Rafting for the blind

By BRIAN CLARK

CAMP NINE — As the five-person paddle raft slipped into the top sheet of the Stanislaus River's Widowsmaker Rapid, 23-year-old Debee Norling gasped with anticipation.

She cocked her head to the side to better hear the roaring water breaking over the boulders.

And as boatman Rick Spittler called out "right turn!" she dug her paddle into the foamy water at her side.

She shattered as the cold spray splashed over the side of the boat and shook from her furskull the blarey wisps of hair the morning breeze had loosened from her braids.

And as the raft eased into an eddy at the bottom of the run, Debee, who has been blind since birth, blazed her face to the sun and smiled.

An ETC blind group heads through a rapid on the Stanislaus River, on what for them seemed like a "rollercoaster" ride.

It's a fun ride for the sightless

By BRIAN CLARK

Her disability did little to dampen her enthusiasm for the river or the excitement of crashing through three-foot waves.

"I guess," she said, "I guess hearing and feeling the river is much more intense for me." She continued the University of California, Berkeley, literature student.

"I know it sounds kind of strange, but I am not distracted by all the visual stuff," she said.

People meet me the same way I meet others," she said. "I don't know what it is like because I can't see it," she explained.

"But I do know it feels like a rollercoaster that is very wet and very fun and I would recommend it to all, especially handicapped people because it helps us overcome our fears."

For Sally Maguire, a legally blind 32-year-old Berkeley resident, riding the waves without the benefit of sight is like nothing she's ever done before.

It is wonderful to work with a group of people like this in the outdoors.

"Sometimes, we do get knocked and you get knocked into the boat," she said. "But that can be fun, too. It is all part of the experience."

The women made up a four-person blind group trip, organized and run by Environmental Traveling Companions out of Angels Camp.

Founded in 1977 by Marc Dubaux and two other river guides, "I feel she is a good place to go for blind people who normally don't think about how to experience the wilderness and that is because they are physically, emotionally or financially limited," said director Gertrudis Rozzi.

Participants pay only what they can afford, she said, with the remainder of the costs made up through grants of equipment, money and time.

"We are basically a volunteer organization," she said. "But is how we are able to reach the blind, the deaf, the handicapped, inner city kids or juvenile delinquents."

"These are the kind of people who are often overlooked," she said.

Co-director Spittler, who has been with ETC for six years, also takes groups backcountry and hiking in the summer as well as cross-country skiing in the winter.

"I think this is the worst I have ever seen," she said. "I thought it was going to be worse than this, but it is not."

Spittler's feet lead the way.

"The wilderness and rivers are a real good teacher for the disabled," he said. "For it allows them to do things they could not do in an urban setting."

"Here, they can jump on cliffs, swing on trees, right through rapids and learn that they can do without balls, rackets and other seemingly necessary things."

"It is incredible what this sort of thing can do for self-esteem," he said. "But the river doesn't know who anyone is," he said. "And it can flip a raft with blind people or paraplegics just like anyone else."

"That means we have to do a little more training," he said. "In one instance, I saw a young blind woman demoralized her aid when she returned home to San Francisco because she realized she could exist on her own."

Rozzi is concerned the organization may lose its base on the Stanislaus if the campground behind the New Mokelumne Dam is filled.

"This place is unique. We do the Stanislaus for a reason and that is because it is more isolated than any other California river that is at this level of skill."

"We are certainly not just the scenes of other rafting and it's not just for our commercial interests," she said. "The loss of this camp would be a loss for the disabled."
Wanted: wilderness — They bring their own courage

By Mary Gamm
Examiner-Mail Staff Writer

ON THE STANISLAUS RIVER — Bill Smith, 25, gets ready to plunge from cliff into the icy river; blind crew members, at right, reach out to touch the terms

Dan Smith, 25, gets ready to plunge from cliff into the icy river; blind crew members, at right, reach out to touch the terms

Feeling is believing

Rating guide Rick Spillers loves showing off the rugged rapids at the Stanislaus. He said, "I love working out here," and under his direction a crew of blind nature-tourers successfully navigated the rapids. On such a trip, these guides provide the expertise and encouragement. The Stanislaus provides the courage. Page 4.