

Young sailors race toward future glory

By David Rattigan | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 19, 2012



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Annisquam Yacht Club teammates Peter Thibodeau and Grace Papp maneuver in a 420-class race Monday.

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GLOUCESTER — Cars lined the narrow streets of the Annisquam section of town, and 170 sailboats clustered under bright blue skies on Ipswich Bay for the Massachusetts Bay Junior Olympic Sailing Festival.

Starting on the heels of the Summer Olympics — sailing's preeminent showcase along

with the America's Cup — the event drew the best young sailors from Maine to Cohasset on Monday and Tuesday. Races scheduled for Wednesday were canceled because of morning rain and thunder.

“For juniors, winning the Junior Olympics is the goal of the season,” said Lauren Norton, commodore at the host Annisquam Yacht Club and cochairwoman of the event. “There are a lot of competitive regattas, but this is the biggest and the most important.”

The ages of the competitors run from 8 to 18, and one can trace the development of the sailors, from steadfast 8-year-olds in the Optimist class of boats — think of a buoyant bathtub with a sail — to teenagers developing skills that will carry on to future levels of competition.

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“They’re out on the trapezes, driving spinnakers, they’re vying for the perfect position on the starting line, and they really know how to sail competitively,” Norton said. “It puts them in good position going forward. Most of the top juniors that are older kids go on to sail in college and beyond. That’s where they keep growing as racers.”

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Organized by US Sailing under the umbrella of the US Olympic Committee, the event rotates each year among clubs on the North and South shores.

“Not everyone involved will go on to collegiate or international competition when they are older, but it’s the first step in identifying our future elite sailing athletes,” said Ben Richardson, a member of the Olympic Sailing Committee who ran the Junior Olympic regatta at Eastern Point Yacht Club in Gloucester six years ago, communicating via e-mail. “Friendships with kids from other junior sailing programs start here, and can last a lifetime.”

One such sailor was 24-year-old Evan Cooke of Andover, a former Junior Olympic competitor who is now an assistant sailing coach at Boston College, where he was on the sailing team, and a member of the race committee for this year’s event.

“This was one of the two big events of the summer,” along with the regattas during Marblehead Race Week, Cooke said. “It’s like a special occasion.”

Skipper Peter Thibodeau, 14, and crew member Grace Papp, 15, were among the teams from the Annisquam sailing program. Competing in the 420 class, they had placed in the top five at regattas in Hingham and Marblehead this summer, and on Aug. 8 won the Tim Baker Regatta at the Sandy Bay Yacht Club in Rockport.



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The club’s junior program enjoyed a good season this year, and Papp was looking forward to last week’s competition. However, the duo had trouble getting untracked, and finished 21st in the 50-boat C420 class.

420-class sailboats race across Ipswich Bay on Monday.

“This is our final shebang – the last regatta of the year to show everybody who we are and what we’re made of,” Papp said.

Thibodeau said they liked the test that came from racing better-skilled sailors. “The competition pushes us to work harder,” he said.

There is more to winning sailing than simply going fast. There is skill but also strategy that involves recognizing the wind conditions, the currents, and the rest of the field, over multiple days and amid conditions that change.

“A lot of people think it’s just the wind, the water and you – which is important – but then you’ve got to think about who’s on top of you, who’s covering you, who’s starboard, who’s port, who’s coming up the left side, and which way the [group] is tacking and how you want to stay on top of them,” Papp said. “It really does matter to watch the boats. If you know everything you can about where the wind’s going, and know that you can catch it, you can still lose the whole race just because you’re not paying attention to everybody else.

“That’s what makes Peter such a great skipper,” she said, “because he knows how to balance watching the wind and watching the fleet.”

Just as athletes in baseball thrive in the warm weather of Florida, California, and the Dominican Republic, and hockey players develop best in the cold of the northern US and Canada, most great sailors come from coastal areas. The stretch from New England to Maryland is one of the great developmental areas for sailing, Cooke said, joining Florida and California.

Cooke noted that many Olympians will train in Massachusetts because they have both the support infrastructure for competitive sailing, and because traveling up and down the coast can provide an interesting mix of sailing conditions without a lot of travel.

The Junior Olympic sailing championships can be a precursor to future competitions.

“Everything’s the same, but smaller and slower,” Cooke said. “These are the same conditions you’ll race in for the rest of your life, against some of the same people you’ll sail with the rest of your life.”

During the regatta, the competitors and their families basically doubled the area’s population. After the races, the sailors would gather for a meal and relaxation under a large tent on the Annisquam Yacht Club’s tennis courts while their parents socialized on the deck.

Coming from the tent area, Bob Thibodeau, Peter’s father, pointed out another benefit for the young competitors.

“They don’t know each other,” he said, “but everybody’s having a blast.”

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