

POINTS OF

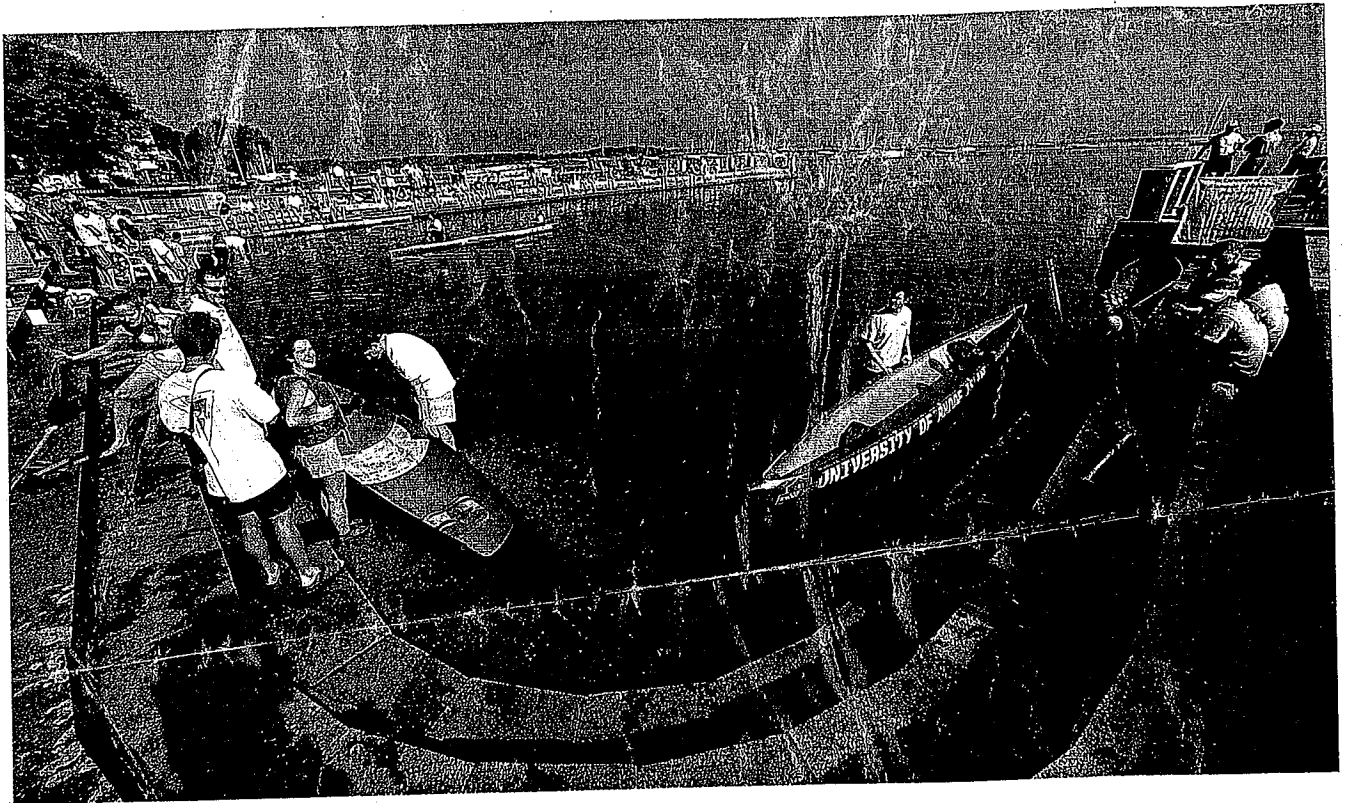


INTEREST

# Like a Rowing Stone

AN UNUSUAL CANOE COMPETITION IN MADISON, WISCONSIN,  
FLOATS THE NOTION THAT CONCRETE WAIVES THE RULES

BY MICHAEL BEHAR



Teams from 25 schools raise up to \$120,000 to design and build a boat to compete in the "Superbowl of concrete canoe racing."

IT'S BARELY DAYBREAK in Madison, Wisconsin, but John Gilbert has already worked up a sweat. The 54-year-old, self-described concrete connoisseur is pacing the southern shore of Lake Mendota, which borders the sprawling University of Wisconsin campus. On this summer weekend, the university is hosting the 15th Annual National Concrete Canoe Competition, a collegiate event Gilbert hasn't missed since 1990. At the moment, he's inspecting 25 slender canoes—one from each contending school—neatly aligned at the water's edge.

When Gilbert, who teaches mechanical and civil engineering at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, invited me to the competition, I envisioned burly jocks paddling half-ton stone bathtubs in a losing battle to keep them afloat. In the early days, this scenario was not so far-fetched. Today, the boats are sleek and refined, painted in

brilliant school colors and nearly identical in shape and size to their conventional aluminum and fiberglass cousins. Yet most of these craft are about 90 percent concrete. (Race rules require that participants leave a strip of canoe midsection unpainted so that judges can check out the concrete for themselves.) Student competitors decide which ingredients they will add to portland cement to make the concrete mixture. They have experimented with dozens of odd materials, from tiny glass orbs called microballoons to rice, perlite, silica fume and a wispy filler dubbed K37.

The 20-foot-long canoes are digitally sculpted on computers, then formed in intricate molds; they can cost up to \$120,000 to design and build. They are not only strong and superlight—weighing between 70 and 130 pounds—but some of them are even flexible. "We could make these boats lighter," says Gilbert, an undisputed authority on the

ALL: LAYNE KENNEDY