



Rosenfeld

Frostbite racing has become keen, serious competition, with a lot of boats engaged. A recent start on Manhasset Bay

## TWENTY YEARS IN A DINGHY

Some Sailors Don't Know Enough to Come In Out of the Snow

By WILLIAM H. TAYLOR



ON JANUARY 2, 1932, a hardy little band of pilgrims with more enthusiasm than good sense went sailing on Manhasset Bay, L.I., in 10- and 12-foot dinghies. They should have stood in bed! Obviously a silly stunt that no one in his right mind would do twice! But here 20 years later, on New Year's Day, 1952, barring a gale or a solid freeze, 40 or 50 or more dinghies, will be cavorting around on Manhasset Bay in the annual regatta of the Frostbite Y.C. And, partly as a result of that manifestation of madness 20 years ago, hundreds of otherwise normal people race dinghies amid ice and snow throughout the winter, or as much of it as local ice conditions permit.

So many garbled versions of the start of this lunatic fringe of yachting have been printed that it may be time for one who was there to explain how come. Most of the stories have the idea being hatched in one or another yacht club bar, over steaming potions of hot buttered rum. Nothing of the kind! It was in my living room in Port Washington, L.I., and it wasn't rum. It was a concoction known in its day and locale as "tiger's milk," and its ingredients were drugstore alcohol, orange peel and—well, never mind. You wouldn't like it anyhow, but those were prohibition days.

The sailors present that December evening were H. Martyn "Slim" Baker, Gordon Curry, Charles J. M. Henderson and myself, all neighbors, and we hadn't consumed as much of the tiger's milk as you might suppose. Slim had recently acquired a new and as yet untried sailing dinghy, a Dutch-bowed, lapstrake, lug-rigged 11½-footer built by Bill Dyer in Providence, R.I. I had in the garage one of the "Lymington scows" imported from England by George Ralsey, of similar size, rig and construction but of quite different model and known sailing qualities. The question of comparative speed came up and Slim proposed getting our

two boats down to the shore and trying them out, some day when the weather wasn't too tough. It was the irrepressible Gordon Curry, youngest of the quartet, who burst out with, "How about a regatta New Year's Day? I'll bet we could get half a dozen dinghies together if we got the word around."

The idea sounded just screwy enough to be fun, especially after we'd milked the tiger another time or two. Henderson and Gordon knew where they could lay hands on a 14-foot British Snowden dink, so there was the nucleus of a fleet. We set the date as Jan. 2, which was a Saturday and allowed time for New Year's hangovers to fade away, and the place as the Knickerbocker Y.C., to which we four belonged at the time. It remained to get the word around.

Now the period before Christmas and New Year is a dull one in metropolitan newspaper sports departments, or was then, before the days of "bowl" football games. So when I broached the subject around the "Herald Tribune" office it sounded good to the sports editor, George Dailey, too. I got in a gag story or two about the impending event, and we began to hear from other mentally unbalanced sailors, with and without dinghies, who wanted to get into the act.

The event was christened by Arthur MacKen, a "Herald Tribune" sports copyreader whose only interest in things nautical was his daily commuting trips on the Staten Island ferry. Seeking a longish word to fill up a headline one night, Mac called the impending event the Frostbite Regatta, and Frostbiting it has been ever since. The Frostbite Yacht Club was organized (more or less) to run the event, with Slim Baker as its first commodore, and the Knickerbocker arranged to provide chowder and coffee. The Ladies Auxiliary of the F.Y.C. produced the first club burgee, a polar bear standing on a cake of ice.

When the great day dawned, the weather might have been made to order—the tail end of an icy northeast gale, with a mixture of rain, hail, and snow. The wind moderated



An early Frostbite regatta off New Rochelle in January, 1932. Some of the founders (middle) aboard "Ranger." Left to right are (front row) H. M. Baker, Jack Mills (middle row) Archie Fife, Sam Wetherill, Bill Swan, Bill Taylor, Porter Buck (rear) Jack Dickerson, Jim Fyfe, Bob Patterson, Harry Hall, Bob Goeller. Arctic explorer Bob Bartlett (below) at the helm of a Ratsey dink (photos by Rosenfeld)



just enough so that dinghy sailing, under the weather shore of Manhasset Bay, was possible though by no means safe nor comfortable. The worst feature of it was that it was too rough on the Sound for the expected entries to get over from the north shore, except for the two Ratsey boats which arrived in tow of the City Island water boat.

Slim's yawl *Banger*, in winter commission, was tied up to the Knickerbocker float as headquarters ship, with a roaring fire in her Shipmate range and an adequate supply of tiger's milk aboard. Some of the jugs held the mixed and theoretically potable product, others a reserve supply of practically straight alcohol, and if our amateur bartender got his jugs mixed in the later stages of the proceedings, that error did nothing to dampen the spirit of the occasion.

Besides half a dozen Ratsey and Dyer 11½-footers and the Snowden, there was the dink which *Dorada* had carried on her famous Transatlantic race and a small skiff with a huge sail belonging to James Fyfe, Jr. More than 100 people

showed up, and quite a few of the spectators got a chance to sail in one of the three races while the regular crews thawed out. When we got unbearably cold while actually racing, first aid was furnished by Jack Dickerson and Al Whitman who came alongside in the little auxiliary ketch *Half Moon* and passed over medical stores.

The summary of the day's racing shows the following skippers: Porter Buck, Here Atkin, Gordon Curry, Slim Baker, James Fyfe, Bud Smith, Arthur Knapp, Jr., Bob Garland, Bill Dyer, George, Ernest and Colin Ratsey (Colin won the Grand Prix, a suitably engraved gallon alcohol tin—empty) and the writer. From memory, others who sailed were Ev Morris, Adrian Iselin, Charlie Henderson, Al Clark, Archie Fyfe, Eugene Kelly and a number of others I should remember but don't. The next day there was more racing, even more informal, off Nowill's shipyard, which being on the north shore of Manhasset Bay was less exposed to nor'westers than the club.

Since the Westchester and Connecticut sailors had been kept from the first race by the northeast gale that prevented towing their boats across the Sound, a return engagement was arranged for the next weekend at the New Rochelle Y.C., and the weather was slightly less strenuous. *Ranger* and Snowden Andrews's cruiser *Tar Baby* towed the Long Island boats over, and the north shore sailors got their baptism of frostbiting—Bill Swan, Sam Wetherill, Ed and Butler Whiting, the Bob Baviers, Sr., and Jr., George Laufer, Jack Mills, Harry Hall, Roy Manny, Comy Shields, Bob Goeller, Walter Rowe, Bob Patterson, George Bonnell and others. Bob Bartlett, the famous Arctic explorer, even came out and took a whirl at it.

Those early races, being a novelty and, to the average reader, completely insane, got a lot of newspaper space, and Jim Robbins, of the "Times," and I made the best of this excuse to get away, for a day or two each week, from the dreary round of indoor winter sports assignments.

We all thought we were pretty tough, and when it blew too hard to sail off the clubs we'd find a lee somewhere and sail there. Once when Manhasset Bay was all white water we even sailed in the tiny Mill Pond in Port Washington, and one of the dinks was blown clear up into a chicken yard at the lee end of the pond, to the consternation of the feathered inhabitants. The skipper of that dinghy, Allegra Knapp, profited by these experiences and went on, as Mrs. James Mertz, to become the women's national sailing champion in 1950.

We really thought we'd started something new until W. P. Stephens, then close to 80, told us he and his friends used to sail canoes on the Lower Bay all winter as boys.

Those first two winters were luckily warm ones, with no heavy ice. Sailors got their clubs interested and before long there were invitation races at the Larchmont, American, City Island, Harlem and other clubs. *Ranger* and *Tar Baby* were kept in commission through those first two winters,

and the Long Island contingent piled aboard them and towed their dinks across the Sound and back every few weekends.

The Essex (Conn.) Y.C. was born out of Frostbite racing, after a group of Essex enthusiasts had arranged an early spring regatta there, at which the Ladies Aid of a local church served hot coffee and beans on the old steamboat dock. No one who saw it will forget the spectacle of an elegant, chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce limousine tooling out onto the wharf early that morning, with two dinghy sailors asleep inside and a dink bouncing along on a trailer astern. President Roosevelt declared his "bank holiday" that same weekend, and we had to hold a tarpaulin muster to distribute the available cash around so all hands could buy gas to get home again.

Frostbiting in those days was informal, to put it mildly. All rules went by the board at times and the boat whose crew could shove others backward the hardest emerged in the lead around marks and on starting lines. Everybody sailed everyone else's boat one time and another, and the boats were a mixed bag of whatever sailing dinghies happened to be around. There were prizes—which usually came in bottles—but no cumulative season scores. It was all for fun, and at first nobody cared much who won. The Order of Loons was founded by those who capsized while racing, and the lowly Mud Hens by those who just fell in or turned over while not racing—a fine social distinction. Then, inevitably, the sport struggled through a silly stage.

The highly competitive minded, of course, craved faster boats than each other, and first class designers got interested—Charles Mower, John Alden, Phil Rhodes, Olin Stephens, Nick Potter, the Herreshoffs and others. One long-dead modeler even got into it when Sam and Ed Willis turned up with a new dink they'd built from the model of an old sand-bagger of their grandfather's.

The basic idea of a sailing dinghy, as a boat that would tow well, row well and carry a load in working yacht tender



*Vireland*

"The Spirit of Frostbiting" at the University of Michigan

service was lost sight of in the speed mania. The simple lug rigs gave way to lofty marconis and complicated gear. Ridiculous sums were spent on 12-foot dinghies, reaching a climax in one that was said to have cost Frank Campbell over \$2,000—and in those days \$2,000, judiciously expended, would buy you a lot of boat. Trying on the other hand for economy, Phil Rhodes and Bill Dyer brought out the prototype of the present Penguin, but she rolled over so often she was nicknamed *Plywheel*, and it was some years before the class caught on.

Along with these developments came squabbles over the establishment of rules and classes and some of them, for heat and bitterness, would have done discredit even to some of the old rows over the America's Cup—terrific tempests in the frail and essentially harmless teapot of dinghydom. It was ridiculous, and gradually the embattled dinghy sailors regained a little perspective and began to laugh at themselves.

In the end, sense prevailed. Those who wanted to build faster and faster dinghy-shaped racing machines had their own class and rules, or lack of them, and they eventually outbuilt themselves right out of business. Before that stage was reached, however, the Frostbite dinghy had become a vehicle of international competition. Two Englishmen, Sir Archibald Hope and Reggie Bennett, came over and raced an American team, off Larchmont, for a solid gold trophy—and lost.

Those who wanted good, equitable class racing, and those to whom a dinghy was still primarily something you towed around by the nose astern of your cruiser and used as a tender, went their ways, too. One-design classes became the order of the sport, which had quickly spread to Boston, Narragansett Bay, and points further afield. Miami's first Sunburn Regatta, in 1936, brought a bunch of Frostbiters down to enjoy a welcome change of climate on Biscayne Bay.

In the legitimate working yacht tender category came, besides the original Ratsey and Dyer dinks, the 10-foot lupstrake, Dyer-built, Rhodes-designed D class and later the Dyer Dhows; the 12-foot Alden X boats and a few others. Strictly racing one-design classes, faster but less suitable

(Continued on page 156)



Bill Dyer in his original Penguin, early in 1933

## TWENTY YEARS IN A DINGHY

(Continued from page 83)

for tender work, were the Potter-designed B One Designs; the Sparkman & Stephens Interclubs, the Penguins, and others.

Of great ultimate importance was the adoption of sailing dinghies by the colleges. Hitherto, intercollegiate yacht racing had been limited to a few of the Ivy League institutions whose students were able to borrow big boats for an annual race. But when M.I.T. started its fleet of George Owen-designed dinghies racing on the Charles River the horizon broadened fast. Today, intercollegiate yachting is nationally organized with scores of colleges and universities, each with its own yacht club, owning fleets of dinghies and sailing an extensive racing schedule which culminates in a national championship. Probably 90 percent of college sailing is done in dinghies, and as yet there have been no "fixing" scandals.

It would be interesting to know how many dinghies of Frostbite size and type now compete in and out of season in this country. The Penguin Class is the most numerous with around 3000 boats, but the college fleets, collectively, must also run well up into four figures and the Dyer Ds at last accounts were nearing 1000. The sport has spread to Chicago, where solid winter ice limits activity to spring and fall, and to Florida and southern California, where the absence of ice proves no deterrent. There are dozens of local classes, which, individually small, total up to a whale of a lot of boats.

All this might have come about, in due time, without the impetus of that first screwball race on Manhasset Bay. But prior to that time efforts to get dinghy racing started here, even in the International 14-footers, which are a separate matter entirely, had fizzled. The early Frostbiters don't claim all credit for the popularity of small dinghy racing today, but they certainly got it away to a jet-propelled take-off.

Frostbite racing nowadays, at least in its native waters around western Long Island Sound, is a deadly serious game. Manhasset Bay, Larchmont, Indian Harbor, Riverside, Sea Cliff and other clubs each has its own local fleets, some of two or three score boats, and their weekly races from early November through April. There are season championships, spring, winter and fall series, and occasional interclub invitation fixtures. Dinghy sailors are perhaps the hottest group racing together anywhere, because the top skippers racing in several different classes in the summer meet in dinks when the frost is on the pumpkin. And dinghy racing, with half a dozen races each good day, keeps them sharpened up, especially on starts and around the buoys. Dinghy racing has been called the best school for aspiring young racing men to learn the fine points in.

Once a year the Sound dinghy sailors revive the spirit of '32 in the jamboree known as the Frostbite Yacht Club Annual Regatta. There really is a Frostbite Yacht Club with its headquarters at the Manhasset Bay Y.C. and its annual regattas sailed in the same waters as the first race of 20 years ago. Last year 70-odd boats, of several classes and clubs, turned out, and six of them initiated their crews into the Loons. There was a special race for past commodores of the Frostbite Y.C., won by Bob Fraser, a veteran of 20 years of Frostbiting and still a member of the Great Unwashed (dinghy racers who have never yet capsized). Ed Miller, who sailed the original Penguin prototype in 1933, was elected commodore.

The club's annual meeting, which features hot buttered rum (no more tiger's milk, thank God) and oratory, goes along with the regatta. Besides electing regular officers, it hands out special honorary awards on the basis of the season's accomplishments. There is, for instance, the Order of the Diamond Sculls, for those who have been guilty of inordinate tiller-wagging in the pinches; the Upholder of the Rights of the Port Tack; and the Order of the Red Face, restricted to commodores and champions who have done



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something spectacularly silly, like the man who shoved off for a race and left his rudder lying on the float.

But the rest of the winter, dinghy sailing is now a serious sport, around the Sound, anyhow.

This January's Frostbite Y.C. Regatta will see a reminder of one of the first participants and sponsors of the game, Sam Wetherill, who sailed dinghies for 20 years until last fall, when he was lost overboard from his power cruiser. G. Unger "Pico" Vetlesen, who was one of Sam's sailing partners in the early dinghy days, is presenting a trophy in his memory. The annual New Year's events have never before had a permanent trophy, and no more appropriate one could be imagined.

**TROUBLE SHOOTING TROUBLE**

(Continued from page 89)

starter pulley. Examination showed that while it had not pulled loose, the cotton sheathing had pulled out of the small ferrule which anchors the cord to the pulley but the wire cable inside had remained securely soldered on. When you pulled the cord all the way out it stretched in the cable and bunched up. Fig. 1 shows what it looked like. This bunched cotton would jam the pulley so it couldn't rotate.

Elaborate testing equipment is the pride and joy of every shop. Sometimes, though, it can be a mechanic's Waterloo. The most common trap it baits is to test a coil as "good." Assured of the serviceability of the part, a mechanic will spend a long time looking for trouble elsewhere . . . the motor runs awhile, then sputters and quits. What happens is that the coil warms up with the heat of operation until a tiny, incipient short circuit in the fine wiring or insulation has been affected by the expansion so as to develop into a full-grown short.

I have a small neon-light electrical tester such as can be bought in any hardware store. I removed the prongs from it and attached small alligator clips. When doing troubleshooting away from a shop I connect it to the sparkplug and its wire as shown in Fig. 2. With one hand I steady the motor and with the other I pull the starter. Much easier than trying to hold the wire 1/2" from the motor and at the same time hold the motor and turn it over! It shows whether or not there is a spark, even if it doesn't provide an accurate test of the coil or condenser's condition.

Having described my "gadget," now let me explain why mechanics get gray. A customer came with this complaint: This motor won't start easy, trolls poorly. I agreed to check it over, using only the tools in my car. I took the sparkplugs out and discovered that they had a gap three times too great. I closed them up to correct gap and reinstalled them. No go. Cleaned the carburetor out. Still no go. Then I put my pet ignition tester onto the sparkplug wires and pulled the rope. There was a nice, red flash, indicating that high tension current was there. I concluded that the sparkplugs had internal short circuits and told the owner to get a new pair of plugs and the motor would be as good as new. Next time I saw him he said, "Hey, you were all wet about the sparkplugs! I put them in and nothing happened. Finally took the motor to town and had them test it and the coils were no good." Oh, well, I've read of doctors who've given people horse medicine by mistake.

Our intentions are good. Every now and again a fellow will come in and ask for shear pins for a Waterbubbler outboard motor. We can't find any. So I ask him if he has any pins left? He will say yes, he has just *one* pin left, the one that's in the motor, but he doesn't dare go fishing this afternoon without a spare. I refer him, and you, to Fig. 3, which shows how to get home on a broken shear pin.

This article wouldn't be complete without my stressing the fact that all the most baffling motor troubles generally are caused by the smallest, seemingly simplest things.

Once I bought a new outboard and, to take a busman's holiday, decided to take a friend down the river to break in this new motor. We shoved off and putt-putted downstream

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