



CHRIS FRANCESCANI PHOTOS

Members of the Orient Ice Yacht Club took part in a traditional 'ice-seeding' ceremony on New Year's Day in hopes of inducing a deep freeze — and this time, it worked!

Ice boat racing returns to Long Island

Local and regional enthusiasts flock to Lake Ronkonkoma for first 'annual' regatta since 2015

BY CHRIS FRANCESCANI
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It's been so long since Long Island waters froze solid enough to race ice boats, that last weekend, Lake Ronkonkoma Ice Boat and Yacht Club vice commodore Peter Truesdell explained his role this way.

"My job is to put on a regatta once a year," he said. "I've been vice commodore for 10 years, and this is the first regatta."

While serious ice boat enthusiasts travel all over the country to find solid ice to race on, Long Island has experienced a decade-long ice drought.

A four-man LRIBYC team spent all day Friday testing the ice on Lake Ronkonkoma — drilling holes in different places and measuring its thickness for safety, as well as canvassing the massive body of water for any other trouble spots, which, when discovered, were marked off with hazard flags.

Declaring the lake safe for ice boating, organizers put out the word late Friday: the races would take place Saturday morning.

But early the next morning, as racers pieced together their boats and strung up their sails, one key ingredient was still missing: wind. Ice boat captains waited for hours until the wind kicked up to about 10 m.p.h. in the afternoon, and finally took flight across the ice.

LRIBYC commodore Scott Valentine said patience is just part of the sport.

"I've gone to world championships where we've had to sit in a hotel for a couple days because of no wind or temperature — if it's too cold, we can't sail."

With the wind came bright sunshine, which cracked the ice in places on the lake.

"They were very comprehensive on testing the ice," East Marion racer Rich Clark said of the Lake Ronkonkoma team. "But ice will crack like that when the sun comes out ... It makes you a little nervous when you first hear it, but basically nothing happens — it's just the sound of the crack. It's



Ice boat racers from near and far headed to Lake Ronkonkoma on Saturday — just one day after race organizers determined that Long Island's largest freshwater lake was sufficiently frozen to host the long-awaited event.

a long, lengthy crack. It doesn't crack around you, where you fall in, but it can be a little scary, and it happened a couple of times during the races on Saturday."

East Marion racing veteran Mike Acebo said the ice drought made last weekend a big deal for dedicated sailors.

"Long Island boaters have waited for 10 years now, and we waited probably another five years before that. So it's just getting to be a rare thing to have ice on Long Island," he said. "We've almost all given up hope of having ice on Long Island, but lo and behold, we've been offered a chance to sail. So it's kind of a special weekend."

Long Island racers are drawn to Lake Ronkonkoma, the island's largest freshwater lake, for its storied history as a premier ice racing spot. The LRIBYC was founded in 1923. Saturday's first race was dedicated to late ice boating legend Richard Crucet, who Mr. Valentine described as a "driving force" in the Long Island ice boating community. Mr. Crucet passed away in 2014 and had been a big promoter of the sport on Long Island and across the country.

'SEEDING' THE ICE

The dearth of freezing weather in the region has

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gone on so long that it's driven some ice boating enthusiasts to resort to light-hearted, age-old Nordic rituals.

"It's an old, old thing," Mr. Acebo told The Suffolk Times last year of annual efforts to "seed" local waters with ice to induce freezing. "Usually it would happen at the [winter] solstice, the changing of the season. They would get together and they wear stupid hats and fur coats and hockey sticks and they'd throw ice in [the bay]."

He said the LRI BYC — as well as his local Orient Ice Yacht Club — has been performing the ceremony for years during iceboating droughts.

"Every year they would have a blessing of the lake and a 'seeding of the ice.' That's what they called it. It was like storm cloud seeding, but they were seeding the lake to get it to form ice."

On New Year's Day, a group of OIYC diehards, dressed as Norse gods and swarthy Vikings, gathered on the shore in Orient. They wielded hockey sticks and swept piles of machine-made ice into the bay, hoping to induce Mother Nature into a deep freeze. In a previous year's ceremony, they built a little boat, set it on fire and sent it out into the bay. For whatever reason, their patient prayers were finally answered this month.

A similar ceremony unfolded on the shore of Lake Ronkonkoma before Saturday's race, Mr. Acebo said.

Mr. Valentine won all three DN races on Saturday, a popular class of ice boats first developed in Detroit, Mich., in the late 1930s. He captained a brand-new DN he'd gotten after an accident in the year prior. "Last year at the North American championships, a guy totaled my boat during the race," he said. "I had the right of way, and he came up on my blind side and hit my boat, and destroyed it and his boat."

Though racing boats can cost several thousand dollars to build, the competitor graciously gave him a new boat free of charge.

"Proper ice boat etiquette dictates that if you do something wrong, you

have to fix or repair the damage," Mr. Valentine said. "He's ranked eighth in the world, and his friend builds boats, so he said he'd build me an exact copy of his boat, and he did."

'EXHILARATING'

The thirst to race across the frozen bays dates back centuries on the North Fork, according to Mr. Acebo.

"During the late 1800s, early 1900s up to [World War I], the farmers had nothing to do in the winter," he said. "What were you going to do when your fields were covered with snow? They built old-style, stern-steer iceboats ... every farmer had an iceboat in the ceiling of his barn."

Despite the long pause, local ice boaters still yearn for their next race.

"The first time you try it, and you get going, and there's a nice breeze and you pull the sail tight, the boat takes off like a jet," Mr. Acebo said last year. "That's the feeling. It pushes you back in the cockpit. The speed is exhilarating. And the speed goes faster and faster and faster and you think you're doing 100 miles an hour when you're doing 45."

"I mean, it's just the most incredible feeling you can have. Now I drive a Porsche. I've skied downhill, rafted in the Grand Canyon. I've flown gliders ... I rode a motorcycle across the country," Mr. Acebo recounted. "This is the most exhilarating thing that I've ever done."

Next week, Mr. Valentine and Mr. Truesdale are heading to the ice boat world championships, which move around the country based on what location has the best ice. Organizers are eyeing Wisconsin, specifically Lakes Winnebago and Monona, according to the DN North America website, with a final update promised next week.

"No matter what happens, when Pete and I go, we always have a great time. We're sailing with the best of the best in the sailing world: America's Cup people, collegiate champions, Olympic champions," Mr. Acebo said. "They're all super people. You can talk to them, have a good time, sit at the bar with them, have dinner with them. There's great camaraderie there."