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Boat crash arrest planned

Post staff report

Police today intend to arrest the driver of a "cigarette" boat which ran over a smaller pleasure boat on the Ohio River Friday night and kept going, leaving six people injured.

"The only thing I can tell you about the suspect is he basically caught himself because of his conduct. He left a trail of (angry) people everywhere he went who called in," said Dayton Police Sgt. Raleigh Barnett, who is investigating the hit-and-run boating accident.

Police were preparing a search warrant and said they intended to serve it at an unspecified location north of Cincinnati and make the arrest, which would conclude a weekend-long search.

The expensive, three-engine speedboat, often called a "cigarette boat" because of its slender shape, crashed into a 21-foot "picnic boat" and injured six of the seven people aboard.

The search for the boat and its driver began to focus Saturday on an Ohio-registered Fountain cigarette boat dubbed "Snap Decision" that was seen being hauled out of the river at a Moscow, Ohio, boat ramp.

Moscow Mayor Tim Suter spotted the boat between 1 and 1:30 p.m. Saturday. He watched as a damaged boat that fit the description of the speedboat in question was pulled from the river at the small ramp.

Suter did not know about the accident as he watched two men in a blue GMC pickup truck and a woman in a black or dark blue Cadillac retrieve the boat and pull it onto a boat trailer attached to the truck.

"I offered to help because one of the three out-drives -- the outer part of the motor that hangs outside the boat -- was nearly falling off the boat," Suter said. "There also was some damage to the front of the boat."

"But they didn't want any help. They acted a little squeamish. One man said, 'We've got to go. We've got to get out of here.'"

Suter said he assumed at the time that the three people were "aggravated about tearing up a very expensive boat."

"I know a little bit about boats and I would say this boat was at least a \$250,000 boat, if not a \$350,000 boat," he said.

About a half-hour after Suter watched the boat being pulled away, a friend told him about the accident and he called police to tell them what he had just seen.

He said the words "Snap Decision" were written on the side of the boat near the front.

The truck and boat trailer both had Ohio license plates and the boat had



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an "OH" in front of its registration number -- indicating that the boat is registered in Ohio. Suter said he did not recall any of the numbers on the boat registration.

The Cadillac had a Kentucky license plate, Suter said.

Suter estimated the woman to be about 50 years old. He said one man was 55 to 60 years old, about 5-foot-8, 200 pounds with blondish-gray hair. He estimated the other man was 45 to 50 years old with dark hair.

Suter said it's rare for large speedboats to be put in or taken out of the river at the "small and tight" Moscow ramp, but he said he has seen it done before.

At a gas station, police said, the suspect took up half the station's area and uttered an obscenity at a man who commented on the damage to the boat.

That man was so put off he wrote down the boat's registration and called police.

The man was also kicked out of a bar for being rowdy.

A woman who asked about the damage to the boat as the man tried to adjust it on its trailer on the side of the road also suffered a barrage of obscenity. She called police too, Barnett said.

Police thought they had the boat -- one of only 10 to 30 made each year by the manufacturer -- in their sights at 4 a.m. today in Clermont County, but that was not the boat.

"We think the person is on the run right now," Sgt. Barnett said at the Dayton, Ky., Police Department after returning from the early morning detail.

The collision itself occurred near the Queen City Riverboat landing on the Dayton riverbank and the injured were taken off the boat at the landing, with scores of bystanders running to offer aid.

In fair condition at University Hospital was the owner of the boat that was hit, Brian Maher of Kenwood. His wife, Debbie, also was injured, but their 6-year-old son, Jesse, escaped injury.

Also in fair condition at University Hospital were Doug Howard and Steve Abernathy. Bruce Bocson was treated at St. Luke Hospital in Fort Thomas, Ky., where he remained in good condition Sunday. William Wright also was injured.

Mike Lee was the head firefighter-paramedic for Dayton Fire Department that night. He said that his medic team made it onto the scene at the Queen City Riverboats dock right when bystanders -- many whom were attending a rave party upstairs at the dock -- were beginning to bring the injured ashore.

"It was pretty much mass chaos, there were 30 or 40 people" on the narrow lower portion of the dock. "There were bystanders trying to assist ... (they) were covered with blood," he said.

The speedboat was believed to have stopped shortly after the collision at Schmidt Field on the Cincinnati shore and then sped away.

Barbara Parker said she had watched in disbelief as the speed boat

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driver raced up and down the Ohio River "like a crazy man."

"I bet he was going 70 miles an hour," said the owner of the Wet Spot Bar & Grill on the Dayton riverfront. "I kept waiting for him to flip."

Parker first spotted the white boat with yellow and blue stripes that she estimated to be 40 feet long at about 1 p.m. Friday. At 11 p.m., the boat was still darting up and down the river.

"It went on all afternoon and into the night," she said. "There's no way anybody should be driving that fast, especially at night."

"There had to be something wrong with that guy, because nobody drives like that. I never saw him slow down. The boat was hardly touching the water. I just stood there with my mouth wide open, waiting for something bad to happen."

Dayton Police are working with officials in Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Resources department, Ohio Department of Natural Resources and other local waterborne rescue agencies in the investigation. The Ohio Coast Guard office said it was not investigating the incident.

Usually, accidents on the river are within Kentucky jurisdiction.

Though Fish and Wildlife doesn't have the personnel to staff the river around the clock, it was patrolling Friday. Several officers work the river out of Boone, Campbell and Bracken counties.

"We don't have somebody on the river 24-7," Casey said. "We work when there is the highest volume of people on the river."

The Fish and Wildlife division did work the Paddlefest event Saturday morning, during which the U.S. Coast Guard closed the river for the thousand or so canoers and kayakers taking part in races and a leisurely float on the river.

The Coast Guard doesn't patrol the river 24 hours a day.

Casey said there is no speed limit on rivers in Kentucky outside of no-wake zones, which require boats to reduce speed in congested areas or near shore.

Fish and Wildlife officers can pull boats over for reckless operation and violation of no-wake zones.

"Some of our officers are involved with the investigation," Casey said.

"We've checked our dispatch log and we never received a call on it here in Kentucky. That may be because the people were from Ohio and you just think to call the people you know."

"We didn't receive a call to our 1-800 number for Fish and Wildlife emergencies and violations," Casey said.

That 24-hour number is (800) 252-5378 or 800 25-ALERT.

Capt. Dale Appel said his organization's Boone County Water Rescue boat and a Dayton Fire Department boat were both on the river scouting for the speedboat until 3:30 a.m. Saturday.

"Even the commercial boats were out looking" for the fugitive cigarette

boat, he said, speaking of barges as well as excursion boats such as the Lady Dean and BB Riverboats

Wayne Moss of Eastgate said he saw the same speedboat Friday afternoon on the Ohio River that Parker had seen.

"The driver was really kicking it up there," he said. "I thought to myself, 'That guy is an idiot to be going that fast.'"

Bob Nolan, owner of the Queen City Riverboat landing where the injured were taken off their boat, said he has seen quite a few cigarette-type boats racing at high speed up and down the river.

"They're going to have to put some kind of control on this," he said.

Parker said she and other employees of her bar and grill were amazed not only by the speed of the boat, but also by the fact that they kept seeing the boat off and on for about 10 hours.

"We were wondering how much gas that thing was using," she said.

"That's all he did was go up and down the river. We kept commenting on it to each other. He just kept making so many trips. I figured the Coast Guard was going to bust him sooner or later.

"That guy was driving like a nut."

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