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Splashing through sludge: Boaters traverse Brooklyn's Nautical Purgatory in 'Gowanus Challenge'

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Brooklyn Paper

Photo gallery



Photo by Erin Lefevre

END RESULT: Canoers huddled together after paddling from Second Street to the Hamilton Avenue Bridge and back again.

It was a race against slime!

Dozens of brave boaters piloting canoes and kayaks launched their vessels into the Gowanus Canal on Saturday for an annual race on the fetid waterway. This year's contest drew stiff competition, but one sludge-farer came with a strategy that led his motley crew to finish near the top.

"We paddled as fast as we could, stayed near the front of the pack, and yelled like pirates," said Bedford-Stuyvesant resident Tim Gamble, whose "Sewer Sharks" team took third place in the Gowanus Challenge.

Approximately 40 people turned out for the showdown hosted by boating club, the Gowanus Dredgers, which required participants to traverse a treacherous, toxic route from the group's Second-Street dock to the Hamilton Avenue Bridge and back.

Gamble's band of marauders rowed the murky canal in a canoe adorned with toy rats hanging from its sides, which looked like rodents abandoning the ship. Another squad's members donned Hazmat suits in an homage to the [polluted waterway](#), and other racers wore crocheted octopus masks in a do-it-yourself tribute to creatures of the deep.

The boating association holds the event each year to raise money and awareness for the canal, a Superfund site that [workers contracted by the federal government began cleaning in 2016](#). Organizers pooled together more than \$6,000 at the event, which they will put towards programming — including free canoe rides that the group offers every summer — as well as operating costs and upgrading the club's website, according to one of its directors, Owen Foote.

The Dredger, who competed with his mother, said the duo was on the fast track to victory until a vessel helmed by staffers from 2-year-old neighborhood barbecue joint, Pig Beach, cut them off, upsetting the pair of veteran paddlers.

"Despite our experience of more than 130 years of canoeing, we still weren't able to take first place," Foote said.

The race drew boaters from near and far, including teams from Red Hook, North Brooklyn, Brooklyn Bridge Park, Queens, the outer borough of Manhattan, and bucolic Staten Island.

Afterwards, the navigators of Brooklyn's Nautical Purgatory partied in the Dredgers' new Second-Street boathouse, sinking beers and listening to tunes by the Tiki Brothers, whose special, Gowanus-themed take on The Standells' hit "Dirty Water" was the perfect way to cap a wacky day on the canal, Foote said.

"Gowanus has always been quirky and interesting and fun and that's the takeaway," he said.

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Photo by Erin Lefevre

STRATEGY: From left, Sheldon Kelly, Tim Gamble, and Kate Gamble planned to win the race by paddling fast and yelling like pirates.

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