68.12.

NOVICE SUB-JUNIOR (UNDER 13): 1, HENRY F 64.41; 2, FLEET-WOOD 65.1; 3, ROSENE 66.34.