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NWIRA Rowing Regatta Turns 100: A century of racing is at stake

(Winnipeg – Canada, August 4th, 2003) In 1886 the Canadians won the first North West Invitational Rowing Association (NWIRA) Regatta on lake Minnetonka in Minnesota. Today teams from Canada and the US are busy preparing for the 100th anniversary rematch.

The spirit of the NWIRA can be traced back to its birthplace at Lake Minnetonka in Minnesota. A quick look around the North American landscape in 1886 told a story of outlaws and opportunity. In Canada the Louis Riel Rebellion was in full swing and in the US, Billy the Kid was still riding free. It was a time when only the fur trade outstripped the brothels and saloons in popularity. Into this world the first NWIRA championship was born. The Winnipeg Rowing Club and the Minnesota Rowing club announced the race was on.

What started as a quiet evening on the shores of Lake Minnetonka on July 16th, 1886 soon erupted into mayhem as the first race was run. The sound of the starters shot gun blast echoed across the lake. Hundreds of small boats and steamers filled with fans began cheering wildly for their favourites. The crews sprinted down the course with Winnipeg in last place. A slight breeze blew across the lake as the Canadians pulled a steady oar to stay close to the pack. Finally, with a quarter mile to the finish line Winnipeg sprinted ahead to first place. The two Minnesota crews and St. Paul hotly pursued them. The Americans pressed forward but Winnipeg continued to open up water. In the end the Canadians crossed the line first and took home a championship that would trade hands many times over the next 100 regattas.

Since the beginning the NWIRA regatta has continued to grow and thrive. The only time the regatta was postponed was during the Boar War, WWI and WWII. In peaceful times international patrons contributed to the sports success. Noteworthy contributors include Sir Thomas Lipton, founder of the Lipton Tea Empire, who in 1914 presented the 'Sir Thomas Lipton Cup'. This beautiful 3-foot high, 32 lb. Sterling silver cup was specially handcrafted in England by the finest Silversmiths of the day. Princess Patricia of Great Britain awarded the first Lipton Cup in Kenora in 1920 to the Duluth rowing club for their winning the Championship.

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The same spirit of excellence continues in the NWIRA today. In fact the NWIRA has grown into a world-class regatta that will attract over 400 athletes from Canada and the US over three days from August 21st – 23rd, 2003. The regatta will take place on a 1500-meters course on the Red River in Downtown Winnipeg. The race format is tribute to the first regatta. Once again crews will go head to head and against the clock in sudden death elimination.

The regatta has also grown from 6 to 65 events. Regatta events include all boats from singles to the large 8's for men, women, juniors and masters. The rowing tradition will continue that only winning crews will receive medals. At the end of the regatta points will be awarded to each club based on their crews results. The club with the most points will win the coveted Championship Lipton Cup and of course bragging rights for the next 100 years.

Regatta organizers this year have ensured there are plenty of special events during the regatta for visitors. Special Events include, the Official opening ceremonies with Manitoba's Lieutenant Governor and the Winnipeg Police Service's Pipe Band, Thursday, 21 August at 6:00pm. Beer Gardens and refreshment Kiosks for fans will be open during all racing. Admission is free. Families are welcome to come down and watch as rowers line up and test their mettle in the quest for the glorious Lipton Cup.

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