

The Capital

Top Stories

Blessing of the Fleet: Event celebrates our 'water culture'

By PETE HOLLEY, Staff Writer

Like a batter waiting for the first pitch, Tommy Lou Hallock swung a thick, steel anchor back and forth.

Without warning, his body lurched forward, his hands released and the 40-pound weight sailed through the air before disappearing with a splash into Parrish Creek.

His 40-foot toss, which drew a round of oohs and ahhs, put him in front of 19 other men and made him the Blessing of the Fleet Festival's anchor tossing champ for the second straight year.

"There's not much strategy," he said. "I'm a fifth-generation waterman, so maybe that helps."

Anchor tossing was one of the highlights of the festival yesterday in Shady Side, revived in 2002 after a long hiatus. Besides watermen-themed contests, it also featured craftsmen, music, food and a variety of bay-related organizations.

Despite the punishing heat, organizers said the event drew more than 2,000, many of whom arrived by boat.

"It's a chance for the community to come together to celebrate the water culture of this region, eat some good food and watch the competitions," said Patrick Ellis, who brought his family from Washington for the third year in a row.

Although standing by a fire in 90-degree weather might not sound appealing, it was all in a day's work for the men in the Blacksmithing Guild of Central Maryland who ran the blacksmith's booth. There, they made watches, knives and horseshoes in front of passersby.

"This knife is called the widow maker," joked a grizzled Dave Morgan as he held up a frighteningly long and shiny steel knife. "We're here to promote the traditional art of blacksmithing. There's a lot of history here."

The festival was also home to non-profits that touted the importance of bay preservation, such as the Chesapeake Environmental Protection Association.

"We want the public to know what we're trying to do, which is improve the quality of the Chesapeake," said Dr. Lee Greenbaum. "Many people say that they'd like to change the bay, but when it comes to making a personal sacrifice that's one of our biggest stumbling blocks."

The event was also a way to highlight south county's historic waterman culture.

"We've just had a wonderful day," said Elaine Reagan, president of the Friends of Discovery Village, which hosted the event. "It's a very unique event because it's home grown. People get access to the water and they get to appreciate how much we owe them for keeping the tradition of being a waterman alive."

Although the blessing of the fleet kicked off nearly an hour late, a sizable crowd was still on hand to witness the popular tradition, which asks for a safe passage and bountiful harvest. The dock was crammed with festivalgoers who watched in awe as the Anne Arundel County Fire Department unleashed a powerful 200-foot arc of water over the creek.

In a matter of minutes 30 boats passed under the arc and through a thick curtain of mist that hung over the water, providing boaters with much-needed relief from the heat.

"It was fantastic," said Robert Walker. It was the 51-year-old Brandywine resident's first time attending the Blessing of the Fleet. "Just the idea that they want to bless the fishermen for a good catch and a safe journey is really amazing."

The day's final event was the boat-docking contest, where watermen competed to park their workboats into a narrow slip as fast as possible. The winner gets year-round bragging rights. His name seemed awfully familiar: Mr. Hallock added another festival trophy to his case.

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