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COVER STORY

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enough to beat your opponent to the finish line.

The race began in 1994 with just one team. Now 20-25 boats take part each year.

All boats must be made of corrugated cardboard — no wood, vinyl or Styrofoam. And they can only be held together by tape, glue and perhaps prayer.

Boat builders do everything they can to make their boats seaworthy, including multiple layers of cardboard, cardboard cross beams and lots of paint (the paint acts like a sealant and helps keep the cardboard from getting soggy).

Boat entries cover all skill levels — from hastily built kayaks to detailed replicas made by actual engineers.

“Some people just slap a couple of pieces of cardboard together and come,”

Perry says. “So it runs the whole gamut.”

The Merry Mariners have won Best in Show for five years in a row. Their boats have included replicas of a “Star Wars” X-wing fighter and a helicopter from the TV show “MASH.”

This year, the club built the namesake boat from the Bogey-and-Hepburn movie “The African Queen.”

“We like to do something different,” says club commander Stephen Warner, 64, a retired auto engineer. “This is the first year we’ve done an actual *boat*.”

The project took 1,000 hours and four truckloads of corrugated cardboard to build, Warner says.

“We use a lot of glue,” Warner says. “A *lot* of glue.”

From a distance, the boat looks like the real thing — complete with a boiler, a working smokestack and torpedoes sticking from the bow. It’s only on closer inspection that you realize

the hull, the boiler, the rudder — practically everything — are made from painted cardboard.

So does Warner think the African Queen will float?

Of course.

“We don’t do sinking,” he says proudly. “This is like the Titanic.”

A second later, he realizes his mistake and laughs.

Oops.

Only time will tell. There aren’t many icebergs at Four Freedoms Park ... but you never know.

Sinking, of course, is always a possibility when you’re sitting on what amounts to a cardboard box.

Janet Miller, 62, of Cape Coral remembers when her alligator-shaped boat sank in 2002. She still smiles at the memory.

Her husband, Bob, had successfully finished the singles race. Then Janet hopped in for doubles.

“We heard a crack when we got in it,” she says and grins. “And I thought,

‘Okaaaaaayy...’”

They paddled anyway, but soon the boat started filling with water.

They got as far as the first buoy.

“And so we went down,” she says. “Luckily, their aren’t any sharks at The Yacht Club (where the race was held that year).”

Miller isn’t sure how long, exactly, it took their boat to sink.

“We were laughing too hard,” she says. “So I don’t know.”

They *have* gotten better at boat-building, though.

This year, Miller and her Caloosa Dive Club friends built a 17-footer shaped like an aquarium. The boat seats 10.

The club has won second place two years in a row for design.

So they’ve set their sites high for Saturday.

“This year, we want No. 1,” says Bianca Ryder, 50, of Cape Coral. “That’s what we want.”