

# —Ice sailing—

Continued from page 15

since he was 11 years old.

He is a successful racer too. He has won various ice-sailing regattas across the country and has finished as high as the top five in the Canadian Nationals, eighth in the North American competition and 14th in the world championships.

When not racing in an ice sailboat he's liable to be building one or selling one at his RS Ice Yachts/Coastline Styles store in Keego Harbor. The store is one of four Stack owns, including stores in Birmingham and Rochester (where it goes by the name West Coast Connection). The stores do double duty, offering ice sailboats and accessories in the winter and sailboards and accessories in the summer.

While ice sailing has some similarity to summer sailing, it offers challenges all its own, Stack said.

Both types of sailors have to learn how to judge where the winds are coming from and when to pull in or let out the sail.

But the major difference between the two forms of sailing can be summed up in one word — speed.

A summer sailboat has to push against the powerful inertia of the water. But three super-sharp skate blades are the ice boat's only contact with anything more solid than air.

"It's about three times faster than regular sailing," Stack said. "You can't believe how fast you can accelerate."

"You're out there, and it's perfectly quiet. You're going so fast, and there's no noise. People don't believe how fast they really go. You go right alongside a snowmobile, and he's really going down the lake, and you're going right with him."

And unlike a waterbound sailboat, the ice sailboat's speed increases as the size of its sail decreases.

The wooden boats are anywhere from 141 to 147 inches long and 17½ to 21½ inches wide, with pliable masts and Dacron sails.

Stack has taken his DNs to three ice-sailing world championships, which alternate annually between North America and Europe.

Besides offering the chance to compete against the best in the world, these events let racers pick up tips on new techniques and strategies.

The Russians and Poles are the most advanced and serious competitors, Stack said.

"They're professionals, and they get paid by the government to race all year round."

"By doing it every day, they're continually working on all the little things. They've gotten down to taking the temperature of the ice so they can decide what type of runner will melt the ice faster."

**W**ith all that speed, the sport has its dangers.

"When two boats hit it sounds like a grenade going off," Stack said. "You can be on the other side of the lake, and you'll hear it."

Stack himself has had two of his own boats disintegrate underneath him, although he has never been seriously hurt.

The worst of the two accidents saw him thrown from the boat and dragged across the ice. While he was trying to stop his boat another boat hit him and dragged him even farther across the ice.

"Talk about being scared, I thought it was all over," Stack said.

Yet the dangers of ice sailing can be exaggerated, he said.

"My dad wouldn't let me play football; he thought it was worse. That's because he grew up with his dad with an ice boat, and he thinks it's the safest thing."

Most accidents occur during races, when the drivers are going all out to win.

"Everybody's pushing it to the limit. It's the guy who can push it to the limit the most."

Racers are required to wear helmets for protection. Most also wear goggles against the ice winds, but not Stack. He feels he can trim the sail better without goggles to interfere with his vision.

"When my eyes start watering I know I'm really moving," he said with a grin.

Ice sailors are a rare breed. It is estimated there are 1,500 to 2,000 active ice sailors in the United States, and perhaps 3,000 worldwide, according to Wind Surf magazine.

Stack competes in the largest class, in terms of numbers of competitors, the DN. DN stands for Detroit News, as the boats are based on a design that won a Detroit News ice-sailing competition in 1937.

**A**t the start of the race the competitors line up along the starting line standing beside their boats. At the gun, the sailors start running, then jump into the boats as smoothly as possible.

The racing has gotten more and more competitive in recent years, Stack said. The equipment has changed as sailors look for that one extra thing that will give them the edge over everybody else.

"People used to wear just regular boots. Then guys started using ice creepers, then golf rubbers with little spikes. Now it's to the point where they use track shoes."

Stack's dream is to win one of the major events, perhaps the Canadian Nationals or the North Americans. He gets plenty of practice racing on winter weekends with the Cass Lake Yacht Club, an informal group of ice sailors.

Since the ice has to be smooth in order to race, the club travels around to different lakes throughout Michigan and sometimes Ohio and Ontario in search of perfect conditions.

"If you want to be good you've got to travel a lot throughout the winter. You've got to go wherever there's good ice."

Operating his four stores kept Stack so busy last winter that he didn't have time to go to any of the major competitions, such as the world or national championships. But he hopes to break away more this winter.

In fact, if the ice is thick and glassy and the wind right, don't look for Robert Stack behind the counter.

He'll more than likely be behind the tiller of his ice boat, where silent solitude and speed are uniquely combined.



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