

Boaters perfect the fine art of sailing - Weekly races give Saratoga Lake club members chance to hone their skills

BY JASON SUBIK Gazette Reporter, Daily Gazette, Monday, 9/6/10

A windy day on Saratoga Lake is either a great day for sailboat racing or an excellent chance for a sailor to go swimming, depending on who you talk to.

“It was tons of fun out there,” John Howe, 16, said after finishing two races on his 13-foot Laser sailboat.

Howe and his family recently joined the Saratoga Lake Sailing Club. The club hosts sailboat races every Sunday and Wednesday evening from May 15 through Oct. 15.

The Hudson family, who normally race a three-man, 17-foot Thistle sailboat at the club, decided to stay off the water Sunday. John Hudson, 75, his son David Hudson, 49 and David’s son Peter Hudson, 16, are often winners of the Saratoga Lake Sailing Club races. They credit their victories and their caution to hardearned experience, starting with patriarch John Hudson’s more than 60 years of sailboat experience.

“Conditions like this are somewhere between fun and terrifying,” John Hudson said with a grin while looking out at the cloudy sky above the lake. “There’s a very real chance you’re going to end up swimming, if you make a mistake.”

Tony Bianchini, commodore of the Saratoga Lake Sailing Club, said the club is made up of 175 families and has been in operation for 53 years. From among those members, an average of about 25 sailboats participate in each of the club’s races. Bianchini said the club awards first, second and third prize winners at the end of the season for each of several sailboat types as well as an overall champion from among all the different types of sailboats. The races are usually about a half-mile long triangle, with different size boats racing at the same time but receiving a five-minute staggered start.

Bianchini said racing is both an art and a science, and attracts both scientists and artists for that reason. For all of the many skills needed to be an effective sailor the sailor’s “feel” for the wind and the water always play an important role in victory, defeat and capsizing.

After 13 years of sailing, Bianchini said he’s becoming a middle-of-the-pack performer in the weekly races in his 16-foot Kestrel.

“There are mathematics involved. You have to figure out the angles of the wind, the marks that you’re shooting for, other boats in the water, whether you’re taking their wind or they’re taking yours,” he said. “My first couple of years of doing that I was sure as heck coming in last. Now I’m in the middle. Even more than figuring all those things out, it’s more about developing that feel for it.”

When the Hudsons sail, the three men work like a well-oiled machine. David Hudson steers the boat from the rear, John Hudson operates the jib and the parachute-like spinnaker sail, and young Peter Hudson manipulates the spinnaker pole.

“If you look at the finish, the people in the front, most of them, have been sailing at least 20 years. The people in the back have been sailing less than five years and everybody else is in between,” David said.

John Hudson said experience is crucial to effective sailboat racing.

“In the first part of the race, the boat is heading directly into the wind and the boat won’t go directly into the wind so you have to go back and forth, and where you go will make a difference,” he said.

This summer, Peter Hudson volunteered as an assistant instructor at the Saratoga Lake Sailing Club’s beginners sailing class. The class had 50 children and 60 adults. He said he took the course himself when he was younger. He hopes to move up to a full-time paid instructor position when he turns 18.

“While I was out there helping with the course, I would say I was improving my skills,” he said.

Kathy Warlow, the mother of John Howe, said one of the reasons she brought her three children to the Saratoga Lake Sailing Club was the many opportunities for racing the club offers.

“Their youth program here is growing, and we would like for more kids to get involved with the racing,” she said. “This is a very good Laser group here, and the Thistle is excellent as well. We would love for more young families to come here and get involved with the racing.”

More information about membership in the Saratoga Lake Sailing Club is available at the group’s website, www.sailsaratoga.org.



BARRY SLOAN/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER John Howe of Saratoga, 16, sails from the Saratoga Lake Sailing Club on Sunday. The club has 175 families as members and runs races for its members twice a week from May to October.



BARRY SLOAN/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER John Howe prepares his boat before sailing on Saratoga Lake on Sunday.