Sailing: Another way to enjoy Illinois lakes

Story By Deb Aronson
Photos By Adele Hodde

"Stuart was an adventurous little fellow and loved the feel of the breeze in his face and the cry of the gulls overhead and the heave of the great swell under him … 'This is the life for me!' Stuart murmured to himself. "What a ship! What a day! What a race!" (from Stuart Little by E.B. White)

From "Horatio Hornblower" to "Pirates of the Caribbean," sailing has always held a certain romance; with no engine, the sailor becomes adept at sailing in every kind of condition, from light to heavy wind, from smooth to choppy water, and, ultimately, to master or harness Mother Nature in all her moods.

To the landlubber this might be an unrequited romance; sailing looks complex and mysterious, something they cannot master. But, in reality, the fundamentals are fairly simple. To turn the boat to the right, push the tiller to the left; to turn the boat to the left, push the tiller to the right. To stop, turn the boat directly into the wind and let the sails go. An adult can learn the basics in a single lesson, but to improve after that it's like the punch line to the Carnegie Hall joke: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice."

Formal sailing programs help youngsters learn to sail and start many on a lifetime passion for spending time on the water.

Racing boats—a sport of diversity whether you are pushing yourself to the limits or the performance of your crew.

Lake Michigan (left and above) is only one of many lakes in Illinois that have sailing clubs.

The best way to get that practice is to join a sailing club and take part in the informal races that are held weekly. There are many active sailing clubs in Illinois beyond Lake Michigan. For example, there are clubs on Carlyle, Clinton and Springfield lakes, as well as on a bend of the Mississippi River known as Alton Lake. Many local clubs run their races either on Wednesday nights or Saturday mornings. This is not high-pressure or high-stakes racing: In this setting racing simply means—in the beginning anyway—sailing around a specific course marked by brightly colored buoys. By going around the course, novice sailors improve their steering and learn the racing rules; by sailing in all kinds of conditions they learn how to handle their boats; by doing it in a club racing setting there are more experienced sailors right there to both teach them and to bail them out (pun intended) if the need should arise.

"There is a lot of collegiality in racing," said Mike Pick, of the Island Bay Yacht Club on Lake Springfield. "Everyone wants everyone else to improve. They all want to help you out and are more than happy to answer any questions."

At most clubs sailors get together informally before and after racing to talk about what worked well out on the racecourse and what they learned.

"Why would a non-competitive person race?" said Nelson Laffey, who learned to sail in his 50s. "First of all, you are more likely to spend time learn-

Club racing is a great way to practice sailing in a casual, friendly setting.

(Photo by Doug Williams.)

(Photo by Doug Williams.)

ing on purpose than if you are just sailing around. For example, if you have two identical boats of the same one-design class and the other is passing you by, then you look at your sails and adjust them, you can even ask the other guy where his centerboard is. You try different things. On the other hand, if you are passing the other boat, then you know you are doing some things right."

Pick learned how to sail as a child, but it was only in the last 6 or 7 years that he began racing.

"People who know how to sail are intimidated by racing," he said. "But competing added a lot more fun to the sport for me. It's so much more fun than cruising around and letting the wind take you. In racing, the boat becomes part of you and sailing it is automatic. That means you can then pay attention to tactics and the wind conditions."

As Laffey explained, the best kind of racing is one-design, which simply means everyone uses an identical kind of sailboat, as opposed to having many types of boats and using a handicapping system. This head-to-head competition is the best way for sailors to learn what techniques help them go the fastest in which conditions.

Learning the ropes, and other equipment, is accelerated in a racing setting and makes sailing a pleasure.

There is a boat for every age and activity level. Some take just one person to sail, such as the Sunfish and the Laser. Some take as many as four or five. Some have spinnakers, those enormous, colorful parachute-like sails that are so photogenic. There are larger boats that take two or three people, such as the Lightning and the Flying Scot, both of which have spinnakers. There are other boats that are the same size but that don't have spinnakers, such as the JY 15 and the C Scow. Then there are boats that need even more crew, such as the E Scow, which is 28 feet long and has three or four sailors on board.

One of the best places to race sailboats in Illinois is at Carlyle Lake, in Carlyle. The club there, which was established in 1971, is a nationally renowned facility with a very active racing program. At Carlyle there are one-design fleets of Lightnings, Y Flyers, E Scows and Flying Scots. Races for these boats are held every Sunday.

While Carlyle is the largest, most organized sailing program outside of Chicago and Lake Michigan, there are other sailing clubs scattered throughout the state. For example, in Springfield, the Island Bay Yacht Club was established in 1935. Island Bay has a fleet of C Scows, JY15s, Lasers and Star boats. This club has more than 500 members.

(Photo by Doug Williams.)

Three Flying Scots get ready to "round the mark," the brightly colored buoy that marks the course.

What Sailboat is Right for You?

One-person boat, without spinnaker:
Laser: 14 feet long; one-person crew; single sail
Sunfish: same as above, but a slower boat and more stable

Two-person boat, without spinnaker:
J15: 15 feet long; two- or three-person crew; main and jib, no spinnaker
Y-Flyer: 18 feet long; two-person crew; main and jib, spinnaker
C Scow: 20 feet; two- or three-person crew; main and jib, no spinnaker
Star: 22 feet long; keel boat; two-person crew; main and jib, no spinnaker

Two-person boat, with spinnaker:
Mutineer: 15 feet long; two-person crew; main and jib, spinnaker
Comet : 16 feet long; two-person crew
Flying Scot: 19 feet long; two- or three-person crew; main and jib, spinnaker

Three-person boat, with spinnaker:
Lightning: 19 feet long; three-person crew; main and jib, spinnaker
E Scow: 28 feet long; up to 550 pounds allowed for crew; main and jib, spinnaker

A boating safety course is recommended for all boaters. For information on Department of Natural Resources courses, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/safety/boat.htm. To learn about U.S. Power Squadron courses, visit www.usps.org/e_stuff/Basic.html.

The U. S. Power Squadron also teaches a Sailboat Basics course, which includes racing strategy, concepts and techniques. See www.usps.org/e_stuff/supp/sailing.html.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Prestbury Yacht Club is a community sailing club located on a small, neighborhood lake west of Naperville. Their racing program includes Lasers and JY15s.

In the east-central part of the state, the Clinton Lake Sailing Association has had an active racing program for 25 years. The club holds races every weekend; Flying Scots, which are the only active one-design fleet at the club, also race on Wednesday evenings, and there are several Laser regattas scattered throughout the summer.

Valley Sailing Association was founded in 1954 on a mile-wide stretch of the Mississippi River called Alton Lake. With active fleets of Comets, Lasers, Lightnings and Mutineers, the club holds races on Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons.

Sailing often becomes a passion for those who try it and it is not uncommon for people to own more than one kind of boat: one for sailing alone; one for racing with their family or other crew; a third to teach their children; and a fourth because it was so pretty they could not resist. It's like some women and their shoes. For example, Laffey, who is the true commodore of the Valley Sailing Association, owns a whopping 14 boats, including one Comet, one Sunfish and six wooden Lightnings. In some clubs, if you have one boat, you are a mere skipper, but once you have more than three, your fellow club members might start calling you commodore, with tongue pressed firmly in cheek. In Laffey's case, his friends jokingly call him Lord Admiral (as in Admiral Nelson of the British Navy).

Deb Aronson and Ben Williams race their boat, Suzie Q, on Clinton Lake.

(Photo by Doug Williams.)

Racing in light wind takes a different set of skills than in heavy wind.

Deb Aronson, Urbana, is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in numerous national publications. When Doug Williams is not writing fiction he likes to take photographs. Deb Aronson just bought her second Flying Scot. She and her husband now own five sailboats.