

Saturday's Great Dock Canoe Race will honor longtime contributor Joe Klimas

By WOODY WOMMACK

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NAPLES — Longtime Southwest Florida media personality Joe Klimas has a pretty extensive résumé. He's worked in TV and radio for more than 35 years, calling everything from high school to professional sports. He's the proud owner of an ACE Award, the former cable TV version on an Emmy, and he has been master of ceremonies for the annual Great Dock Canoe Race since its inception.

So when Klimas gets to add another honor to his already great career, it's a big deal. That will happen Saturday morning when Klimas serves as the grand marshal for the 35th running of the Great Dock Canoe Race at Crayton Cove.

"You have to stick your chest out a little bit because it is an honor," said Klimas, who will continue his role as co-emcee along with race founder Vin DePasquale. "It makes you feel special to be named the grand marshal, even if there aren't many added responsibilities that go along with it."

For Klimas, it brings his involvement in the race full circle. During the first race in 1976, which DePasquale started as an end-of-season part to celebrate the Dock restaurant's first year, Klimas was behind the microphone calling the action, just as he has been every year since.

"It just started out as a way to have fun and just seemed to get more popular every year," Klimas said. "I remember the first year there were maybe 100 people out there, now there more than we can count."

By unofficial count, average attendance has grown to nearly 5,000 per year. As the years have gone along, different heats have been added, and now there are three different heats in addition to the theme canoe race that starts things off.

This year's race theme is "Rednecks and Royalty," with Klimas being dubbed the unofficial "Redneck-in-Chief." Klimas, who survived a battle with lung cancer and still receives preventative chemotherapy treatment, said the race holds a special place in his heart.

"This is just a real special event and a true community event," Klimas said. "It's a great thing for the community, it raises money for charity and I'm extremely proud to say I've been a part of it for all 35 years."

Each year a selected charity receives a \$5,000 donation from race organizers. This year's charity is First Book-Collier County. With the donation, the organization will be able to provide 10 books per student in each of the 13 classrooms serving underprivileged students in Naples.

The theme race, which features parade float-style canoes and garners a \$1,000 dollar prize for the winners, begins at 11 a.m. The "Tippycanoe VIP Sprint" sponsor race begins at 11:45 a.m., followed by the "Ambitious Amateurs" race at 12:45 p.m. and the "Practically Professionals" race at 1:45 p.m.

Klimas said that even though the professionals heat now draws competition from all over Florida, everyone still remembers the No. 1 rule of thumb.

"This is an event we all love because it's all about having fun," Klimas said. "Anytime you're going against other people it's going to get a little competitive, but it's a fun time for everyone, but competitors and the people who come out to watch."

