



Sailing the summer away

building friendships and a sense of community are as important as nautical skills at the Sturgeon Lake Sailing Club Article by Geoff Coleman / Photograph by James Wisener

Upon hearing a Bay Street lawyer speak glowingly of “the Club”, one could be forgiven for assuming the reference was to a favourite country club, or a new Calloway driver. Or, maybe “the Club” is barrister slang for the gavel punctuating a favourable court ruling, as in: “Judge Winslow really gave that guy the Club.”

However, at least one counsel is talking about an institution where most members are younger than a good bottle of single malt, and your after-tax income doesn't matter as much as your after-tacks gains.

Hugh DesBrisay - the lawyer mentioned above - is Commodore of the Sturgeon Lake Sailing Club, a youth-oriented club that focuses as much on sailing instruction as it does on community-building. The SLSC is located in Sturgeon Point, a unique waterfront community which was the smallest incorporated village in Canada before the amalgamation which led to the creation of the City of Kawartha Lakes. DesBrisay himself is a fourth generation cottager at Sturgeon Point and began sailing at SLSC when he was eight years old.

He stresses that the volunteer-run group offers a program to teach kids how to sail, let them have some fun at the same time, and make them feel like they are part of a larger community.

To achieve this goal, the club runs a weekly ½ day program from 8:30 to 12:30 with instruction at various skill levels, and holds a weekly themed dance and movie night. It almost sounds like something from a bygone era, but they must have the formula for success figured out because the club is in its 53rd year, and many of the instructors have themselves come up through the ranks of the SLSC. The health benefits and confidence-boosting that come along with the sport go without saying.

DesBrisay goes on to say that while racing is not the primary focus of the club, members have enjoyed some success at the competitive level.

Perhaps the most notable product of the club is Greg Tawaststjerna who became a member of Canada's national sailing team. He also

went on to skipper a little boat called “True North”. That ship bowed out to “Canada II” in a series of exciting races during the early 80s to determine who would represent Canada in the prestigious America's Cup races.

More recently, in 2008, the team of Kate Thomas and Amy DesBrisay, both second generation sailors, raced in the Canadian Youth Championships in Halifax where they finished 5th overall, and 2nd among the girls' teams. Fresh off their performance in Halifax, the girls headed to Ottawa, where they were crowned gold medal champions at the Ontario Summer Games.

The community-building aspect comes naturally, since the club is run by volunteers who, for the most part, live in, or near Sturgeon Point and by instructors who spend their summers in the community. They will have a little more on their plate this summer as the Club hosts the Mid-Ontario Championship Regatta. With 150 boats and over 300 visitors descending on the tiny hamlet, many residents outside the Club get involved, giving competitors a lawn on which to camp, and feeding them breakfasts during the weekend event. A big dinner is organized for Saturday night, and the club has earned a reputation for regatta hospitality like no other.

A sailing club may appear “exclusive” to the casual observer, but that is hardly the case.

The SLSC welcomes any young people interested in sailing, and has delivered afternoon outreach programs on behalf of the Lindsay Boys and Girls Club and the Fenelon Falls Boys and Girls Club. And, they are welcoming junior sailors once again this summer who are looking for a great way to learn new skills, get some exercise, make friends on Sturgeon Lake, and develop a life-long pastime. Check out their website at www.slsc.ca for contact information.

Geoff Coleman is a freelance writer with credits in every major Canadian outdoor magazine and several US publications. He is a regular contributor to Kawartha Life Magazine.