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Salty dogs

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cruiser for casual sailing. The next year, casual sailing gave way to racing and the purchase of the 35-foot boat that would win three Port Huron to Mackinac races.

"When you have a hobby of this sort, you stay away from the shrinks," O'Neil Jr. said.

The *Natalie J.* was named for O'Neil's wife. "This is a family operation or it won't be successful. The wives have to be enthusiastic about it," O'Neil said. After racing to Mackinac, the O'Neils set off for easy cruising on the North Channel.

Philip O'Neil III of Beverly Hills, who has a dental practice in Troy, began reading everything he could about sailing and the proper equipment and everything he could find about racing. He is the tactician for the *Natalie J.*

A crew is needed to operate a successful racing sailboat.

Jim Hoover of Birmingham, a partner in the Kimco computer company, handles the foredeck where he is responsible for handling headsails and the spinnaker. His is the wettest and most dangerous job. O'Neil Jr. said that Hoover came aboard as a college student and for the first two years shyly accepted everything he was told to do. "By the third year, he started to yell," O'Neil said.

David Otenberger, a 14-year-old Sterling Heights high school student with a maturity that belies his years, shares the tough foredeck duties with Hoover.

Tom Hillock of Yale, Mich., a loan officer at Farm Credit Services, handles the mast and halyards.

John Barker of Detroit, a photographer who operates Photo Staff Inc., takes care of the mainsail.

Al Gaiefsky of Dearborn, a vice president at Standard Federal Savings, is the head sail trimmer.

Greg O'Neil of Dowagiac works the cockpit and takes turns at the helm.

Ken Kerney of Traverse City, who works for Petrostar Oil and is O'Neil Jr.'s son-in-law, is the navigator.

O'Neil Jr. takes the helm and O'Neil III plots strategy.

Trim, trim, trim." Al Gaiefsky worked steadily at a winch to bring the sails in tighter. It was a new boat but the years of experience were easily transferred to this newer, longer, faster

Natalie J.

Over the winter O'Neil Jr. and O'Neil III became partners in a 41-foot racing boat, sell-

ing the successful and proud 35-footer to Ronald E. Sears.

On a cold, rainy Thursday afternoon crew members gathered to try out the new boat that the O'Neils had taken delivery on a week before.

The *Natalie J.* is docked at the Bayview Yacht Club on the Detroit River. The club sponsors the Port Huron to Mackinac race and its members are primarily racing sailors.

The *Natalie J.* and other boats race every Saturday from May to September in all kinds of weather except dead calm. Over the years the crew of the *Natalie J.* has borne away 85 flags designating a first, second or third in a racing event. The races are over an Olympic-style course set out in a pentagonal shape on Lake St. Clair.

The new boat features some of the latest equipment. Developed as a prototype by C&C Yachts of Toronto, the boat was owned for two years by the yacht company's president.

"It has a lot of fancy stuff we haven't used yet," said O'Neil III. "The mast is significantly different. It's bendable and can shape the sails better than with a stiff mast, but it's a lot harder to do it. You can go slower with a flexible mast if you don't turn it right, but a lot faster when it is turned right."

A central hydraulic system operates the tension of the stay wires that control the mast. Electronic instrumentation gives readouts on wind conditions, wind angle and wind strength.

A Loran is a sophisticated instrument for finding location and marking a course. An on-board computer digests this information to give suggested courses. A computer expert will be coming in to explain how to best use this equipment.

But all the fancy equipment is only as good as the crew that uses it. A crew that depends on each other feels safe.


"That's why you sail with the same crew all the time," said O'Neil III. "Everybody has to know what they're doing. We get calls all the time from people who think it would be fun to go racing."

But it's a lot of hard work. You have to know that you can rely on the guy on the other end to know what he's doing."

A four-cylinder diesel engine is used to take the *Natalie J.* out into the open water. On this practice run, Peter Gobel of North Sails is on board. An excellent sailor who bears resemblance to actor John Candy and shares Candy's sense of humor, Gobel is aboard, both to promote his sails and to help the crew fine tune their teamwork.


The boat cut swiftly through the water, heeling sharply to starboard. The cold spray barely fazed the crew as they worked quickly over the length of the boat pulling ropes by hand and with winches. A colorful red spinn-

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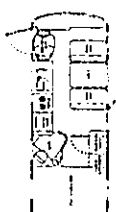


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