



Mark Gruber and his wife Sharon (hidden) enjoy a stress-free race in mid-June.



Paul Schaefer catches the wind in his Sunfish sailboat during a recent race.

Anywhere the Wind Blows

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Where there is a wind, there is a way. There was next to no wind on this late June Saturday morning but that didn't stop six savvy sailors from testing the waters of Lake Hopatcong, literally.

After all, this was no ordinary voyage. This was a stress-free voyage. No wind? No problem. Just go with the flow or whatever sails ya.

Welcome to stress-free sailing.

The brainchild of Hopatcong resident Mark Gruber, stress-free sailing offers the general public—from the novice to the experienced—an opportunity to pace rather than race (though there is a trophy involved).

"The idea is to make it a stress-free fun event," said Gruber.

The "races" take place every Saturday morning at the Garden State Yacht Club in Hopatcong and any type of sailboat is welcomed. Participants are challenged to navigate a triangular course in clockwise and counterclockwise motions. The course is marked by three buoys, which sailors touch upon passing. Using the honor system, sailors time themselves and email in their results.

Scoring is similar to a golf handicapping system, said Gruber. A boat's past performance determines its handicap in a subsequent race and is applicable across the board to all classes of boats. In theory, he said, a boat with the fastest time in race one will lose standing in race two if a slower class boat improves its relative time in race two.

"Skippers and crew are not competing against other boats but are competing against their own past performance," he said.

Gruber introduced the races last year as a sort of reboot of the yacht club's former invitational and competitive-based events that took place from 1960 to 1990.

"Those races were open to club members only

but now anyone can join in," he said. There is no cost to participate.

He started a mailing list and word of mouth takes care of the rest.

Raised in Hopatcong, Gruber embarked on his maiden sailing adventure at age 7. He knows all too well the competitive aspect of sailing. This is evidenced by his name etched into the trophy for Best of Season in 1964. "I was 14," he said.

On this sticky and overcast Saturday, the still air and passing sprinkle resulted in a stalled start, but a few passing breezes and shoulder shrugs led the sailors and their crews to the water. This included a committee boat that oversees the races and keeps a careful watch for problems such as capsizing.

Mathew Steinbaum knows a thing or two about that. The Hopatcong resident admits to having capsized six or seven times the first time he tried his hand at stress-free sailing in early June, when the winds were whipping.

The first stress-free Saturday, June 7, brought winds of about 5 to 6 knots, Gruber said. "Gentle is the word that comes to mind, and good for our junior sailors in the first race of the season."

This all changed the second week when sailors were left a bit winded or, as Gruber said, "challenged." Mother Nature unleashed a 12-knot wind for the first race, a mere warm-up compared to the second race involving 18 to 20 knots.

Captaining the committee boat every week is Benett Rosen of West Orange, who is accompanied by Scott Maynard of Livingston.

"Any excuse to be on the water," said Rosen, a self-proclaimed powerboat fan.

Maynard, who converted from sailing to powerboats, is content in his role as watchful eye.

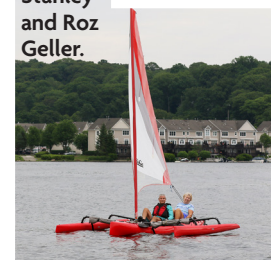
"I find boating extremely relaxing" Maynard said. "I've driven powerboats for 20 plus years, but I love pontoon boats. It's like taking an SUV convertible onto Lake Hopatcong."



Avery Rosenfeld with Marcy Salwen Levitt and her dog, Honey, during one of many stress-free sailing Saturdays.



Stanley and Roz Geller.



Matthew and Noah Steinbaum during a race in June.



Noah Steinbaum peeks under his sail.



Gruber, however, is the opposite. "Movement on the water without the sound of an engine is very soothing, almost mesmerizing. And if there's a strong wind, it's exhilarating. And it's my favorite thing to do after work."

Lake Hopatcong resident Avery Rosenfeld echoed those sentiments.

"I find sailing very inspiring—quiet and exhilarating" he said. "You're always watching for the next wind, pulling a line here, watching the sail tails."

Like Gruber, Rosenfeld took to the waters at an early age and hasn't looked back since, unless he's looking for his second wind, of course.

On this day he was joined by Jason Scharfstein of Stanhope, his one-man crew. The pair commanded a bright yellow 1973 Flying Scot, which was restored by Rosenfeld and his daughter. Each week Rosenfeld and Gruber invite whoever is around to help crew their boats.

New to the sailing scene and more accustomed to powerboats, Scharfstein finds the experience "different and enjoyable."

Meanwhile, Stanley and Roz Geller, a husband-and-wife team who split their time among homes in Hopatcong, West Orange and Florida, boarded their Hobie Cat Island, a kayak fashioned with tandem pedals and pontoons.

Members of the Garden State Yacht Club for 10 years, the Gellers have incorporated boating as a way of life.

"I've been sailing for a very long time," Stanley Geller said.

Stress-free Saturdays are just one more excuse for him to take the helm.

"If Mark says we're racing, I just show up," he said. "I go out and enjoy the wind and feel the power."

The power transcends to his pontoon boat, as well. The couple have also chartered boats all over the world.

As the Gellers pedaled into second place in 35 minutes, Gruber and his wife, Sharon, took the lead aboard their Flying Scot, at 31 minutes.

Last but not least—remember, noncompetitive—Rosenfeld and Scharfstein pulled into the dock while Rosen and Maynard drove the pontoon to pick up the buoys.

At the next stress-free Saturday, a steamy Fourth of July, brothers Matthew and Noah Steinbaum joined the races aboard their Phantoms, which are similar to Sunfish sailboats except that Phantoms are designed for solo voyagers.

Also lifelong lake residents, the Steinbaums were born into a sailing family. "We have a family regatta for our family reunion," said Noah Steinbaum, who is a junior at Carnegie Mellon. "Sailing is just a part of our life. We're so blessed to live near the lake."

The brothers learned about stress-free sailing through their grandfather, Fred Steinbaum, who taught them how to sail. The Steinbaums are also long-time friends of the Grubers.

Noah's brother, Matthew, an incoming freshman at Northwestern University in Illinois, has since recovered from his multiple capsizes. "I have one goal: To get around the course," he said.

He is the first to point blame at the wind for his capsizing. "It was really windy," he said. "Probably about 10 to 20 knots. It was a rough day."

"It was a comedy of errors," said Rosenfeld laughing.

Rough days aside, the younger Steinbaum

returns to the water for the sheer intellect of sailing.

"You have to think more," he said. "There's a thought process to pulling the sails, paying attention to the wind and bringing it all together."

Like the Steinbaums, Paul Shaefer also sailed solo. The Brooklyn resident is spending this summer at his parents' house in Hopatcong. As a youth, he raced competitively with his dad. On this recent Independence Day, he took control of a borrowed Sunfish and joined the stress-free group. He learned about the Saturday sails through Gruber, a family friend.

Schaefer embraces the solidarity of sailing. "It's a sport where everything is on you," he said, adding that his goal is to get his girlfriend to give the sails a go. "She's terrified of capsizing."

But despite the challenge of the "shifty winds on Lake Hopatcong," in which "you have to work to get your footing," he said, he plans on sailing every Saturday.

So, what is a good wind speed?

It depends on the boat. "A Hobie Cat is designed to withstand ocean winds," Matthew Steinbaum said.

Flying Scots, however, dominate as the most popular racing sailboats.

The young men's Phantoms? Not so much. "They are slower than most boats," he said.

According to Gruber, a "nice sail" tops off at around 8 knots with a minimum of 5 to 6 knots to go out. "A true sailor can withstand a wind of greater than 10," he added.

Where there is a wind, there is a way.

To learn more about stress-free sailing or to participate, email Mark Gruber at: mg@gruberlaw.biz.