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Local water sport makes a splash

By Stephen Maher
Of the Emerald

They begin arriving along the Willamette River as soon as the weather heats up, carrying with them irregularly shaped pieces of plywood and long ropes attached to old tires.

After a brief delay to tie opposite ends of the ropes to both the plywood and large boulders, they push off from shore and zigzag against the rush of the strong current.

For the curious onlookers who gaze from the Autzen Stadium footbridge, this water recreation has no name. But for those who participate, it's called riverboarding. They say it helps whittle away the long summer hours.

"It's something to do when you're bored, and it's something to do besides swimming," said Joe Whitehead, a Springfield resident who has been riverboarding for the past five years. "It's the closest thing you can get to water-skiing without a boat."

"I like it because when it's hot, it's a great way to cool off," said another riverboarder, Yansi Casis of Eugene.

One of the attractions of riverboarding is that it's inexpensive. The boards are handmade from plywood, and the ropes and tires are items usually found lying around a garage or back porch. A pair of shorts, tennis shoes and an occasional wet suit make up the rest of the equipment.

"I've gone down there in the morning and early in the year when the water was colder, and people break out their wet suits," Casis said.

The stretch of the Willamette that flows under the footbridge on the south bank is considered by many to be the best riverboarding spot in the area because of its swift, rough and deep current.

"The way the river is here is



Photo by Stephen Maher

Joe Whitehead and his English pit bull, Angel, ride on a riverboard in the Willamette River.

really unique," said Robert Pitts of Seattle, a former resident of Eugene. "I go fishing in the rivers near Seattle, and you never see anything like this. Not every river has this."

"It's just about the only place I know of. But all you really need is some rapids, and the swifter the better," Whitehead said.

Whitehead first noticed people riverboarding about five years ago when he happened upon a number of University football players thrashing about on boards. It wasn't long before he found himself among the participants.

"We made a board. And then I saw them popping up everywhere," Whitehead said.

Riverboarding to a large extent is strikingly similar to other water sports. The standing, leaned-back position is reminiscent of water-skiing or jet-skiing, and riding the crest of large river waves resembles surfing. The main distinction is that riverboarders go against a

strong current.

"You have a sensation of moving up the river because the river is moving by you," Casis said.

But riverboarding does have its hazards.

"You can get injured if you aren't careful. I came into the rocks too fast and couldn't stop, and I hit them," Whitehead said, pointing to a gash on his elbow.

People floating down the river in inner tubes pose another problem to riverboarders, and sometimes boards are swept under water and remain there because of the intense pressure of the current, Whitehead said.

The pressure of the current also causes ropes to snap, he said.

There are also the humorous moments when someone out of place tries to ride the boards.

"Anytime a big guy shows up and wants to ride a board, we let him. And before long, he goes under," Whitehead said.

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