

Keeping Warm Important for Frostbite Sailors

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suits, knit hats and earmuffs, wet suits and dry suits. Some even managed to stay dry. The less-fortunate got a dunk in an icy river.

"I weigh 50 pounds more in all these clothes," a woman in red said as she walked down the dock. About the only part of her body not covered by at least one layer of clothes was the tip of her nose.

At noon, the sailors gathered in a circle for a pre-race skippers' meeting in front of the Essex Corinthian Yacht Club. Some sipped cold beers. Others threw snowballs in a parking lot.

"This is a study in insanity," one said.

An official of the Frostbite Yacht Club explained the position of the buoys that would mark the race course.

"If you look down and see pavement," he said, "you've done something wrong."

The Frostbite Yacht Club celebrated its 50th anniversary three years ago, and some sailors have been racing in the 10-week Sunday series for decades.

Chris Field of Noank has been competing in the pre-spring races for 22 years.

"There have been worse days than this one," Field said as he prepped his boat. "This day is a nice day."

Inland temperatures at Essex hovered near the freezing mark. Winds on the Connecticut River gusted to 20 knots. Water temperature varied from 34 to 36 degrees, depending on where the measurements were taken. If Sunday's race had been held three days earlier, the sailors would have looked out on a river covered by ice.

Ice or strong winds can cause problems. But races aren't postponed by sleet or snow.

"We've sailed when it's been snowing," Field said. "We've sailed when it's been snowing a lot. Ice on the boat can be a problem, but the snow itself isn't. Last year when we finished racing, there were icicles



Paula Bronstein / The Hartford Courant

A group of sailors bunch together on their Laser sailboats Sunday as the Frostbite Yacht Club starts its spring series on the Connecticut River.

hanging from the bow."

The boat Field rigged was a wedding gift from his wife, Vicki, and this was their first race in the new purchase. She serves as his crew.

"I guess they would postpone a race if there were ice flows on the river," Vicki Field said. "That could cause a problem. But otherwise, it's not so bad. It's no worse than sitting on a chairlift."

A field of 59 sailboats raced Sunday. The fall racing series sponsored by the Frostbite Yacht Club drew 112 boats at its first race in October, when the weather was still warm. The field dwindled each Sunday as the weekly series slid into winter.

Single-handed Lasers, two-man

Laser II's, Blue Jays and Interclub dinghies comprised the four-class field Sunday, and though fashion was left to the discretion of the individual sailors, life jackets were mandatory. The Blue Jays and Interclub dinghies drew most of the attention from the four crash boats that patrolled the race course. The crash boats were strategically positioned, not only to pull sailors from the cold water in case a sailboat capsized, but two of them were equipped with pumps to facilitate refloating.

The Lasers, on the other hand, could be quickly righted, even by the solo sailors, many of whom took more than one dip in the Connecticut River. So low the freeboard clear-

ance on the Lasers, the racers all wore wet suits or dry suits because their bodies were wet all the time, even when sailing fully righted.

One Laser skipper capsized within 12 feet of the committee boat at the starting line, and he looked up and shook his head.

"This just isn't my day," he said.

Another boat was aptly named *Icicle*, with a home port of Essex, and another was skippered by Jim Gibbs of Old Lyme. Gibbs breezed by the committee boat wearing only a short-sleeved T-shirt under his life jacket.

It was debatable whether the starters on the bow of the committee boat or the scorers on the stern faced

harsher conditions.

A stiff wind buffeted the bow where Stan Horan of Essex, Sandy Poindexter of Madison, Neal O'Connell of Glastonbury, Bob Frech of Old Saybrook and Mike Lennon of Stonington sent off the racing classes with their timed starts. A cooler of cold beer — stacked on ice, no less — received little attention.

Mary-Lawrence Sinclair of Niantic, Debbie Krampf of Chester, Sharon Jones of Wallingford, Jenney Libby of Essex, Bobbi Johnstone of Madison and Sandy Bragdon of Stonington huddled in the committee boat stern, where they recorded the racers' order at the finish. A Thermos jug containing a homemade hot-

rum toddy concocted by Johnstone helped ward off the cold, and it was gone by the time the last sailboat finished.

Bragdon was in this race for eight years until she moved onto the committee this winter.

"It's exhilarating out there sailing," she said. "It's unbelievably stimulating, and there's no better exercise, believe me.

"The work on one of those sailboats is incredible ... it's in the neighborhood of 250 deep-knee bends. There's nothing like it, but it feels so good when you finish.

"On the other hand, when you're on the committee boat, you can't lose."



Paula Bronstein / The Hartford Courant

Gary Orkney of Mystic, left, and Tucker Bragdon of Stonington sail toward a buoy.

Opening Series a Real Icebreaker

Keeping Warm Rates High For Frostbite Club Sailors

By TOMMY HINE
Courant Staff Writer

ESSEX — They came from Wethersfield and Wallingford, Suffield and Stonington, Guilford and Glastonbury, Niantic and Noank.

Most were members of the Eastern Connecticut Yacht Racing Association. All were members of the Frostbite Yacht Club — Connecticut River Squadron. And on the first Sunday in March they sail on the Connecticut River — no matter how bitter the cold.

There were serious and not-so serious sailors. Stonington's Rodney Johnstone, designer of the popular J-boats, was in the field. So was Essex' Britton Chance, designer of America's Cup 12-meters.

And a good candidate for mother-of-the-year honors was Sherrie Desmond of Glastonbury. She raced on Sunday with her daughter, Mary-Beth. Four years ago, Sherrie Desmond sailed in this series with her son, Tim, who raced on his own this year.

There were young racers and old racers and, though sailing expertise was important, keeping warm was foremost on their minds.

Their garb was as varied as their talent. They wore rubber surgical gloves and woolen mittens, ski parkas and diving suits, foul-weather gear and windsurfing



Diana Boyd of Milford is happy — and possibly a little cold — after a day at the races.

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