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Brotherhood of the wind

Sailors compete in national sailing regatta at Okoboji

By Greg Drees



Marty Palmer of Sioux City, at the tiller of sailboat P-2 with crew John Schwartz, jockeys for position during a race Friday in the Class C National Championship Regatta at Okoboji.

OKOBOJI, Iowa – Zephyr himself, god of the wind, must have been casting the breezes upon West Lake Okoboji, so perfect were the drafts. Sailors, grateful all, took to a course prescribed to them and raced for a coveted prize. Yachtsmen from all over the country gathered in the Iowa Great Lakes at the Okoboji Yacht Club (OYC) over the weekend to participate in the Class C National Championship Regatta.

Sailors from such places as Minnetonka, MN, Lake Beulah, WI, Chatauqua, NY and Missouri Yacht Club, MO brought their 20-foot Class C scows to Okoboji to compete for one of the most sought after crowns in racing. Ten local sailboats joined the fleet, completing a 49-boat contingency.

Begun around 10:30 a.m. on Friday in ideal breezes of from 5-15 miles per hour, the sailors chartered a course from offshore at Dixon beach south into Emerson Bay. In a spectacle of ivory sails set against deep blue Okoboji waters, the sailors studied the wind and set strategies in place. The breezes were at times fickle, however, rising and falling on a whim and challenging the sailors to gamble on upwind or downwind maneuvers.

Marty Palmer of Sioux City, who owns a home on West Okoboji, is an avid sailor who participated in the regatta. Palmer, with John Schwartz as crew, had two top ten finishes in Friday's competition. "We're sitting in good shape," Palmer said, "considering the caliber of sailors out here."

Palmer prefers the Class C sailboat for competitive racing. "The C is a 20-foot long, sporty, single-sail cat-rigged scow," Palmer said. "It's a tactical racer and sailors enjoy its versatility. It's the Harley Davidson of sailboats."

Palmer's children are also sailboat enthusiasts. Sons Ross and Duncan love the competition and daughter Chloe will compete in the Laser class world championships in L.A. later this summer.

It is the competition that drives the Palmer's enthusiasm for the sport, but "sailing just to be on the open water" is part of it, too, Marty said. "In fact, midnight sailing under a full moon is an amazing experience."

Depending on the strength of the wind, the Class C sailboat is manned by a crew of two or three. In gustier conditions, it is more typical to see three yachtsmen on board, the extra weight proving to be beneficial. A crew of two is more customary if the winds are gentler. Sailors generally prefer consistent winds in the 10 to 15 mile per hour range, but they understand that breezes are more often capricious than not. Winds in excess of about 25 miles per hour are physically hard on boats and sailors.

This is the third time in the last 25 years the OYC has hosted the Class C national championship. Phil Petersen, who serves as head judge for the OYC, helped explain some of the particulars of the competition. "The first leg of the race is directly into the wind and is usually a mile to a mile-and-a-half long," Petersen said. "Depending on the length, the sailors will navigate the course two to three times and make the final leg to windward. Typically, it's six or seven miles to the finish buoy."

Petersen said the Iowa Great Lakes is a favorite destination for competitive sailors. "Okoboji is the envy of many sailors because of our wonderful lake and our marvelous facilities," he said. "This event attracts some world-class sailors." Petersen's son, Jim, who races out of Lake Geneva, WI, was among the fleet of racers.

If weather is favorable the Okoboji championship will consist of six races, concluding on Sunday. To be considered an official regatta, three seven-mile long races must be finished. The top point-getters in all the races combined will be crowned champions at a ceremony at the OYC on Sunday.