



**ROGER BAUMAN** of Westbrook races in the Laser class during the opening of the Frostbite Yacht Club's racing season on the Connecticut River on March 29. About two dozen boats participated in the race, which was about a month behind schedule because the river was frozen.

## SPRING SAILING

RIDING AN ICY  
RIVER WIND

Yacht Club Holds Annual Frostbite Racing In Essex

Story by **ERIK HESSELBERG** | Special to The Courant Photos by **Stephen Dunn** | sdunn@courant.com

**E**SSEX — When Steve Adkins arrived at the Essex Yacht Club last Sunday for the start of frostbite sailing on the Connecticut River, the air temperature was 22 degrees and there was snow on the ground. Ice covered most of Middle Cove, and the committee boat, a gray barge named Fair and Square, was edged in white. But the river was ice-free, meaning sailing could finally begin.

"It's called frostbiting for a reason," said Adkins, commodore of the Essex Frostbite Yacht Club, rubbing his hands together in the cold.

Essex has four yacht clubs but none quite like the Frostbite Yacht Club, whose burgee, or flag, is a polar bear. The club, which operates out of Essex Yacht Club, is one of the oldest frostbite clubs in the nation, dating to 1933. Members head every Sunday in spring and fall for dinghy races on the lower river, sometimes dodging ice floes and uprooted trees brought down by the freshet.

The prolonged cold this year, locking the river in ice, delayed sailing for nearly a month. The first regatta was held March 29. Some two dozen boats competed, 13-foot Lasers and JY-15s, centerboard dinghies with one and two-person crews.

The bigger keelboats, 18-foot Ideals and 28-foot Etchells, would not race this time because the heavy ice had delayed the installation of docks. "A week ago, the committee boat was still frozen in," said Adkins. "We're about a

pluck sailors from the icy river; frostbite sailors wear dry and wetsuits over layers of wool and fleece to protect themselves from the numbing cold. Capsized boats usually are righted quickly, allowing sailors to continue the competition.

"It's very intense sailing," said Leighton Lee, 70, of Old Saybrook, puffing on a cigar before the race. "I think that's the appeal. All the boats are the same, so no one has an advantage. It's a test of skill and tactics."

Lee sails a 16-foot M-Scow, which wasn't competing Sunday.

"I'm just going to have some fun today," Lee added. "It's something to do."

On the water, a brisk northwest wind was blowing 8 to 12 knots in the wide stretch between Essex and Nott Island off Lyme, where races are held. It was sunny but cold, the air temperature about the same as the water — 38 degrees. The current was running at 8 knots.

"This is one big heat sink," said Bob

Leary, at the helm of a 17-foot Boston Whaler, referring to the expanse of chilly river water. "It's a lot colder out here."

Leary was helping to set the buoys, or "marks," for the mile-long course, which Adkins described as a "lopsided triangle." The first leg was to windward, followed by a short reach and then a downwind run to the leeward mark. Rounding the last buoy, sailors make a final beat upwind to the finish line, marked by the committee boat, Fair and Square, anchored in the channel. The starting line was on the port side of the committee boat, while the finish was on the starboard side.

Aboard Fair and Square, the race seemed like chaos, with horns announcing various starts, and signal flags hoisted and lowered. Eight committee members with clipboards kept track of results. "It's like an aircraft carrier with everything going on," Adkins said. "It's kind of controlled

FROSTBITE, B6



**KEVIN GILLMAN** of Madison unfurls his sail as he prepares for an afternoon of frostbite racing. Visit [courant.com/frostbite](http://courant.com/frostbite) for more photos.

## LATE SPRING

Winter  
Chills  
Plant  
Sales  
Can't Get  
Hands In DirtBy **ANNE HAMILTON**  
Special to The Courant

The snow is quickly disappearing in some areas, temperatures are definitely warming — finally — but this winter's deep freeze is still being felt at garden centers and nurseries, where the weather has put a chill on early spring sales.

Grower Direct Farms, a wholesale nursery in Somers, can't plant marigolds or zinnias in the greenhouse until it is able to ship its early spring flowers — but customers don't want them until the weather warms up.

There is a general but sometimes unspoken fear among growers that it will not be possible to recover from financial losses caused by the long, cold winter. "We need some global warming here," said Jimmy Burnham, the self-styled "pansy guy" at Burnham Farms, a wholesale nursery in East Hartford.

"In 60 years of doing this, I've never seen anything like this," said Burnham, the nurs-

PLANTS, B7

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**JON LENDER**  
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SPRING SAILING

# RIDING AN ICY RIVER WIND

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Still, it was a glorious first day, with cloudless skies and the broad river estuary dotted with white sails.

Kevin Gillman, of Madison, had the best overall score out of six races in the Laser Class, despite taking a dip in the frigid water during an early race. Meanwhile, Prescott Littlefield, sailing instructor at UConn's Avery Point Campus, took honors in the JY-15 class.

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pluck sailors from the icy river; frostbite sailors wear dry and wetsuits over layers of wool and fleece to protect themselves from the numbing cold. Capsized boats usually are righted quickly, allowing sailors to continue the competition.

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### FROSTBITE, B6



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### PLANTS, B7

### GOVERNMENT WATCH

## Malloy Mailings Battle Heats Up



**JON LENDER**  
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It's just the opposite, though, with the State Election Enforcement Commission's continuing investigation of Connecticut Republicans' complaint that the state Democratic Party spent money illegally for Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's re-election last year.

Conflict has escalated in recent weeks between the SEEC and the Democrats, suggesting that it may take a

### MAILINGS, B7

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# IMAGES

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**SAILORS ADJUST** the sails of their JY-15 yachts on the downwind leg of one of the frostbite races. The smaller Lasers and JY-15s competed in the races; the bigger keelboats could not because ice delayed the installation of docks.



**THE RACERS** wore drysuits or wetsuits during the race. Sarah McCort, a student at UConn-Avery Point, is bundled up while racing aboard a JY-15.



**KEVIN GILLMAN** of Madison is out front and getting wet while racing his Laser on the Connecticut River in Essex. "One day out on the water and it all goes away," he said. "Winter's over."

## Frostbite

Continued from Page B1

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Likewise, a regatta at times appears as a confusion of boats, then suddenly a ballet of white sails in synchrony. The biggest challenge is the wind. Breezes are notoriously fickle on the Connecticut River, with sudden shifts and puffs and pockets of surprising calm. Sailors aim for the dark patches of feathered water, indicating wind.

"Where did the wind go?" is a question you hear a lot in Essex.

"The wind can shift as much as 20 degrees on the river," Adkins said. "It funnels down between the hills, and is very variable. In a race you can say, 'we winning, we losing, we winning, no we're losing.' That's what tactics are all about. It's not over until it's over."

The same challenges were faced 82 years ago in 1933, when the first frostbite fleet gathered on the river in Essex in March for



**JON BAWABE** of Columbia scoops snow out of his JY-15 sailboat before rigging it to sail. With the launch ramp iced in every week in March, last Sunday was the first day the frostbite sailors could race.



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The same challenges were faced 82 years ago in 1933, when the first frostbite fleet gathered on the river in Essex in March for a spirited competition off the Steamboat Dock. The regatta boasted New England's leading yachtsmen, including Walter Rowe and Sam Wetherill, both of Essex, who also raced out off Larchmont, N.Y.

Frostbiting as a sport is said to have begun the year before that Essex race — a demonstration of resolve in the face of the Great Depression, when fortunes were wiped out and stockbrokers were leaping out of tall buildings.

The nation was plunged in gloom, but a few hardy yachtsmen at Port Washington, N.Y.'s Knickerbocker Yacht Club, on Manhasset Bay, determined to put a brave face on it. They challenged their fellow sailors to a dinghy regatta on New Year's Day.

The race took place in a snowstorm with sleet and rain. Describing the celebrated event, a yachting correspondent wrote, "The idea of Frostbite Regatta is to prove that some people are crazier than others, and those who are craziest of all sail races in 11-foot boats in the middle of snowstorms — and enjoy it."

That same spirit persists today on the river in Essex. Despite his unscheduled swim, Gillman said it was a thrill to be sailing again after a long winter. "One day out on the water and it all goes away," he said. "Winter is over."



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**KEVIN GILLMAN** of Madison got tangled in his mainsheet during a wind shift and went into the drink during one of the Laser races. He quickly climbed back aboard and continued sailing. Three "crash" boats were on hand to pluck sailors from the icy river and right the yachts.

PHOTOS BY STEPHEN DUNN | SDUNN@COURANT.COM