

After 30 years, foolishness still distinguishes the island

By Adrienne Downing

Chris Powell, the Chief Fool of the Fools' Rules Regatta, is not at all surprised the event is still going strong after 30 years.

"I see people's reactions to it and I know they love it more every year," Powell said. "I get phone calls from out of state wanting to verify the date because some people actually plan their vacations around it."

Event founder Karl Smith could not have foreseen the popularity of the event he pitched to the Jamestown Taxpayer's Association in 1978 as a way to celebrate the island's tricentennial. After all, asking people in a city with a proud sailing tradition to throw marine logic to the wind and build boats out of completely unseaworthy materials must have seemed, well, foolish.

Smith had actually heard of a similar event being held in California, but put his personal stamp on it by penning the untraditional rules, such as, "No eye-catching beauties shall be used to distract and confuse competitors," and "In the event of a collision or violation of standard sailing rules, it is suggested that those involved fight it out amongst themselves or anyone else." Most of Smith's rules are still in use today.

One minor change in the rules came in the regatta's third year, when participants were required to wear life jackets. In the first two years of the race, the life preservers were actually forbidden.

The foolishness has taken place at the Town Beach at East Ferry each year, except in 1979 when it was moved to Potter's Cove because of a water quality issue at East Ferry.

Powell took the Chief Fool torch from Smith in 1981, after passing a rigorous examination process.

"Karl approached me and asked if I would like to take over, and I have no idea why I said yes, but I did and I have loved it every year since," he said.

The race was taken over by the Fools' Rules committee when the taxpayers' association disbanded in 1984. After being approached by the committee, the Jamestown Yacht Club took over sponsorship of the event in 1989, an association which committee member Candy Powell describes as "win-win" for both entities.

As Chief Fool, Powell has seen many funny, crazy, zany, and bad examples of naval architecture, but he said two stories

stand out in his mind from the last 26 years.

"Probably one of the best theme things I have ever seen was very early on in the history of the race. Group of guys did a Fruit of the Loom theme," Powell said. "They had to get permission to use their logo, but they all came out dressed as one of the fruit guys."

He described how one of the ingenious sailors was covered in purple balloons and purple tights to portray the grapes and how another wore bright yellow tights to be the banana.

"The best part of the whole thing was that they used a huge pair of men's underwear as the sail," he said.

Another year, he said, someone decided to use a big block of ice as their sailing vessel.

"We were just getting ready to start the class 2 race when this big truck pulls up and unloads this massive block of ice," Powell said. "The only problem was that the wind had changed and the starting line had been moved from the south to the north end of the beach. By the time he pushed that block of ice from one end of the beach to the other, it had melted and there went his boat."

Although dressing up, playing the fool and embarrassing people seems like reason enough for Powell to stay in his current role, he said it is the enjoyment that he sees in others faces that keep him coming back year after year.

"This is a thing that anyone can do and have a ball with, it doesn't cost a thing, is a family event and is very positive," Powell said. "People laugh at themselves and have a jolly, happy, fun time. As long as they do that and it remains a free and easy thing to do, I will be back."

This year's Fools' Rules Regatta will take place this Saturday, Aug. 18. The cannon will go off at 9 a.m. to signal the beginning of construction, and the races will commence at 11 a.m.

For official rules and registration information, visit www.jyc.org and click on the Fools' Rules link.



Foolishness on the bay

Racers in last year's Fools' Rules Regatta headed toward the finish line at East Ferry. This year's event begins Saturday at 9 a.m.

Photo by Andrea von Hohenleiten

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