

SPORTS

Keeled over: a landlubber's first sailing experience

A sailing man, I am not. I've been on boats before, but of the motorized variety: pontoon, speed and mail.

But sailing? I'd never been.

So when the Lake Geneva Keelboat Club's Commodore Patrick Evans offered me a first-hand experience aboard one of the boats in the club's fleet during their race last Wednesday, I didn't know what to expect.

Originally, I was supposed to be just a passenger, taking photos and making sure that I wasn't in the way of sailors who actually knew what they were doing.

But when the second mate canceled just hours before the race, my learning experience became much more hands-on as I was thrust into active duty.

My first faux pas came the second I stepped on the boat as Captain Doug Perks eyed my footwear, asking if I brought any other shoes.

Apparently dark-soled footwear is a big

no-no on the high sea – er, choppy lake, as black shoes are infamous for scuffing boats' decks and gunwales.

So my shoes spent the trip tucked away in the ship's cabin as I clambered back and forth across the deck barefoot; an especially toe-chilling first lesson in sailing.

My second lesson came by example, courtesy of the first mate Marty Cielez, spelled M-A-R-T-Y as he repeatedly reminded me when he discovered I was writing an article about the club.

"Always bring a lighter," Marty said turning out his pockets, lamenting the two, now useless, packs of cigarettes that he brought aboard.

I think that translates to always be prepared, albeit prepared with something that can light a smoke.

Once we reached the starting line, Doug and Marty showed me how to tighten and loosen the mainsail while moving from starboard to port and back as we practiced

coming about – turning, for the nautically naïve such as myself.

A couple of neighboring boats noticed the fresh blood on board as we made our practice runs and asked who this week's ringer was.

Marty told them I was a sailor visiting from Australia and I made sure to spout a couple "good day, mates," in my best Aussie accent for good measure.

And for the record, best does not mean good.

Moments later the gun sounded and the five minute timer to prep for the race started.

Our boat, named "Life's a Dance", is inscribed with the saying "sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow."

Very true, but it turns out that when you're racing with an inexperienced second mate working the mainsail, you tend to follow much more than you lead.

Despite being behind for most of the race and losing the feeling in my feet, I found myself mesmerized by the weaving and slashing nature of the race as our three man crew zigged and zagged from buoy to buoy for more than an hour.

More than once I found myself white knuckling the railing and bracing for a collision as opposing racers skimmed past our bow, yet before I knew it the race was finished and I found myself wishing we could dip and dodge around a few more boats.

After the race, the club congregated at the newly refurbished Lake Geneva Yacht Club and I spoke to Bob Winter, one of the keelboat club's veteran sailors who has logged more than 50 years of sailing experience.

I told him that this was my first time sailing and asked what he thought was the most important thing to learn for a sailor just starting out.

He replied by asking if I'd had fun and I told him I did.

"That's the most important thing," Winter said.

The next thing to do is find a good crew to learn from, he added, but first have fun and the learning will follow.

Wise words, but with all due respect, I think I may have discovered a different golden rule on Wednesday.

For the sake of the feeling in your feet, don't wear dark-soled shoes.



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Keelboat/A close knit sailing community

The only missing ingredient for the virtual yacht club was the virtual clubhouse. The group often went out to dinner after racing, but they wanted to find a place accessible by boat so they wouldn't need to sail all the way back across the lake after finishing their race.

That's why Evans approached Bill Gage, owner of Gage Marine and Pier 290.

"He had no warning, I just stopped in," Evans said. "He was on the edge of his chair for half an hour."

Evans pitched the idea of turning Pier 290 into the group's official meeting place, because it's the only restaurant on Lake Geneva accessible by beach. In return, Pier 290 is guaranteed a wealth of business each week as the club comes in off the water, famished and looking for sustenance.

"It's a lovely place," Evans said, noting that Pier 290's fire pits and beach are great for when it's warm, and on less agreeable nights the bar works just as well.

After striking a deal, Gage mentioned that he'd like to use the Lady of the Lake to sponsor one of the club's five racing series in July.

Clearwater Outdoor is also sponsoring one of the club's series.

"This is news, because this can be used all over the world," Evans said. "Everybody who doesn't have a yacht club can cut a deal with a restaurant that's on the water that has a place to put boats and you can use the launch ramp."

The second part of Evans' virtual movement is to instill multiple classes of watercrafts used in races, not just keelboats.

He said the idea came to him while racing in Naples, Florida, over the winter. Lake Geneva used to run only one race a day, he said, but in Naples, they ran as many as four with a myriad of different watercrafts competing.

So he imported the idea to Geneva Lake, starting a tradition of holding two races every Wednesday instead of one.

Now, the start of the keelboat races are quickly followed by a heat of scows, boats without keels, racing behind, and Evans said he doesn't intend for the changes to stop there as he hopes to include wind surfing as early as next summer.

"Hopefully this time next year you'll be able to come out and see the keelboats start, then the scows and then the real exciting part is when the kite boarders and the windsurfers start."

And to keep things fair, the club has developed a handicap system similar to that of golf. The officials in charge of clocking the races add and deduct time based on the length and speed of a boat, so no one has an advantage outside of skill and practice.

Another facet to the virtual yacht club is that they've begun relaying race results to Pier 290 via cellphone. This way the finish times are posted before the racers even make it to shore, letting them know exactly where they ranked in the night's standings.

"It's revolutionary," Evans said.



DAVID MICHELS/REGIONAL NEWS

THE LAKE GENEVA KEELBOAT CLUB races in almost any weather, regardless of impending rain. They only postpone races in case of lightning or lack of wind.

"There's clubs, you finish the race and you don't even know until next Saturday what happened. It could be a close race, so this makes it instantaneous."

Evans acknowledged that not all of these ideas are his, and gave credit where credit was due.

"I'm a catalyst, I'm a change agent," he said. "But it's not just me personally, my ideas."

It was Vice Commodore Doug Perks' idea to utilize the race committee and have them score the races on the water. Kevin Johnson, a member of the committee, then came up with the idea to beam the results live with wifi.

"This stuff that you're hearing, they're going to be doing it in Dubai. Nobody's thought of it before, but it helps everybody," Evans said.

And as for the racers, Evans said that you can't beat the camaraderie and they're always looking for more people to join in.

"People really should come out and see this because it's a lot of fun," Evans said. "And if you race, I warn everybody it's really addictive. The first time you race you're just going to go 'I really like this, I didn't know this existed.'"

He likened the start of a race to fractals in mathematics, on the edge of chaos.

"They make no sense to you, being somebody who might not race, they make no sense," he said. "Then, with a minute to go, they all flop, they're like minnows and they're all going for the line."

From there, Evans called it a combination of chess and physics, with all of the pieces moving across the board.

"You go to start the race and you go 'OK, we're going to do it this way,' and then a boat comes out of nowhere, blocks my way. You can't start that way, you better have a plan B."

The races last between an hour and an hour and a half and the boats spend that time weaving back and forth, from buoy to buoy.

And only two things can shut down a race: lightning or an absence of wind.

"If it's gusting over 20 knots steady, that's when they'll probably elect to say 'hey, do you still want to race?' And most people say yes and we still race," he said, laughing.

Evans said that the sailing community is close knit, similar to that of motorcycle riders, and it's important to him that everyone who wants to race feels welcomed.

"If they have a boat, doesn't matter if it's a keelboat or a scow, I will personally go out with them and show them how to race," he said. "And I'm not a yeller, I'm more of an instructional teacher."

"I always ask people, show me how you do it now and then watch how fast we're going. And then I'll show you how I'd do it, and I bet you 500 bucks that I'll get the boat to go faster."

"And once they learn and they do their first race, there's no going back. I'm just telling you, that's how fun it is."



CHRIS SCHULTZ/REGIONAL NEWS

SANDLOT HEROES, from left rear, Kaleb Watrous, Christian Johnston, Tyler Satterstrom, Bradley Kinsch. Front row from left, Wyatt Quaintance, Kayli Willett, Devon Watrous and Brandon Watrous. They received their uniform T-shirts courtesy of a grateful Dream Team, after these youngsters agreed to play after a team that was signed up to play in the Dream Team tournament on July 8 cancelled.

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Dream Team

Afterwards, asked about his team's accommodating style of play, Kaleb just shrugged. "This sounds sad, but I think some of our players were really trying," he joked.

Swanson said the Dream Team mustered 68 players on Wednesday, with 40 players on the two opposing teams.

The Dream Team games are like other summer league games.

Coaches tell kids to hustle and keep their eyes on the ball. Teammates cheer and parents capture moments on their cell phones.

In 2002, Swanson, now a retired Lakeland School teacher, was a driving force in getting the Dream Team program on the playing field.

In the first season, there were only 10 players.

Swanson once said he created the Dream Team league because he realized there wasn't a place on the diamond for kids who attended Lakeland.

Swanson said he wanted to get his kids involved in the game, where they could yell, cheer and have a good time.

Last summer, Swanson's work with the Dream Team was recognized by the Milwaukee Brewers for the Community Achiever Award.

He threw out the first pitch at Miller Park in front of more than 25,000 fans.

Swanson still shows up, puts on a Dream Team T-shirt and shouts encouragement to the players.

"You're a great player," Swanson told one of the Dream Teamers.

However, Swanson said he relies more and more on the four coaches and 40 or so high school and middle school student volunteers to really run the program.

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