

SPORTS

The Fun of Frostbiting

Area sailors revel in Winter's winds.

By Pippin Ross

Frostbiting doesn't just refer to the moment when exposure to cold weather causes the tiny capillaries just under the surface of the skin to freeze. It's also the name for the somewhat bizarre, but bonafide sport of racing small sailboats in Northern climes during the Winter. It's an activity, many participants will tell you, that often results in the other kind of frostbiting.

The precise origin of the sport is vague, but current frostbiters believe it was started during the 30s by what one described as "a bunch of die-hard old salts. . . basically the same people who do it today."

The criteria of the sport are fairly simple: a small (10 to 15-foot) single masted, one- or two-man sailboat, a body of water somewhat snug (one of the reasons why the protected Connecticut and Rhode Island coastlines are considered ideal for the sport); and preferred, though not absolutely necessary, a heated shelter in close proximity to the race course wherein participants can warm-up, dry-off, drink a beer and socialize.

For the most part, frostbiting is recognized as a sport for true sailors, those that "never want to stop sailing," says Deborah Krampf, secretary and treasurer of the frostbiting club that operates out of the Essex Yacht Club. "Some people just can't get it out of their system when the seasons change." The Essex Yacht Club, in fact, was founded in the winter of 1933 solely to host frostbiting. Only later, when other, presumably less hardy, members joined, did the club deem to add summer sailing.

Originally, frostbiting was reserved for New Year's Day. "It started as a bunch of hung-over people looking for something fun to do before the advent of televised college bowl games," says Krampf.

Today, New Year's practically marks the end of the first phase of the frostbite season. Typically, clubs begin a ten-week series of races soon after Labor Day which continue well into January, when ice generally arrives on Long Island Sound's semi-protected waters. It resumes in March with another ten-week series.

Frostbiting, says Krampf, is for sailors who relish the purest skills of sailing: agility and quick thinking. "The feel of the water in the winter is completely different than in summer," says Krampf. There's also a tremendous challenge in just keeping warm.



Chilly scenes of Winter: Hiking out at the start; bundling up against the cold.

Frostbite regattas are organized pretty much the same up and down the coast. Races are held on Sunday and begin around noon. "The reason for the late start is so people coming from Boston or New York have time to get here," says Kevin Kelley, a frostbiter and manager of the Westport Cedar Point Yacht Club, which hosts a competitive frostbite club. "It's also the time of day when the temperature is at its peak, and the winds are more settled."

Sailors race around marks, usually orange buoys, that are set in a triangular or, occasionally, trapezoidal course, depending on wind direction and weather conditions. Anywhere from three to 30 boats race at a time, and there are often 5 to 10 races a day. Both Essex and Cedar Point host approximately 120 frostbiters. The minimum age is 15, and it's not necessary to be a member of the yacht club to join.

Frostbiters are somewhat limited in the type of craft they race. The list includes Lasers, Dwyer Dhows, Blue Jays, Interclubs and 420s. The frostbiter's boat of choice is the Laser, a 14-footer boat that costs from \$800 (used) to \$2,000 (new). The boat is fast, easily managed by one and has a low free-board (the vertical distance between the water and the deck, which on a Laser is about six inches). Another important feature of this class is that it's self-righting, crucial when sailing in choppy, near-freezing seas.

What makes the sport particularly suspect is that Lasers and other small craft require a great deal of "hiking out," a term that refers to the near acrobatic maneuver of getting most of one's body weight over the side

of the boat in order to keep it flat on the water. According to Kelley, one of the most difficult aspects of the technique is "keeping your butt in the right place. You want it to hang a little over the edge, while keeping it out of the water." Out-of-shape frostbiters, he says, often end up with a sore and wet rear-end.

Many frostbiters incorporate a somewhat controversial—some say illegal—technique called kinetics, which is a method of speeding the boat along by using your body weight to pump, or rock, the boat from side to side. Lasers respond well to kinetics. "It's controversial because heavier people who have perfected the technique have an advantage," says Kelley.

Obviously, the sport requires special clothing. Most frostbiters wear either a wet or dry suit—tightly fitted, insulated, water-repellent gear. While the sailors have to bundle up against the cold, it's important to wear un-cumbersome clothing," says Krampf, "because tacking and jibing [maneuvers to turn the boats] require the sailor to move quickly and smoothly."

Those who don't want to invest in a wet or dry suit often pile on layers of thermal underwear and top it with waterproof foul weather gear. Often, frostbiters create their own ensembles, which might include cut-offs with special anti-skid patches sewn to the rear and electrical tape at the ankles and wrists to keep water from seeping inside. The consensus among frostbiters, though, is that keeping hands dry and warm is the ultimate challenge. "You really can't wear gloves because sailing requires great dexterity—to tie knots and cleat lines," says Kelley. "Most of us just suffer."



SPORTSCARD

Monday, November 17

Hockey: Bruins at Montreal, 7:30, WSBK-38

Hockey: Rangers at New Jersey

Tuesday, November 18

Hockey: Islanders at Quebec

Wednesday, November 19

Basketball: Hawks at Celtics, 7:30, SportsChannel

Basketball: Knicks at Philadelphia

Hockey: Bruins at Buffalo, 7:30, WSBK-38

Hockey: Canadiens at Whalers, 7:30, SportsChannel

Hockey: Rangers at Edmonton, 9:30, WOR-9

Thursday, November 20

Football: Raiders at Chargers, 9:00, WTNH-8, WGGB-40

Hockey: Canadiens at Bruins, 7:30, NESN

Hockey: Maple Leafs at Islanders

Friday, November 21

Basketball: Knicks at Chicago, 8:30, WOR-9

Basketball: Warriors at Celtics, 7:30, SportsChannel

Hockey: Blues at Whalers, 7:30, SportsChannel

Hockey: Rangers at Vancouver

Saturday, November 22

Basketball: Celtics at Atlanta, 7:30, WTC-61

Basketball: Warriors at Knicks

Basketball(m): Navy vs. North Carolina in the Tip-Off Classic at the Springfield Civic Center, 2:00.

Football: Central at Southern, 1:30

Football: UConn at UMass, 1:00

Hockey: Blues at Bruins, 7:30, NESN

Hockey: Rangers at Calgary, 8:00, WOR-9

Hockey: Whalers at Islanders, 7:00, WHCT-18.

Volleyball: UConn at the Big East Tournament in Pittsburgh.

Sunday, November 23

Football: Buffalo at New England, 1:00, WWLP-22

Football: Denver at Giants, 1:00, WVIT-30

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