

Sailing Widens Its Net In a Quiet Harbor

By James Lomuscio

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Magnet Schools and Programs Expanding

In Orange, magnet-grade parents make up a third of those in the district that oversees the work to be formally dedicated on Saturday.

Submarine Veterans Remember Their Own

By BRADLEY A. WOODS

Whether they were submarine veterans who served in the United States Navy or the United States Coast Guard, they have a common bond: they served on submarines. And they are remembering their own.

Sailing Widens Its Net In a Quiet Harbor

By JAMES LOMUSCIO

Westport Harbor is a quiet harbor, but it is also a harbor that is widening its net. The harbor is home to a community of sailors, and the harbor is also home to a community of families.

Two 18-foot boats serve up to 15 families.

Archie Stephan is out of the community sailboats in Westport Harbor.

Westport Takes to an Olympian

By BRADLEY A. WOODS

Like a champion, Westport has taken to the water. The harbor is home to a community of sailors, and the harbor is also home to a community of families.

Yanick Murray, Pierre Gauthier, Maudie Johnson (in blue shirt) and Matthew Katz (in red) of Mr. Murray's playing basketball in Westport.

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WHITE mansions border the quiet harbor at Southport, evoking a prosperous seafaring past. The harbor, home to the Pequot Yacht Club and expensive boats whose owners have virtual lifetime mooring rights, is one of the most scenic on Long Island Sound. But it is also considered one of the most exclusive. And therein lay a problem for the Town of Fairfield, in whose borders it lies. If the town wanted to continue to receive Federal financing for dredging, it had to increase public access. "The Federal Government thought that this was a private, blue-blood harbor," said Robert Stephan, a Fairfield resident, as he and his family prepared for an evening sail.

About four years ago, Clark DuBois, a former resident of Fairfield and a member of the Pequot Yacht Club, tried to soften that image of exclusivity by proposing a concept not unfamiliar to the boating world: community sailing. For a fee comparable to that of Y.M.C.A. membership, people who could not afford boats or who did not want the bother of ownership could sail out of the same harbor as all those expensive yachts.

The Town of Fairfield's Parks Department dismissed the idea. A large community sailing program, it said, would overcrowd the harbor, changing its character. Also, there was not enough parking at the yard boaters use to get to their moorings. Two years later, Mr. Stephan pitched the same idea to the Parks Department. "It was the most acrimonious meeting I ever had," recalled Mr. Stephan, who had moved to Fairfield from New Jersey several years earlier. "I thought I was going to be run out of town on a rail. They said we would destroy their hamlet. People with moorings worried about neophyte sailers punching holes in their boats."

Ted Cart, a recreational sailer, said: "They anticipated the membership in the first year to be 1,000. They were looking for any excuse." There was also resentment that the community sailing program might push ahead of boat owners who had been on a long waiting list, some for more than 20 years, for moorings, Mr. Stephan said.

While novel to Fairfield, community sailing has been around for more than 50 years. There are currently about 1,000 such programs in the nation, according to the United States Sailing Association in Newport, R.I. The largest one is in Boston, where 150 boats serve more than 5,000 people. And in Connecticut, there are 27 community sailing programs in coastal communities from Greenwich to Mystic and along the Connecticut River as far north as Hartford.

In Fairfield, size was the initial issue. The program's proponents had hoped to have at least a dozen 18-foot sailboats moored at a pier to be built at the end of the dock. Lobstermen and commercial fishermen who used that end of the harbor expressed fear that inexperienced sailers might cut their lines.

So Mr. Stephan and supporters dropped their grand plans, reducing the number of craft to just two 18-foot keel boats to serve a maximum of 75 families. From May through October each family could reserve at least two hours of sailing a week.

Armed with the more modest proposal, Mr. Stephan approached Fairfield's First Selectman, Paul Audley, in February 1994. "It was obvious that it was going to be a small-scale, high-quality operation," Mr. Audley said, "and it really created no impact for the facility and surrounding neighbors. This offered the town the opportunity for community sailing and training. But we didn't have to put in the capital or deal with capital replacement costs."

Shortly afterward, the Parks Department and the Recreation Department gave their approvals and a one-year pilot program was born.

"The opposition seemed to drop away after the program was started and all the fears were proved 100 percent unjustified," said Roy Barnhart, now president of Fairfield Community Sailing, an ongoing program that was officially approved by the town in May.

A nonprofit private group operating under the auspices of the town, Fairfield Community Sailing currently has 37 families enrolled, each paying an annual \$395 membership fee. The money goes for payments on two boat loans of \$12,000 each as well as for storage, maintenance and advertising costs. As membership grows, Mr. Barnhart anticipates even having to hire a dock attendant on weekends.

"It passed this year with no problem," said Gerry Lombardo, director of Fairfield's Recreation Department. "It's a good way for novices and experts alike to have an opportunity to sail if they don't own a boat themselves."

"Of course, when there's anything new there's a lot of concern, like how much traffic it would generate," he added. "We oversee it in making sure that they adhere to the rules."

In addition to limiting the program to two boats, the town also restricted membership to Fairfield residents, a provision Fairfield Community Sailing does not favor but has accepted. Mr. Barnhart said the restriction was inconsistent with the program's philosophy that the primary requirements are a love of sailing, being able to pass a sailing-proficiency test and a minimum age of 18.

"It is possible that we will need to go outside the town to fill the program if we cannot get enough Fairfield residents to pay for the boats," Mr. Barnhart said. "If that happens, we'll go back to the town and ask."

Mr. Barnhart is also not ruling out the possibility of buying more boats if more space should become available. "We'll keep our ears open for any changes in the harbor so we can expand our program," he said. "You have to realize this is a resource," he said of the harbor, "and you want to maximize that resource without destroying it."

Meanwhile, with just two boats the program has run smoothly, Mr. Barnhart said. "There has not been a single time when we have not had a slot open for somebody wanting to sail, even on the weekend." On a recent Thursday evening, Mr. Cart, his wife, Susan, and their 15-year-old daughter, Kristy, set sail in the harbor. Mr. Cart, a Fairfield Community Sailing member who volunteers his time taking reservations, talked about the importance of the program in a town where hectic work schedules can leave people little time for the rigors of owning their own boats.

"I used to sail out of Rowayton," he said. "I had a 30-foot sloop. But we as a family wanted to become involved in the community and sailing and to teach Kristy how to use the boats. It's important for us as a family."

Anne Stephan, Mr. Stephan's wife, stressed the financial advantage. "You're basically time sharing a boat," she said. "It's an affordable way to sail."

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