

Shellback dinghies float Jamestown frostbiters

By Michaela Kennedy

Winter sailing, or fondly referred to in the Northeast as frostbiting, may strike many as a crazy sport; but on any given Sunday, dinghy races liven up the bleak waters of Narragansett Bay from late November to early April. No longer do local frostbiting fanatics need to travel across a bridge or up the inner bay to find a welcoming fleet of cold-weather sailors, for Jamestown has its own, the Shellback dinghy race series.

Three Jamestowners John Horton, John Quinn, and Dick Hutchinson used to frostbite in Newport, and lamented the lack of winter sailing in Jamestown. So they started a frostbiting fleet five years ago at East Ferry, and the group has been growing larger every year.

Horton explains the first rule of the fleet. "We decided that you needed to build your own boat," he says. The men joined a boat-making course held in New Bedford, and together they learned how to build their own Shellback dinghies from a kit. Joel White, a naval architect and boat builder from Brooklin, Maine, designed the Shellback, an 11-and-a-half-foot, shore-based casual sailing boat.

Wooden Boat magazine had someone create a kit for the White design, and the pieces to the boat come pre-cut, according to Horton. "There aren't many fittings on it," he notes, assuring that the design was simple enough for a beginner to assemble.

The fleet used to handle their own race committee, with each sailor taking a turn each week to do the timing for the starts. However, in the last three years, Dick Allphin has been the principal race officer for the winter series, timing the 3-minute starting sequence for each relay. "We do fairly short races, and get about five in," Allphin notes, pointing out that a 3-



Frostbite sailors on the bay. Photo by Nancy Logan

12-knot wind is considered a "premium window."

Another rule is that the fleet does not go out if the temperature is below 20 degrees or the wind is over 20 knots, says Horton.

Since the boats are not rightable, another rule is that no one leaves in a boat until the committee boat is on the water. Quinn says that only one boat in four years has tipped over. "He sailed right into the committee boat," he adds.

No tragedies have happened out on the frigid bay, but Horton recalls some mornings in winters past when the sailors chipped ice away from the boats so they could lift them off the dock into the water.

According to records at the Blunt White Library in Mystic Seaport, the Intercollegiate Yacht Racing Association traces the origin of racing back to the founding of yacht clubs and sailing associations in the late 19th century. Intercollegiate dinghy race series became popular in the early twentieth century, and Princeton University organized the first college fleet in 1934. Brown, Yale, and Harvard Universities also formed early clubs. Frostbiting soon became popular, planning regattas amidst the odds of bitter weather

and high winds.

Intercollegiate frostbiting continues to be popular near university populations along the Eastern Seaboard, but Conanicut Island boasts an older crowd. The age span of the sailors typically runs from 40 to 70. "We're just a bunch of old white guys," Horton chuck-

les. Anywhere from three up to 17 racers may show up between 10 and 10:30 a.m. on Sunday morning, and races usually start by 11 a.m.

The last rule of the fleet is everyone must meet after the race at East Ferry Deli for a coffee and a chat. After all, says Ward Esaak of www.sailing.about.com, this is a social gathering. "Don't neglect to buy a round at the bar, even if it's hot chocolate," is one of his standard etiquette rules for frostbiters.

The men in the fleet all give a hearty thanks to Bill and May Munger, who let them keep the boats on the waterfront floats. "We go until Bill Munger needs his floats back sometime in April," Horton says.

Horton and Quinn note that not every boat on the dock is used, and they invite anyone who would like to try out Shellback frostbiting to come down on Sunday morning and join them.

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