

The Boston Globe

September 29, 2006

Regatta showcases rejuvenated harbor

By Tony Chamberlain, Globe Staff |

It's pushing 20 years since George H.W. Bush's presidential campaign was hammering Michael Dukakis for the pollution in Boston Harbor. Can you remember that leaning sign that read "poison" sticking out of the water?

What a difference a couple of decades makes.

All the efforts to clean the harbor -- successfully -- in a way that highlights the cityscape and the spectacular string of nine islands come together this weekend in the second Boston Harbor Islands Regatta, which will feature approximately 100 sailboats racing around the islands, and a number of shoreside celebrations.

Last year, 85 boats raced in the inaugural regatta, which is sponsored by several surrounding yacht clubs and presented by the Island Alliance.

"We wanted to put on an event that attracted all the sailboats in the greater Boston area," said Bob Johnstone, race director and a director of Island Alliance, who says the minimalist approach to tomorrow's race is one of the big draws for many sailors.

"More than half of the participants don't have a PHRF [handicap] certificate," said Johnstone, founder of J/Boats, one of the most successful boat manufacturers in history. "I'm really excited about this. It's the kind of thing that will get people out, going to their boats, enjoying the area, enjoying each other, and for a lot of people having their first experience racing a sailboat."

The first impulse was to create a major race with several circles of competition, said Johnstone. But the simplicity of a single-day event book-ended by two social occasions was decided to have more appeal. There is a captain's dinner at the Boston Harbor Hotel tonight, and Sunday features a cookout on Georges Island.

"The regattas that really work," said Johnstone, "are pursuit races, like Figawi, around island races like Conanicut Island down in Newport or around the Isle of Wight. Those are fun races to do. And the charity races like Hospice and Leukemia always work well. In our case, we have all three of those [conditions] in one event, and we find that it's very appealing to sailors."

Of course, he noted, a huge part of any sailing event's success is how good the party is, and a \$30 ticket to a wine and beer party at the Boston Harbor Hotel overlooking the harbor at sunset "has to be the greatest deal in Boston."

The first regatta kicked off with a definite awareness of environmental issues, since the Island Alliance and Dick Cross, chairman of the group, had taken a strong stand against the placing of an LNG terminal on outer Brewster Island.

"I guess the sailors were appreciative of that," said Johnstone, one of whose boat production companies is seeking ways to produce low fuel-use powerboats. "I mean, people are well aware of just what a treasure this is -- to have such a recreational facility right here in the harbor. It's really special."

A pursuit race, while handicapped by a boat's potential speed, is less technical than PHRF classification, but for many sailors, lots more fun. Rather than being divided into classes with staggered starts and

finishes, in a pursuit race the slowest -- usually smallest -- classes begin while ever faster boats start behind. When the course is figured out well, the fleet has a close-quartered finish.

“It just keeps everybody in the race and having fun,” said Enid Beal, regatta chairman and a director of Island Alliance, who conceived of the event about five years ago. “The little boats are sailing in the same course with the world-class racers that sail to places like Bermuda and England.”

Though Boston began as a maritime port with constant focus on its waterfront, over time the city largely forgot its harbor and the islands, certainly as recreational sites.

“So today, you have people asking questions that no one ever would in Seattle,” said Beal. “Like, ‘How do you get to Georges Island?’ There’s just a general lack of knowledge about the fact that there’s a national park out there, and that’s what this race can do -- raise that awareness. The harbor is really everybody’s front yard.”

When you dream, said Beal, it’s worth it to dream big. “We look forward to this race someday being a third big-city event after the Boston Marathon and the Head of the Charles.” Last year, proceeds were nearly \$40,000, which supported the event and other activities of the Island Alliance, an organization formed in 1994 to heighten awareness of the harbor islands.

This weekend also features the Boston International In-Water Boat Show at the World Trade Center in South Boston. Featuring boats from 14 feet to 70 feet, this is the largest of the Boston shows and the only one in the water.

Aside from boat and equipment displays, daily seminars will feature such subjects as chart reading, radar, GPS, fishing of all sorts, and safety issues. The show runs today through Sunday, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day.