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## Barnegat Bay Yacht Racing Association Preps for Upcoming Season

Venerable sailing organization approaching 100-year mark, hosting several top events this summer



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Posted Mon, Jun 13, 2011 at 3:09 pm ETUpdated Sun, Jun 19, 2011 at 5:50 am ET



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In the 1800s, fishermen and hunters sailed the waters of Barnegat Bay in small boats, fishing and hunting to feed their families. These small boats – known as sneakboxes because they enabled the hunters to sneak up on their quarry – were in some cases built by the hunters and fishermen themselves.

As the 1800s came to a close, those sneakboxes began to find a secondary use – sailing in a social setting, and social clubs began to form around the bay. It wasn't long before competition took hold.

In 1914, five sailing clubs joined together, expanding their social ties and also expanding their range of competition.

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And so the Barnegat Bay Yacht Racing Association was formed.

Today, the BBYRA prepares for its 98<sup>th</sup> season, where 14 member clubs will participate in a 10-week race season that opens on Saturday, June 30.

“It is one of the busiest summers in the country,” in the sailing community, Commodore Richard Proko said.

Each week, there are nearly 150 sailors on the BBYRA's three courses, and at least 135 sailors participate in at least half of the season's races. Those who do sail at least half of the races receive a 12-by-18-inch BBYRA flag commemorating their participation, Proko said.

“That flag is a big motivator,” he said.

But the weekly racing series is just a small part of what goes on with the BBYRA, one of the largest – and arguably, one of the most active – member organizations in U.S. Sailing.

Proko estimated the BBYRA has roughly 3,200–3,400 members, a figure he said is 10 percent of the national membership of US Sailing.

The testament to how active they are, however, comes from the fact that BBYRA member clubs will be hosting some of the biggest events in the country this summer. In late July, the Island Height Yacht Club will host the USA Junior Olympic Sailing Festival – Mid-Atlantic, which draws 300 boats each year, he said.

In August, the Toms River Yacht Club will be the host club for the Chubb U.S. National Junior Championships for the Sears, Bemis and Smythe trophies. These are also known as the single-, double- and triple-handed championships, which indicates the number of sailors on each boat.

And there is the US Junior Women’s Double-Handed Championship regatta in mid-July as well that will be hosted by the Mantoloking and Bay Head yacht clubs.

Part of the reason these events come to Barneгат Bay is it’s a great setting for sailing, Proko said.

“There’s not a lot of current, and there’s natural breezes most of the summer,” he said.

That makes for nearly ideal sailing conditions. But all of those events, as well as the summer racing series and a full social calendar make for a lot of work.

“We have strong volunteers, and for them, this is a year-round love affair,”

said Proko, who has been an officer of the BBYRA for eight years. “It takes so much work, but people feel so connected. There is such a sense of ownership and sense of family here.”

Indeed, it’s a family affair for Proko: His wife, Susan, is a regional training coordinator for US Sailing’s Area C junior sailing program, and a liaison to US Sailing.

And the ties and sense of family extend to the national organization as well. The current president of US Sailing, Gary Jobson, who helped win the America’s Cup in 1977 for Ted Turner, sailed his first races on the waters of Barnegat Bay with the Beachwood Yacht Club.

Proko noted that Jobson hasn’t forgotten his local ties, either: last August Jobson returned to the area and sailed in a one-day duck boat regatta, where adults and juniors sail together. One of the competitors was Proko’s son, and he was at one point going head-to-head with Jobson.

“I look up, and my son is match-sailing with the president of US Sailing,” he said. “It was a thrill.”


And while it would be easy to assume the BBYRA is a stodgy old organization after 98 years, that couldn’t be further from the truth. In addition to a website that provides everything from race information to historical race scores, the BBYRA has a Facebook account as well, to keep in touch with the changing times.

“Change happens slowly,” Proko said.

But it happens. He noted as an example the move from a single race course that existed up until about 10 years ago to the three courses they have today, that allow for more flexibility in the weekend sailing programs.

“We’re proud of our tradition, and mindful of our past, but we’re always looking forward.”

It’s clearly a combination that has helped a vibrant organization keep growing for nearly a century. For more information, visit [www.bbyra.org](http://www.bbyra.org).

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