

Port Townsend Sailing Association

By Elizabeth T. Becker

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Ten years ago, local sailmaker Sean Rankins (owner of Northwest Sails) was frustrated that there weren't more local venues for sailboat racing. "Ed Barcott's group, the Quimper Tars, which was originally called the Port Townsend Sailing Association before we stole their name, got together for weekly races, but that was about it," recalls Rankins. "Our one big event was the annual Classic Mariners Regatta, which was run by the Wooden Yacht Racing Association for many years."

While on the Board of Directors of the Wooden Boat Foundation in the late 90's, Rankins and others started the wheels turning to expand the opportunities for sailors on Port Townsend Bay. "We were all saying, 'Wouldn't it be cool if we had more events to encourage folks to get their boats out on the water?' So Pete Johnson and I got together and started the Sea Dogs' Regatta, which included tests of all sorts of maritime skills in addition to racing. That was also about the time the annual Shipwrights Regatta began. And then we figured we'd offer a seven-race series in the spring and see if anyone showed up."

Show up they did. The series was so successful that a second and third series (for winter and fall) were added the following year. At first, the series were run like the Quimper Tars races, with no formal race committee. But in a very unfortunate turn of events during the first race in the spring of 2001, Rankins' boat, *Havhesten*, sank, leaving him thankfully unhurt but boatless, nonetheless. (On a positive note, *Havhesten* was recovered and restored, and races once again.) Without a boat, Rankins decided to take on the role of race official, standing at the end of City Dock with signal flags and air horns to start the races and track finishers. As time went by, he was joined by Myron Gauger, who brought a passion for racing rules, handicap ratings, and statistics, as well as a commitment to the local sailors. The races were run under the umbrella of the Wooden Boat Foundation, which provided insurance coverage and handled U.S. Coast Guard permits. The Foundation's boat, the *Martha J*, was called into use to set marks.

"After I left the Board at the Foundation, there really wasn't anyone there to continue running the races and regattas. But there were enough of us in the community who wanted to see the events continue. The Foundation asked us to help them put on that year's Classic Mariners Regatta, and with folks like Ted Pike, Alex Spear, and Bertram Levy pitching in, we had a successful race. It got us thinking, 'Why not keep doing this?' and the idea of the Port Townsend Sailing Association was born."

The PTSA (which became an independent 501(c)(3) organization in 2006, with a five-member Board of Directors that included Rankins and Pike along with Kathy Grace, Larry Eifert, and Don Haviland. The group was able to obtain insurance coverage through U.S. Sailing Association, and a website was created to post race schedules, race results, and announcements. With a great deal of persistence on the part of Eifert, and contributions of buoys, anchors, and line from West Marine and Admiral Ship Supply, and diving assistance from Grant Ausk at the Townsend Bay Dive Shop, four "permanent" buoys were installed to serve as race marks. "We occasionally have to go and retrieve the buoys when they go astray," says Eifert, "but overall they've worked out really well. One actually almost made it to the San Juans with the anchor and rode attached before we recovered it."

Each year, the PTSA hosts three multi-race series (spring, winter, and fall), along with several longer events. Members (numbering more than 40 in 2007) volunteer their time and talents to help run the organization. Gauger still serves as the head of the race committee, with help from a dedicated group of race officials. In 2006, PTSA recruited Vern Barnett and his 1956 Chris Craft *Comet* to serve as the official committee boat, making life much more comfortable for the officiating crew. In 2007, local shipwright Arren Day crafted a signboard system (large wooden letters posted on the aft deck of the committee boat) to indicate the layout of the day's race course to the fleet. The classic cruiser *Emmeline*, skippered by Jack Becker, acts as the semi-official PTSA photography boat. And the group even has its own green-and-white burgee and publishes a yearly calendar that lists all of the races and features photos of member boats.

Holding the group together for two years as Board President has been Kathy Grace, who has devoted countless hours of her time to keeping things organized, from big stuff like taking care of legal documents to little stuff like providing sandwiches for the race committee. On race days, however, Kathy has taken a few hours off from her official duties to join husband Chris on their Concordia yawl *Lotus* and enjoy the competition, and she will have more time to enjoy sailing now that she has turned over her presidential duties to newly elected Ted Pike. "Without Kathy, this wouldn't be the functioning organization that it is," comments Eifert. "She's an amazing person who epitomizes the spirit of the Port Townsend sailing community."

What defines that "community" and the PTSA? "For me, this organization is all about putting people and boats on the water," Eifert answers. "By having scheduled events, it's a great motivator to get your boat out of the slip and go out and sail. It's a great way to improve your sailing skills, whether you're a novice or an old salt. And it's really fun. One of my crew members (who doesn't have his own boat) told me that the Friday race is his 'golden moment of the week.' I think that pretty well sums it up."

When asked about the image of cutthroat sailboat racers, Rankins laughs. "We're not that kind of group," he explains. "For one thing, we cherish our boats too much to risk damaging them. And we're out there to have fun, practice our racing skills, and have something to tell stories about at the pub afterwards." He adds that a few of the skippers have taken their boats and their finely-honed skills to other events around Puget Sound, such as the Whidbey Island Race Week and the Swiftsure International Yacht Race out of Victoria, B.C. Most, however, simply enjoy the camaraderie of sailing their boats around Port Townsend Bay with a congenial group of folks.

The PTSA welcomes new members, those with boats of their own or ready to sign on as crew or as members of the Race Committee. Joining the Committee for a couple of races is a good way to see how races are run, while joining the post-race gatherings at Sirens is a good way to meet skippers who have room for crew. Annual membership is a bargain, at \$75 for skippers, \$20 for crew members, and \$10 for young sailors who are 15 to 18 years old. There are no restrictions on types of vessels...as long as they sail. A special category for dinghies, with shorter race courses, is being formed to encourage more small boats to take part. "I strongly encourage anyone who wants to get out on the water to join us," invites Eifert. "You don't have to have a fast boat or be a super sailor. All you have to do is have \$75," he laughs, then adds, "Actually, you don't even have to be a member to race. It's open to everyone, and we welcome anyone who wants to come out and join us, even if just for one or two races. If you end up becoming a member, so much the better. But our main goal is to get as many folks out there on boats as we can."

- Membership in the PTSA is \$75 for skippers, \$20 for crew members, and \$10 for 15- to 18-year-old sailors. The \$20 membership includes the option of adding your name to the Crew List, a great way to find a boat to sail on. But the group stresses that you don't actually have to be a member to race. They want everyone to be able to participate.
- For race schedules, race courses, and information on membership, visit www.ptsail.org.