

ker was hoisted, catching a gust of wind and speeding the boat along.

"It's a team sport, but you don't get injured like you do in basketball, hockey or football," said crewman Barker. "It's mental exercise. It gives you a chance to get out before you go home and burn off steam."

The sails are shifted to make best use of the wind in procedures called tacking and jibing. Gobel called out the orders, crisply, firmly. When the game was afoot the crew was serious about its business. When the procedure went well, Gobel was free with his compliments. As the boat returned under gentle wind, the crew had time to sit, talk and enjoy the feeling of fresh cool air and spray.

Coming on another race boat, the *Rage*, the crew was set for the challenge. Hands and feet moved swiftly to trim and turn sail for a racing posture. Over on the *Rage* the crew frantically leaped to life, turning winches and pulling ropes to get into position. The two sleek crafts cut an arc through the water, the *Natalie J.* taking the inside course. The race was soon given up, a show of bravado by the two boats.

The big race begins July 19. The Saturday races are fun, the regular games of summer. And Bayview holds an overnight race and the Windsor Yacht Club holds an overnight. But these are all preparation for July 19, the annual Bayview Yacht Club Port Huron to Mackinac race. This and the similar Chicago to Mackinac are the major Great Lakes sailing events of the summer. Racing crews point for those races.

A week before the race, the *Natalie J.* will be taken up to Port Huron where the O'Niels will try to get a good berth. Sails will be carefully folded and delivered so they come out just as they should. Natalie O'Neil and the other wives will begin preparing food on Tuesday, a well-fed crew being a happy crew.

A diver with a soft cloth will go below and carefully clean the boat's bottom. The bottom has a special smooth paint that causes water to sheet against it. O'Neil Jr. says that paint, a smooth unguaged bottom surface, is 25 percent of a boat's speed.

A safety inspection is made to be sure the boat has all the required safety items — life rafts, man-over-board poles, flares, safety harnesses. A check will be made before and after the race to be sure these are on board.

"Boats that participate in the Port Huron to Mackinac race are the safest boats on the water. Nobody cheats. Everything is backed up. Life comes first, no flag is worth winning for that," said O'Neil Jr.

This year the new *Natalie J.* has been reclassified to Class A in the Performance Handicap Rating Fleet. It will be competing with larger and swifter boats than the crew has been used to. Each boat, in addition to being classified, is also handicapped based on boat size and other factors to determine potential speed. The handicaps are computed in seconds against competition.

The success of the *Natalie J.* may be tried this year with a new boat and new competition. But the crew hasn't always known success.

Phil O'Neil III grows expansive when he describes some of the setbacks that the crew has faced in the big race. In addition to last year's storm, a storm in 1981 made for a wet and rocky race.

The first year the boat was lost in a fog. The *Natalie J.* finished second to last.

"We didn't know where we were. We came in on the wrong side and saw these two other boats and tried to beat them in," O'Neil III said.

Then there was the time the boat was grounded. The crew had gotten off course and found themselves in shallow water, unable to move. A photographer on shore was able to get a shot of this most embarrassing moment.

The crew has learned a lot since then. With three victories under their belt, they are now going for their fourth and their third in a row.

Peter Gobel regaled the crew with funny stories as the light began to die on the Detroit River. A freighter came through the deep channel. The *Star of Detroit* set out into the drizzly night for a cruise. Small rowboats with outboards carried carp fishers into the murky green river. And other sailboats glided by as the *Natalie J.* returned to harbor and the crew returned to the warm soup of the Bayview.

The crew was pleased with the workout and with the expensive new toy. Tom Hillock said he liked the feel of it, that despite the extra length it was easier to work because of its shape.

The O'Niels were also pleased with the workout and ready to make a good run at their third in a row.

"This is a crew with sheer determination," said O'Neil Jr. "They will not give up. They are a good bunch who come out to win a race. They fight no matter what."

— Hugh Gallagher

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