

# The "Breakwater Irregulars"

by Bob Rasmussen

Every Tuesday evening, from June to September, men and women, even children, rendezvous in Stamford. Unusual flags and gonfalons are displayed, they meet on the water and worship the wind, and have been heard chanting strange phrases such as "mast abeam," "hard-a-lee," and muttering "will we fetch the mark?"

Not witches or warlocks, nor a secret society of guerilla terrorists: it's the "Breakwater Irregulars."

The "Breakwaters," as they've come to be known, are a Stamford-oriented bunch of sailors dedicated to racing their Cruising Class sailboats and they gather a mile offshore every Tuesday night to do it.

"It all started," recalls Dick Sockol, the unofficial commodore, "when four or five of us got together in Stamford Harbor and decided to have a race. The breakwaters at the entrance formed a natural start and finish line that we used until we attracted so many boats we were forced to move out of the harbor."

Eighty boats now make up the Breakwater Irregulars and, like Topsy, the fleet seems to have just "grow'd" so we asked Dick Sockol to explain.

"It's an easy way to get into yacht racing if you own a Cruising Class boat. The only cost is the annual fee of \$35 for each boat to cover the expense of the weekly newsletter and results, the champagne for our Regatta, and the trophies handed out at our winter Awards Dinner," he said.

Sockol, who laughingly describes himself as a benevolent dictator, (former crew members on his boat have difficulty remembering the benevolent part), arbitrarily assigns each boat a handicap rating, based in part on the complicated formula of the Midget Ocean Racing Club (MORC). A modification is cranked into the MORC formula by Sockol, considering the experience of the captain and crew, the sail inventory, and the potential speed of the boat. If one yacht begins to run away with all the races, Dick reviews the boat's rating according to the MORC-Sockol formula and it's adjusted, making it more difficult for that boat to win.

"Our boats range in size from 24 to 43 feet," reports Sockol, "and in many cases the captain is the husband/father and the crew is his wife and kids."

In the early years, Dick and his crew carried out the duties of the Race Committee: picked the course, set the starting line, started the race, raced themselves, and usually finished ahead of the others in time to take the times and order of finish. Now the Race Committee chores are rotated among all the members. To minimize the problems created by the varying degrees of experience of the captains, the Race Committee of the night need only determine the direction and velocity of the wind, (pray it doesn't change), pick one of the 18 preselected triangular courses, and hoist the proper signal flags that identify the Government Aids to Navigation that are used as turning marks. The longest is 16 miles for nights when it's blowin' and just under two miles when it's not.

After the race the results are determined in the quiet, restful, (at least dry), atmosphere of a nearby restaurant featuring pizza. Here's where the captains take all the accolades when they win, and reprehend their crew when they don't. Everyone knows they could have

won if only the crew had done better!

The uniqueness of the Breakwaters is reflected by two events during their 15 weeks of racing; a mid-summer Champagne Regatta and raft-up, and a distance day race held on Labor Day Sunday.

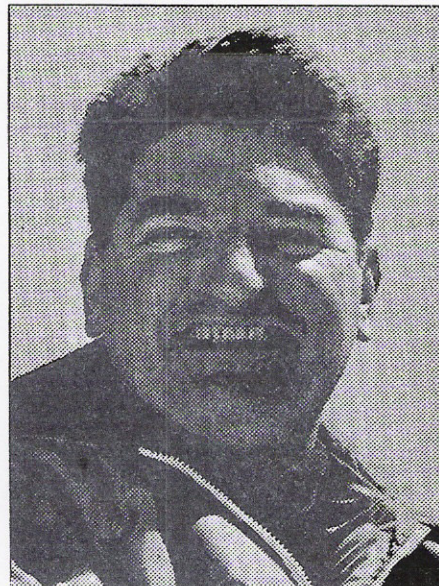
Following a day race in July or August, each boat to finish receives a bottle of champagne, and those finishing in the first three places in the various divisions get a larger reward. Last year, at the post race raft-up, according to Dick Sockol, 108 bottles of champagne were disposed of "in the finest tradition of yacht racing."

The premier race of the season is a distance race to Stratford Shoals Light on Labor Day Sunday. Four divisions and courses are established with assignments based on the boat's previous performance. The longest, about 50 miles, is to the Stratford Point Buoy, Port Jefferson, and home. Division 3 boats go to the Light and back, while the smaller/slower boats go to Fairfield or Norwalk, cross Long Island Sound to Bell 15 at Lloyd Point, and return to Stamford.

The Breakwaters exist for yacht racing and they promote the sport in various ways. Membership is usually limited to an individual boat, however two exceptions have been made. Both Riverside and Stamford Yacht Clubs have purchased memberships and send out various boats to race that are crewed by members of their junior programs. The "Breakwaters" have also supplied the Race Committee for the annual Yacht Haven Trophy Race, sponsored by a local marina, since its inception in 1970.

"Most of our members live in the greater Stamford area," states Dick Sockol, "but others live in New York and New Jersey and just keep their boats here. Some are commuters who literally leap from the Conrail train and into a waiting wife-operated car and then race to the dock."

If you'd like to join, or want more information, call Dick Sockol in Stamford at 323-0257, or sail out to 32, "The Cows," on any Tuesday in June and look for him on "Wave Dancer." The first gun is at 7pm. □



Dick Sockol, the "Breakwater Irregulars" unofficial commodore, mentor, and organizer.

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