

Rockport pulls off a sailing coup

Fishtown Local

Gordon Baird

Come up over the rise by the upper parking lot at Granite Pier in Rockport and you will see one of the most fabulous views of the ocean to which the public still has free access.

But if you came up over that rise last week, you would have had your breath taken away by the sight of hundreds of sailors in small boats spread all over the beautiful Rockport bay. What a glorious sight.

This was the the 2008 Junior Olympics event, pictured in last week's paper (The Times, Wednesday, Aug. 13), hosted by Sandy Bay Yacht Club and bringing together the best young sailors in all of eastern Massachusetts, vying for top honors as best Opti, 420 or Laser sailor in the East.

To give you a smidgen of background, kids sailing was kind of clunking along in the slow lane until the early 1990s, when the Opti came along. Before that were the dreaded Turnabouts — slow, heavy and not kid-friendly — that were the entry level vessel of choice. The older kids were in these awful craft called widgeons and CJs, ungainly, clumsy and slow.

But all that changed when the Optimist Pram hit the scene. Experts and older sailors laughed at its flat prow and postage-stamp size, but the kids flocked to the boat. So did the parents, who were delighted that kids showed interest in anything, plus they could throw it upside down on the roof of the family car.

BOOM! went the sport of sailing. Soon the Opti kids aged out and into this exciting rocketship the next size up: the 420. It takes two, as the song says — crew, that is. Complete with spinnaker and a jib, too, this sturdy craft revolutionized the sport for the more advanced kids. The rest is history.

While racing in the one-design classes has been declining steadily for adults over the past 10 years, the kids show has been booming. More kids, more entries, more boats every year. In the case of an event like the Junior Olympics, that also means more cars, more parents, more sign-ups, lunches, parking, trailers, more everything.

The event has a real D-Day feel to it. All of the almost 200 boats have to get in and out of the water every day. They have to use dollies to launch, they have to be co-ordinated in line and everyone feels like they're late to the starting line, so "Let's Go, People." It's hard to do it in an orderly fashion, but organizers picked the perfect venue in Granite Pier. It has a triple-wide ramp, parking, trailer storage, room for an events and registration tent and extremely cooperative neighbors who were happy to see the kids have their day. That included the fishermen and sportsmen who continued to do their business around the kids but cut them a wide swath.

And while I occasionally chuckle in print at Rockport doings, here I will bow low to their incredible powers of organization and co-operation to stage this giant event. Charlie Clark was the brain and the brawn behind this endeavor. His capos were Ron Petoff, Jen Doyle and Joeanne Levins who worked tirelessly to amass a wonderful set of volunteers to check in, process and provide for the immense needs of this army of kid competitors.

That included housing a large portion of the fleet, feeding, entertaining them at night and keeping them safe.

Kudos to Amelia's for doing such an awesome job of providing such varied, nutritious and cost-effective lunches and the delivery chain that got them on site on time to distribute every day before the racers left the dock. Hurrahs also go to every shape and size of volunteer that pitched in, from Visnicks to Saffords to Dunns, young and old. In fact, I saw pretty much everyone in the Sandy Bay sailing community there pitching in to help the kiddies.

Commander Clark did something else that earned a boatload of respect in my book: He sent the kids out to sail. The first two days looked pretty ominous, but with on-site weather monitoring, he could tell where the trouble lay and he elected to not baby the kids and as long as there were no thunder- or lightning storms near, he had 'em sail in the misty rain.

Too many times at these events, they do not sail. They wait around for perfect conditions and end up barely getting any races in. The irony is that the two crappy days saw more racing (three events each) than the beautiful sunny last day when the wind and tides only let them get in one. But the racing was terrific, albeit difficult and demanding, but kids will almost always rise to the occasion when you raise the bar and wimp out if you lower it.

Well, Mr. Clark wasn't going to miss his opportunity after all the preparation. His own kid was racing, so he was organizer and parent, a good safety net for constant weather surveillance.

In the end, the Rockport kids did their mamas proud, registering top five final standings in all three classes. Local Mathew Safford won the Opti division to continue a proud family racing tradition, while hardworking Jared Dunn was just short of winning the whole shooting match in the 420 Championship fleet, the creme de la creme.

Also attending the event was Patty Paige, supporting her own Gloucester/Rockport high school sailing team members competing. Patty has almost single-handedly forged a combined sailing team between the two schools and with Jared Dunn as her elite skipper, built a team out of goodwill, donated boats from Eastern Point Yacht Club, and help from many friends of sailing in Gloucester.

And in the background at this event, it is always such a pleasure to see the Godfather of Kid Racing on Cape Ann, Peter Bent of Brown's. Peter makes any last-second part available inexpensively to the racers, but spends most of his time doing mercy repairs on cracked and broken fiberglass fittings and the boats themselves for those who unfortunately collide. Peter was the director of kid sailing in all of Massachusetts Bay for decades before they suckered me into the job. He is youth sailing's best friend in these parts.

So hats off to the all the racers, the parents, the volunteers, the neighbors, town officials, suppliers (most of them at cost) and even the cops for letting the kiddies have their day, but most of all to Charlie Clark who had the vision, the connections and the patience to pull it all off.

Great job everyone.

Gloucester resident Gordon Baird is founder of Billboard's Musician Magazine and the West End Theater, and is producer of the "Gloucester Chicken Shack" TV show.