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(Net)working out

From the river to the rink, Twin Cities professionals meet...and sweat together

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You can keep your business suits and your mini-muffins, your banal chatter and business-card swaps. Sherry Essen likes to do her networking the old-fashioned way -- with a paddle and a can of bug spray.

"When you are in a canoe with somebody for four hours, you get beyond the superficial," said Essen, owner of St. Paul leadership-consulting practice Springboard.

On July 30, she took part in a networking event for professional women, some two dozen of whom formed a casual canoe flotilla down the St. Croix River as participants in the Second Annual Ladies Voyageur Day.



Leadership consultant, **Sherry Essen**, was one of 22 women who participated in the Second Annual Ladies Voyageur Day in July 2004.

This is not a fluke. All around the Twin Cities, busy executives are taking time out of their week to play hockey, pound the pavement and generally up their heart rates, while simultaneously boosting their career prospects.

As a rule, networking is believed to be a powerful career tool. Some 41 percent of executives say they secured their current or most recent job through their personal or business network, according to the Executive Job Market Intelligence 2004 report from recruiting firm ExecuNet of Norwalk, Conn. While networking in its purest form is an informal, "friend-of-a-friend" affair, Chamber of Commerce gatherings and other more-formal events also give strangers a chance to meet and greet.

But athletic gatherings are different, said Fred Montana, owner and CEO of Eden Prairie-based FM

Industries Inc. and its division The Arthur Group, which represents job candidates to potential employers.

A longtime golfer, Montana draws a metaphor from the links. "If you look at golf, you really get to know someone's character: how they handle adversity, how they comport themselves, if they are a poor winner or a poor loser. You will see all those things in four hours on the golf course."

Subtext: Think twice before hiring the professional who ends the day with one club tied around a sapling and two others flung deep in the rough.

Where golf outings offer a leisurely session in familiarity, ClubRun delivers networking on the go. An offering of the Wellbridge system of health clubs -- which includes Northwest Athletic Clubs -- ClubRun provides coaching and training to help people prepare for distance races. Ten local trainers are readying about 300 people for the Oct. 3 Twin Cities Marathon.

Participants in the club run the gamut.

"We've got teachers; we've got doctors; we've got accountants and CEOs," said Marlee Meshbesh, who leads a group around the trails of Eden Prairie. "These are typically very goal-oriented, very driven people. On Saturdays, we typically do our long runs, with a slower, more casual pace. People can be out there for two or three or four hours, running at a comfortable pace, and there is plenty of time to get together with the people who are running next to you."

Meshbesh has trained runners for the better part of a decade, and she has seen the networking machinery in action. More often than not, she is that machinery.

"Everybody is always in the market for something. They are looking for work, or they are looking to fill a position," she said. "I am the middle person. They come to me because I know most of them pretty well."

Some run, others skate.

A senior vice president at real estate services provider Welsh Cos., John Johannson gets together with his professional buddies, representing a variety of industries, at least once a week to slap the puck around in what is arguably one of Minnesota's most passionate pastimes.

About 30 men gather at the Bloomington Ice Gardens, or anywhere else they can get ice, for some friendly rink time and casual banter -- including talk of business opportunities and evolutions.

Networking is not the primary goal here, but rather a fortuitous outcome.

"You'll sit around and have a beer, and people will talk about what they are doing," Johannson said. "You might learn a little bit about the stock market or a little bit about real estate.

"You'll become friends with someone and next thing you'll be learning about some aspect of their business or their employment. Then you might come across something in your work and you say: 'Hey, I know someone who does that.' It becomes another avenue."

As is often the case with these informal athletic/networking groups, the play is friendly and none too competitive. No sense slapping a puck in the face of tomorrow's junior partner, after all.

"Everybody's a good player, so nobody's trying to prove anything or hit anybody too hard," Johannson said. "We're there to get a good workout, and then get to the beer."

Among the ladies afloat, meanwhile, a noncompetitive day of paddling offers a prime chance to make new contacts, at least according to Suzanne McGann, owner and president of the St. Paul-based Web site design shop Voyageur I.T. She put together the canoeing event, which included four hours on the water, followed by a gourmet dinner.

The invitation-only event was limited to people McGann knows personally, or those to whom she had been recommended by close business associates. Before the paddling began, each woman stood up to give a brief description of her work.

Then, they all set sail.

"It's a way for them to get to know each other, to meet new people and to do it in a pleasant way that gets them out of the office for the day," McGann said. "Twenty-two women is a pretty small group, and by the end of the day, this is a pretty cohesive group of people who have really gotten to know one another and begun to form ties."

It worked for Essen, who already has a number of new collaborations in the pipeline as a result of the event.

"It was fantastic," she said. "You get tired of the traditional blandness of networking, walking into a roomful of strangers at 7 in the morning, where it is just by sheer luck that you maybe end up meeting up with someone that you have anything in common with."

"This was so much more intimate."