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The Unstuffiest Classic Regatta



The East Coast fleet gathers for 'least stuffy regatta in the classic yacht world' at the season opener Black Duck Regatta

Story and photography by Dan Erwin

Beautiful yachts have crisscrossed Narragansett Bay since the Gilded Age, but a resurgence of interest in classic yacht restoration and racing has brought together a band of like-minded sailors out for fun and just maybe a little showing off. First up in a season packed with get-togethers and regattas is the Black Duck Regatta.

The regatta has been the informal warm-up for the classic wooden yacht fleet's season, traditionally held in Newport, Rhode Island, the weekend before the Fourth of July. Founded by Newporter Don Glassie almost 20 years ago, it has always been a low-profile, casually organized but competitive event run by the participants for their own enjoyment.

"We do the Black Duck for fun and for love of classic boats," said Johan Lillkung, who is the project manager for the 84-foot 1926 Herreshoff schooner *Gallant*.

"When the regatta first started, some of the boats were in need of significant TLC," said John Taft, a business partner and longtime friend of Glassie. "It took years to get them into decent shape." Thanks to those restoration efforts, 20 classics sailed in this year's regatta.

"Classic yacht racing is a more relaxed crowd," said Richard Barker, the race committee chair during the regatta's early years. "But when the gun goes off they're as competitive as anybody else." Barker said that what differentiates classic yacht racing from grand prix competition is traditional vs. modern equipment, and the higher level of pre-race boat prep in modern yacht racing.

"The flexibility that casual race organization affords is nice," said consulting naval architect Carol Vernon, who was part of the successful Alinghi America's Cup campaign and delivery skipper when *Bolero* returned from Antigua this year.

The regatta uses essentially the same Classic Rating Formula as in the Classic Regatta Series, but with some small modifications to afford everyone a chance at winning.

According to Bill Doyle of Newport's Museum of Yachting, the CRF is a simple self-measurement rating system that is time-on-distance based. It takes into account hull and sail dimensions, but not materials or displacement. There are strict rules against certain sail and building materials like Kevlar and carbon fiber. A CRF rating approximates a boat's waterline length. "Because this is a fun event where we know all the competitors, we occasionally take liberties and give extra credit to heavier displacement boats to try to even the score a bit," Doyle said.



The crew on the 84-foot Herreshoff schooner *Gallant* douses the fisherman.

Glassie acquired the 50-foot staysail schooner *Fortune* 30 years ago, and began racing in classic yacht regattas with Taft. However, there were no classic yacht regattas held early in the season, and the two felt they needed a deadline to force them to have *Fortune* ready to sail by July 4. Glassie knew David Kilroy, who owned The Landing restaurant on Bowens Wharf. Glassie agreed to organize the event, and Kilroy agreed to hold the party, so it was originally called the Newport Landing Regatta.

By the mid-1990s, The Landing was too busy to continue hosting the party, and at the same time Glassie and Taft finished restoring their 65-foot Prohibition-era wooden Elco Motoryacht *RumRunner II*. A similar rumrunner was involved in the notorious "Black Duck Incident" in Newport during the height of the Prohibition Era, when a U.S. Coast Guard patrol boat shot and killed three crewmembers and wounded the captain on December 29, 1929. Glassie and Taft began serving Black Duck rum aboard the *RumRunner II* and at the Black Duck Restaurant in the Park South Hotel in Manhattan. So it seemed logical to use the name Black Duck for the regatta.

in Newport's historic district, widely regarded as one of the highlights of the regatta. "We've been willing participants and they've been wonderful hosts," Taft said.

The Black Duck has always been famous for elaborate silver trophies. "Don is a frequenter of antique shops in search of hard to find or unusual items to furnish our properties," Taft said. Glassie would purchase old silver and have it polished and engraved to give as awards. Each silver prize was accompanied by a complimentary bottle of Black Duck rum. This year Doyle split the fleet into three classes, and awarded prizes for first through fourth in each so that more people could take home silver. He also awarded prizes for the "prettiest boat" and "nicest crew."

Glassie and Taft acquired *Fortune* in 1974 by trading Glassie's S-boat *Vixen*, Taft's Beetle Cat *Pieces Of Eight* and \$800. According to Taft, the boat has been a "work in progress" ever since. She used to leak so badly that the crew became accustomed to putting their clothing in garbage bags. Glassie and Taft also quickly discovered that spare cotton underwear "made pretty good caulking in a pinch." *Fortune* was a real "mother of invention" boat. One regatta they experimented with using different weights to put tension on the reacher's clew, and determined that *Fortune's* old

head was the ideal weight. "It wasn't one of our prouder days, but we won the race," Taft said. *Fortune's* rig was gradually becoming unglued, and Glassie resorted to an old S-boat trick of using hose clamps. Narragansett Shipwrights in Newport completed a partial restoration of *Fortune* in 1993, which finally resolved the hull leakage problem, and built new masts in 1996 after the mainmast broke.

Since those days, *Fortune* has become competitive, with Glassie at the helm and Taft managing the foredeck and navigational tasks (they share making tactical decisions). *Fortune* won the Classic Yacht Division at the 150th Jubilee of the America's Cup in Cowes, England, in 2001, and first place in the Class 2 of the New York Yacht Club Invitational Racing Series for Vintage and Classic Yachts in Newport this summer.

Fortune's main competition is *Gallant*, also a classic staysail schooner. *Fortune*, being much lighter and narrower, has the advantage in light air while *Gallant* comes alive in winds over 15 knots. Originally built within 10 miles and one year of each other, *Gallant* has been racing against *Fortune* since undergoing a major restoration four years ago. "Who would have thought that so many years later we'd be racing against each other again so often," Taft said.



"The Black Duck is the least stuffy regatta in the classic yacht world," Vernon said. A post-race reception was held Saturday evening at the Museum of Yachting, where Doyle, recently elected vice chairman of the Board of Trustees, spoke of a new era of cooperation between the museum and the International Yacht Restoration School in Newport. IYRS and MOY are symbiotic organizations, with IYRS focusing on training a new generation of wooden boat shipwrights, and the museum concentrating on preserving and presenting the historical aspects of yachting. Doyle and New York Yacht Club 30 racer Jed Pearsall have hosted the awards party for the past eight years on Sunday evening at their waterfront home



Rail down and rolling, *Adventure*, the 95-foot William Fife ketch built in 1924, top, races across the Narragansett Bay. Perennial Black Duckers, from left to right, Bill Doyle, Don Glassie and Jed Pearsall celebrate at the awards bash.

Fortune typically sails with a small crew, which Taft said is very demanding.

"While the ability to adapt to the situation is a great strength of a schooner, typically *Fortune* will have more sail changes than the rest of the non-schooner fleet combined," he said.

In addition to headsails, both schooners carry a staysail and fisherman sail, and each uses a golly-wobbler for light air, off-the-wind sailing.

According to Johan Lillkung, at a hull speed exceeding 11 knots, water starts pouring through *Gallant's* transom. "That's how we know we have to start pulling down the sails," Lillkung said. "The faster you sail a displacement boat, the more it becomes like a submarine."

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When classics get serious

The Museum of Yachting hosts a classic regatta to cap off the season

Narragansett Bay bustled all summer with high-tech racers. TransPac 52s and canting-keel marvels raced to Bermuda while Cup racers banged around the buoys. But the boats that really stole the show were 60 beautiful classic wooden yachts racing in the Museum of Yachting's 25th Annual Classic Yacht Regatta and Parade during Labor Day weekend.

"This was one of the greatest collections of classic yachts in the country," said event chairman Bill Doyle. Fine yachts from the drafting boards of such great designers as Herreshoff, Fife, Burgess, Alden and Sparkman & Stephens competed in not only round-the-buoy racing but in fun events as well off Newport, Rhode Island.

Sunday morning featured a yacht parade around Newport Harbor led by John Moitza's Dixieland Band on *RimRunner II*, a Prohibition-era commuter-style motoryacht. The fleet received canon salutes from Newport, Ida Lewis and New York yacht clubs as it passed. A perennial crowd-pleaser, creatively costumed yacht crews cavorted for the judges and spectators as they competed for prizes. In the afternoon, many classics also participated in the second race of the regatta, this time around Conanicut Island.

"A lot of people think of this as the museum's signature event," said Executive Director David Brown. The regatta was the third event in the inaugural New York Yacht Club Invitational Racing Series for Vintage and Classic Yachts. The New York Y.C.'s race committee even got into the spirit and dressed in Roaring 20s attire.

The Museum of Yachting itself was launched in 1980 with a regatta for classic yachts. "The announcement of that race described it as the First Annual Classic Yacht Regatta, which spoke volumes of the vision and confidence of the museum's founders," Brown said. The regatta became part of a New England-based classic yacht series for wooden boats in the late 1980s.

"It used to be cruisers who wanted to go out and show off their boats," said Sheila McCurdy, a past executive director of the museum. "As the owners have become increasingly savvy, the level of competition has increased."

According to Chris Wick, who has administered the Classic Rating Formula since 1986, the CRF originated with the Nantucket Opera House Cup, was modified in the Classic Yacht Regatta, formalized in 1993 and then applied to all of the regattas in the series. Wick has sailed his 1914 Herreshoff sloop *Mischief* in almost every Classic Yacht Regatta since its inception. The definition of what constitutes a classic yacht has also evolved to include a new "Modern Classics" category, which allows boats that have traditional topside appearance but modern underbodies, materials and construction methods to race, while being scored separately.

The museum was founded by a group of classic yacht enthusiasts led by the late Tom Benson, noted marine artist John Mecray and local yachtsman Nick Nicholson after the sinking and raising of the 53-foot 1907 Herreshoff sloop *Neith* sparked interest in preventing the loss of other classic yachts and encouraging their restoration.

"The museum provided tremendous support and was a great resource during *Neith's* restoration to stay consistent with boats of the period," said Van Brown, son of *Neith's* owner Jack Brown. "These old boats become a focus of your life. She pays it back in pride and joy of ownership, and an entrée into a wonderful community of people."

Jed Pearsall brought the 1905 Herreshoff New York 30 *Amorita* to Newport in 1983 and Bill Doyle came to Newport in 1984 to participate in the Classic Yacht Regatta, and they've been sailing together ever since. Pearsall and Doyle were honored with the Clingstone Canon, which is awarded to the sailors exhibiting the best corinthian spirit, noting their years of continued out-



A smiling Jack Goggin, 11, rides the bowsprit of the 72-foot Herreshoff ketch *Ticonderoga*. Halsey Herreshoff takes the helm of his 1904 Herreshoff sloop *Bambino*, above, during the Museum of Yachting Classic Yacht Regatta. Dan Erwin photos

standing contribution to the sport of classic yachting. Jim Lynch received the Thomas Benson Memorial Restoration Award for the three-year restoration of his 1924 Fife ketch *Adventress*. One of a class of cruising boats in the 75- to 90-foot category designed by William Fife III and built by the Fife yard in Fairlie, Scotland, she is 83-feet on deck and constructed of two-inch teak planking over double-sawn oak frames. The deck, cabinhouse and most of the keel are also teak. "You couldn't build this boat today," said Lynch, noting the materials are no longer available in the sizes needed.

Located in historic Fort Adams State Park since 1980, the Museum of Yachting is dedicated to preserving and presenting the history and culture of yachting. In addition to the permanent America's Cup and the Single-Handed Sailors' Hall of Fame exhibits, the museum hosts a number of special events and exhibits each year. The museum also displays several historically significant classic yachts on its waterfront. For complete results, or more information on the Classic Yacht Regatta and the Museum of Yachting visit www.museumofyachting.org or call (401) 847-1018. --D.E.