

Newville's 'Break in the Weather' party a rite of spring

[Neil Johnson](#)

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NEWVILLE—It didn't matter that the Rock River was an icy 43 degrees on Saturday.

That's a lot warmer than the air temperatures during many days of this past winter.

And if you jumped in the frigid river, as five people did during a belly-flop contest at Anchor Inn in Newville on Saturday, you weren't worried.

You got a double-shot of liquid courage beforehand: a sip of cinnamon-flavored whiskey, and cheers from 1,500 people who were celebrating the color of your undies and the start of a new spring.

The belly flops and other southern Wisconsin revelry—beer, brats and live bands playing 1970s and 1980s classic rock—went on Saturday at the Anchor Inn as part of the tavern's annual Break in The Weather party.

The long-running event in Newville—and its heralded Rock River belly-flop contest—is as familiar to Edgerton-area residents and Lake Koshkonong vacationers as the Groundhog Day woodchuck “Punxsutawney Phil” is to Punxsutawney, Penn.

For residents and Lake Koshkonong vacationers, the Break in the Weather party, which runs from noon until after midnight, is an annual rite. The ice is finally off the Rock River, and the season of fun has returned to Newville.

“Look at the buds popping out on that thing,” a tattooed man in a leather and denim motorcycle jacket said to his friend. He was pointing to a tree on the riverfront veranda at the Anchor Inn. “Isn't it nice to see that?”

It was an unexpected Walt Whitman moment for a motorcycle dude, but hey—it has been a long, nasty winter.

Anchor Inn owner John Kinnett smiled from the tavern's deck, which overlooks the river. On the back lawn, people sipped Leinenkugel beer, a group played beanbag toss and two Walleye fisherman putted past in a boat. The sky was blue and the temperature 60 degrees.

Not a heat wave, but compare it to the weather Jan. 26, just three months ago: a low of 7 below with 3 inches of snowfall.

“This, today, is a true break in the weather,” Kinnett said. “Even this spring, we haven't been able to string two warm days together. Yesterday was a good warm up. I bet the folks will pour in today.”

Kinnett said the annual party used to bring in 5,000 people, but now crowds have leveled off at about 3,000. Though floods have threatened the event, which has

been run by different owners for 41 years, it has never been canceled, Kinnett said.

The crowd ranges from motorcyclists to locals to Lake Koshkonong vacationers returning to the area.

"It's great. This now is when you see all the usual groups come out. It's the first time we've seen many of them return from the winter. They're waking up," Kinnett said.

Four Machesney Park, Ill., women stood under the tavern's big, white tent and danced to a classic rock cover band Pink Houses tear into a guitar, tambourine and fiddle breakdown cover of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken."

The women's brightly-colored toenail polish set off their new flip-flops and spring tops. They couldn't hear a word a Gazette reporter was trying to shout to them: something about a church song being played at a tavern tent revival.

The women just smiled at the reporter.

One town of Fulton police crew and three Rock County Sheriff's office squads were assigned to the party, which at one point in the afternoon had about 2,000 people.

In the past, the Break in the Weather Party has netted a handful of arrests, and on one occasion a man died when he tried walking home intoxicated from the event. A drunk driver hit him, said Rock County Sheriff's Deputy Greg Niles, who was on patrol Saturday.

The most common offense in the past, Niles said, has been people leaving the event and carrying their beer with them.

"It's mostly no big deal," Niles said.

Jason Johns, a native of Oregon, Wis., the party Saturday was a big deal, though. Water dripped from Johns' head in beads after he belly flopped twice into the Rock River, once with a dollar bill stuck to his forehead.

Johns, an Iraq War veteran who was injured in action, said the cold river and the people at the Newville party made him feel alive.

"It's s---t like this that reminds me I've got nothing in the world to complain about. It's about living life," Johns said.

- See more at: <http://www.gazettextra.com/article/20140426/ARTICLES/140429756#sthash.m63071Rg.dpuf>