
Off Soundings sailors will go no matter how big the blow
Two-day race to and then around Block Island starts Friday off Watch Hill with 132 boats scheduled to compete.

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For seasoned sailors, the farther out you are, the better it gets. And Friday and Saturday's 72nd annual Off Soundings Club Spring 2009 race series will begin, no matter what Mother Nature stirs up.

Regional racers in the invitation-only series will start two days of competition off Watch Hill, racing to Block Island on Friday and around the island Saturday.

"And hell would have to freeze over for us to cancel," said Bill Loweth, skipper of Brer Rabbitt III and this year's OSC Commodore.

These are not the words of a cocksure boater, but rather an experienced sailor who, like many in the 500-member strong club, has raced in this series and in these waters for decades. This race is a preview of Block Island race week, and for some, like Stonington's Rod Johnstone, a pretrial for his newest thoroughbred, the J-95.

Fleets run from 115 to 165 boats sailing in 10 or more classes; this year there are 132.

"Thirty years ago, when I first joined Off Soundings, there were more than 280 boats at the starting line, and that slowly died off. But back then, the starting line was wild," said Loweth.

Participation in the Off Soundings Race series is by invitation only for safety reasons, said Loweth. Given the large fleet sizes, exposed waters, and difficult weather conditions in which races are often sailed, the Off Soundings Club wants to know the experience and skill level of competitors before they're on the course. So a non-member can be invited to join the race by two club members who are familiar with his sailing ability and experience.

"Our entry process is pretty lengthy and demanding because we want to be sure you have competency. It can get to 50-55 knots over the deck and it's truly up to the skipper and skipper alone as to whether to race, whether to cancel, or to continue with reduced sail," said Loweth.

Boats register with a handicap (PHRF — performance handicap racing fleet), which is like a golf handicap but in seconds per mile. In addition, boats are given a percent penalty (PE), Loweth explained, so that if a boat wins a race, it receives a 15 percent penalty if it takes first again in the next two-race series; if it finishes second, it gets a 10 percent penalty if it repeats the second place finish; and 5 percent for third place.

"It's an effort to make it so everyone can win a trophy," Loweth said.

Saturday's series race will begin near Block Island, and the course is typically an around-the-island race. Fall series racers start in New London and head to a point in Gardiner's Bay, Long Island. During the series, sailors navigate beyond the 100-fathom shallow water curve — officially called

“off soundings” because in earlier maritime days, the term was applied to a vessel in water deeper than could be sounded with a sounding lead.

It’s as much the company as the competition that entices sailors back onto the water for Off Soundings series races. Generations of sailors from the same family have raced with and against one another.

Jack Washburn of Stonington will race this weekend, as he has for nearly 40 years. He crewed for his father, and has raced with his brother, wife Barbara, son Jay, and nephew Brad.

“I hope we can go for a few more years ... some of us old sailors who are still around are still at it and enjoy it — though we’ve entered the nonspinnaker class. It’s good to race with family — sailing is a family deal,” he said.

Washburn will skipper “Our Tern” and said he’ll keep an eye out for his nephew Brad in “Corona.”

“But Rod Johnstone keeps making boats to beat us all!” he said.

Another family boat will be raced by the Pecks of Niantic: Norm Peck and sons David and Norm Peck III, who have sailed together for years.

“In my class, C-5, the Pecks, in ‘Spirit,’ are our nemesis,” said Commodore Loweth jovially.

One reason sailors love this series, which is run in the same waters each year, is that they can learn the vagaries and patterns of wind, tide and current —not to mention the racing styles of other skippers.

“The competition can get pretty fierce and you start understanding the psyche that goes on in each skipper’s head. After many years of racing, you begin to understand their inner workings,” Loweth said.

Sportsmanship runs deep with members, so protests are as rare as canceling a race due to weather.

“If it was to blow 30-40 knots on Friday, we’ll still be racing,” Commodore Loweth said.