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3 still missing after river wreck

BY **EARNEST WINSTON** and **JANE PRENDERGAST**
The Cincinnati Enquirer



Officer Douglas Bryant looks at wreckage from the smaller boat. (Glenn Hartong photos) | ZOOM |

DAYTON, Ky. — Searchers combed the Ohio River overnight but failed to find three people presumed dead in Monday night's boat wreck.

Rescuers, working in shifts, said it was "100 percent unlikely" that anyone will be found alive. By midday Tuesday, officials said it was time for their mission to change from hopeful searching to grim

body recovery.

"It's hard to do that," said Douglas Bryant, the Kentucky water patrol officer investigating the accident. "But there just comes a time."

INFOGRAPHIC

How accident happened

Bad visibility, alcohol and driver inattention are being looked at as factors in the wreck. An investigation will determine how fast the two boats were going and whether the boats used proper lighting.

Families and friends of the victims waited on the shore Tuesday, watching rescuers try to find their loved ones.

The recovery effort was made difficult due to winds that make it harder for dogs to pick up human scents, and because of the wide search area. Both sides of the river were searched, from the Waterfront to Hooters in Newport for clues.

"It's like searching for a needle in a haystack," said Joe Davis, assistant chief of the Campbell County Water Rescue.

Authorities think the three missing people were not wearing life jackets. "More than likely, if these three folks

would have had life jackets on, they would be alive today," Mr. Davis said.

Still missing were Pamela and Scott Martini of Dearborn County and Ken Middendorf of Cleves. They were on their way back from seeing Black Sabbath at Riverbend with Mr. Middendorf's wife, Kim. She survived the wreck, the only passenger in their Stingray Rally Sport to do so.

Officer Bryant thinks the Stingray, starting to turn into Watertown Yacht Club, was rammed from behind by another speed boat, a 1986 Thunderbird Formula. In it were Nicole Purvis, 23, and Brian Brunen, 32, both of Cincinnati.

The Thunderbird then went over the top of the Stingray. The Stingray sank fast, with only the tip of its bow sticking out of the water by the time rescuers arrived.

Beer cans, both empty and full, were taken from the Thunderbird. Officer Bryant packed them in a cardboard box to keep them for evidence. He said he did not know how long it would be before charges, if any, might be filed.

Ms. Purvis and the passengers from the Stingray all were knocked into the water. Mr. Brunen, unconscious, remained in the Thunderbird as it spun driverless in circles in the water. A passer-by jumped in the boat and cut the engine.

Ms. Purvis was taken to St. Luke Hospital East in Fort Thomas. She was treated there and released. Mr. Brunen was taken to University Hospital, where he was in good condition Tuesday.

Mrs. Middendorf, 35, was in fair condition after surgery Tuesday.

The wreck, with busy-boating Labor Day coming up, brought pleas for more patrols from other boaters. More police presence is needed on the water, they said, particularly from Wednesdays through Sundays when the river is busiest and not just after big events such as Thursday's Jimmy Buffett concert.

Authorities disputed that, saying plenty of law enforcement was out on the river Monday night. Patrols always are organized after Riverbend concerts and other events that bring extra boaters out, said Douglas Bryant, the Kentucky water patrol officer investigating the accident.

"People just get wild and crazy," he said. "They run without lights; they're under the influence of alcohol. It's just a deadly combination.

"People seem to think the waterways are a last vestige for raising hell."

Today, searchers also will drag the bottom of the river, which is up to 30 feet deep in the area being looked at.

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