Look out, Detroit — Here comes the Silver Bullet

By John Hubbard
Of the NEWS Staff

University of Maine seniors in the Mechanical Engineering Technology Department are still finding ways to perfect "Superb," but the question of whether any of four projects will float will have to wait until Saturday morning for an answer.

It has become an annual tradition at the University of Maine at Orono to build a boat that can go over the challenges of land and sea travel, even over shortages of fuel, with man-powered vehicles. The resulting bicycle boat-like contraptions might lead anyone to wonder if they were not the answer to why Ford refused to start that morning — or maybe gave up the ghost in heavy commuter traffic at the end of the Chamberlain Bridge, to a chorus of angry horns behind.

After all, these UMO students will find jobs in Detroit and other places where cars are made.

A Thursday morning test by the machine tool shop began with an introduction to a bicycle aluminum frame with bicycle wheels and stereo foam padding strapped to it. Four university seniors fiddled intently with the drive sprockets, which would be powered by two very athletic seniors-to-be graduates.

The design and engineering project is to the undergraduate seniors what a doctoral dissertation is to the graduate student, but a lot more fun.

Design and building efforts will be judged Saturday morning by members of the engineering department and there will be an endurance race around the university mall, followed by a water race.

If the machinery should fail in its attempt to traverse both land and the Stillwater River Saturday morning, the students' grades might reflect that shortcoming. As one member of the crew observed, "The captain goes down with the ship. Meanwhile, last-minute work to finish the "Silver Bullet.""

"Pfft! That smells good," Jeff Dutton sarcastically commented as he brushed away the residue from his bicycle wheel on one drive sprocket. A puncture, indefinably some odor filled the tool shop entry. The chain and drive did not line up correctly and the four were trying to find ways to keep the bicycle chain from slipping off the sprocket.

In truth, it was the axle on which the bicycle wheel rode that didn't line up, explained Jim St. Laurent, a member of the team. Someone mentioned something about the Titanic just as Dutton had finished brushing the dust off the welding job. "Yeah," St. Laurent retorted, "but there's no iceberg here."

The idea behind the project involving about 40 seniors in the Mechanical Engineering Technology Department is to create a functional design for land and water travel. It has got to be something that has not been thought of before. Each needs human power via bicycle chains, sprockets and wheels. And each, its builder, hopes, will float.

All have two things in common:
They have bicycle wheels and aluminum frame members. All hold two drivers whose physical prowess will be responsible, to one degree or another, for the success of their team's project.

The most complex machine, appearance and weight, is the Silver Bullet. Its wheels are to be lightweight and compact, even the one that is built on a modified canoe hull.

All of the materials have been donated by local companies, such as the Old Town Canoe works where a test hull, damaged at the company, was given to the team for its project. As Thursday's work refining and redesigning wore on, the crew of the Silver Bullet's St. Laurent's group, began to pilot their amphibian out of the shop onto the pavement for a last run across the campus.

St. Laurent's team had their machine upright just in time to hear the sheet aluminum holding the foam in place rattled in the omnibus, thundering away that loose sheetmetal does when disturbed. The foam blocks in the back settled onto the cement floor and the four stood transfixed, arms rigidly at their sides, as they thought of ways to correct the design.

After the repair, the Silver Bullet was taken outside for a ride down the street. Jeff Dutton and Tim St. Clair, the running gear, audible or gumpling of aluminum sheet held one of the designers. Working with Dutton and St. Clair on the project were Rick Loisel and Jim Gould and Gould work on the Silver Bullet preparing for final trials and the Saturday morning test that will determine, in part at least, whether they get in their Mechanical Engineering Technology course.

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