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Frostbite Fleets Meet Winter on the Sound

By RUTH ROBINSON

FOR most people, sailing is a summer pastime. But some die-hards extend the season, venturing out in the nastiest winter weather. Enthusiasts call this frostbite sailing, and the sport is popular on Long Island Sound.

One of the most active frostbite fleets sails from the Pequot Yacht Club in Southport. The sailors are out on the water every Sunday afternoon from the middle of November to the middle of April, racing in 9-foot 6-inch Dyer Dhows, dinghies with fiberglass hulls and wooden seats, masts and booms. Snow, sleet, rain and low temperatures do not deter them, as long as the harbor does not freeze over, which has not happened this winter. "There's a lot of esprit de corps," said Ted Jennings, founder of the Pequot program, now in its 25th season, and a fierce competitor. His attire on a recent Sunday was typical for Dyer Dhow racing -- corduroy pants tucked into rubber boots, a heavy wool sweater over a plaid flannel shirt, a parka, a wool cap, and a life preserver without which he would not be permitted to leave the dock. Safety is a primary concern at Pequot, he said. Should a boat capsize, as four or five do each month, the race is called off and a crash boat picks up the wet sailor, who is rushed ashore to dry out in front of a roaring fire in the clubhouse.

Two divisions sail every Sunday at the club. The less experienced sailors go out from 12:30 to 1:30 P.M., and the more competitive group races from 2 to 4 P.M., following United States Yacht Racing Union rules, modified to take into account the relatively short course, generally less than a mile.

Depending on how aggressive the race committee is, there can be anywhere from six to eight races in the two-hour span. There are usually more than 20 boats competing, never less than 15. Since the boats are identical in every detail, the race is a test of seamanship. Women make up a quarter of the 60 frostbite sailors at the 300-member Pequot club. On a fine Sunday, the racing attracts a crowd of spectators who watch the boats jockey for an advantageous position on the starting line, then take off at the sound of the starting horn.

Frostbite sailing is a sport that spans the ages from hot-shot teen-agers to seasoned sailors in their 70's. Bill Cargill, 35 years old, the officer of the day at Pequot on a recent Sunday, said that sailors like the club's 70-plus John Sherwood and Hugh Estes usually triumph in competition.

"They know the eddies, they know the current, they have the experience," he said. "I never win." 'Race With Your Wife'

The Dyer Dhows used by Pequot are the most popular frostbite boats on the Sound, followed by the 12-foot Interclub two-person dinghies. The Riverside, Milford and Norwalk Yacht Clubs and the Indian Harbor Club in Greenwich also sail the Dyer Dhow. But at Indian Harbor, use of the Interclub dinghy is on the increase, "because you can race with your wife or your girlfriend," explained Dave Lovelace, former president of the Frostbite Association there.

Increasing in popularity, especially among younger sailors, is the Laser, which is like a high-performance Sunfish, quite fast and athletic. Since it has only a small cockpit and a little strap to hold the feet, the sailor is in the water most of the time. Thus a dry suit of latex, which protects the body from the wrist to the neck, is the preferred attire.

The fleet at the Cedar Point Yacht Club in Westport is composed entirely of the Laser, "the most popular one-design boat in the world," said Chris Woods, who initiated the club's Laser program in 1982, when he was fresh out of college. On a good weekend, he said, 30 of the club's boats might be out. Upon occasion, Bruce Kirby of Noroton, designer of the Laser, joins the fleet sailing his own, called Laser No. 1.

The Essex Frostbite Yacht Club, which uses the Essex Yacht Club on the Connecticut River, includes Lasers in its fleet as does the Fayreweather Yacht Club of Bridgeport. Essex also sails Interclub dinghies, Blue Jays and the two-person Laser II's. Clubs Compete for Trophy

The Essex season runs from the beginning of October to the beginning of December and from the beginning of March to the end of April. From December to March, the freshwater river usually ices up, explained the club's commodore, David Dyson. Fayreweather also races a boat made by the members, the eight-foot Fayreweather pram dingy.

In addition to the regular Sunday racing, the clubs compete against each other. One of the first major regattas of the season is held in November at Mystic Seaport. The invitational Ice Cube Trophy event, initiated by Pequot 15 years ago, rotates among Cedar Point, Fayreweather and Milford. This year's meet will probably be held in March.

Mr. Woods, chairman of frostbite racing at Cedar Point, said the sport offers a good way to learn to sail and a fine opportunity for experienced sailors to hone their skills.

"It is the best way to practice," he said, "because of the amount of tactical incidence with shorter courses and more races."