

Jan. 25, 2007

Hot Competition Comes with Cold Weather for These Sailors

By Marianne Sullivan
Courier Senior Staff Writer
ESSEX



The "Fair N Square," as this photograph clearly illustrates, is no sleek yacht. It does, however, serve as a quirky, working symbol for what is probably Essex's oldest yacht club, the Frostbite Yacht Club.

It is perhaps Essex's oldest yacht club, yet it has no clubhouse, no Commodore's Balls, "or any of the other stuff" sometimes associated with yacht clubs.

"What we have are diehard sailors who love the sport and the competition," says Bob Leary. As the commodore, he is explaining the lure and the longevity of the Frostbite Yacht Club.

On any given Sunday from the beginning of October to the first week in December, and then again from March through May, the diehard sailors who are the members of this "very, very basic" yacht

club are out racing on the Connecticut River.

Frostbite sailing on the river, according to the historical archives of the Frostbiters, began in March of 1933 at Essex.

"Commodore Hobart Ford of the Cruising Club of America led the way to Essex from the western end of the Sound, carrying a deck load of racing dinghies, Class A and B boats assembled from all over New England, and 22 skippers answered the starting gun... Nautical reporters covered the sport for major newspapers and wire services... This triumph inspired (Essex resident Walter) Rowe and friends to organize a

See HOT page 12

Hot Competition Comes with Cold Weather for These Sailors

Continued from page 4

permanent home for the regatta," the club's history says. So, first the Frostbite Dinghy Regatta and then, the organization of the Essex Yacht Club.

With that tradition, the club continued sailing until the outbreak of World War II. Rowe reintroduced frostbite racing in 1958, with help from the Essex and Pettipaug yacht clubs. It has been a fixture on the river ever since.

Leary explains, "It is cold

weather sailing. Our members are diehard sailors who really love the sport. On a typical Sunday afternoon during our racing seasons, there will be 30 to 35 boats in four different classes racing competitively on the river right off the Essex Yacht Club dock. We love it."

He adds, "Sailors go out because it is good, competitive fun. It is great racing. The river is very challenging because of the variable winds as well as the strong currents. The caliber of the people who

come out for frostbite sailing are, by and large, very good sailors, and that means the competition is very good. Most race competitively at other times in other places throughout the rest of the year."

Cold weather sailing, no matters how competitive, must also be safe, he says. There is the "30/30" rule. "We don't sail if the temperature is under 30 degrees or the winds is over 30 knots." And appropriate dress "for cover and for safety" is required.

Requirements for membership?

"Not really. Love sailing. Register," Leary says. He doesn't know exact membership figures. "Don't need to know," he explains.

But the Frostbite Yacht Club is not without its traditions. Its race committee boat, the "Fair N Square," is the most obvious.

"In the past it has been described as a looking like a large garden shed on a raft with an engine," Leary admits. "It is slow, and it is cumbersome, and it doesn't maneuver very well, but it gets the job done."

Believe it or not, the ungainly boat was one of two winners in this year's Trees in the Rigging