

SAIL AMERICA NEWS

Monthly News for
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WAYPOINTS COVER STORY



Randy Draftz, owner of Charleston Yachting and event director for the Sperry Top-Sider Charleston Race Week (April 10–13, 2014), has been involved with the sailing industry his entire life. Established in 1995 by the Charleston Ocean Racing Association (CORA), Charleston Race Week, open to 20' to 80' monohulls, is the largest keelboat regatta in the US and after nearly two decades remains arguably the fastest growing regatta as well, attracting such sponsors as Torqeedo and Quantum Sails, Charleston Harbor Resort & Marina, Vineyard Vines, Gosling Rum, and its title sponsor

Sperry Top-Sider. Sail America caught up with Randy to chat about the meteoric rise of Charleston Race Week and to get his thoughts on business, racing, and sailing.

Sail America: How did you get involved with Charleston Race Week?

Randy Draftz: I was the Rear Commodore of the Charleston Ocean Racing Association (CORA). The Rear Commodore is responsible for running all the CORA races for the season (except race week). I thought I should at least help out so I worked on one of the signal boats as a starter. The following year I ran the scoring for race week. Then I missed a very important meeting and became race director.

SA: How would you characterize this regatta?

RD: It's a fun family event and yet it is very competitive. The boats range from big grand prix entries to 20 foot one designs. We are adding multihulls for the first time this year, so the event has something to offer everyone.

SA: Who competes in the regatta?

RD: It's the novice to past Olympic medalists and America's Cup. It's one of the great things about our sport; we can sail against the best our sport has to offer if we choose.

SA: According to the race's website, Charleston Race Week saw a dramatic shift in 2005 after CORA struck a deal with the South Carolina Maritime Foundation to focus on establishing the Race Week as a premier event. Can you comment on this and to what do you attribute Charleston Race Week's popularity and its fast growth

RD: The event was growing and was headed to the next level. The game changer was moving the venue to a resort that had a marina and a beach. Having the harbor for smaller keelboats and the ocean for larger is also somewhat unique. Our weather in April is just starting to get warm and our sea breeze is becoming reliable, so it's also a great time of year to be in Charleston. We have worked hard to develop the quality of our race management and that has also allowed us to expand our six courses.

SA: Last year, the Melges 24 National Championship took place during Charleston Race Week. Did that help bolster attendance and/or recognition?

RD: It was great to host their National Championships. Sperry Top-Sider Charleston Race Week had already become one of the more popular M24 regattas. It's a great testament to the capabilities and caliber of our race committee.

SA: What changes have you seen in the near decade you've been director of the Race Week?

RD: I have watched it grow in popularity and competitiveness. It is great to see all the talent the event is now drawing. Last year it seemed like the best sailors were either at the AC World Series or at Sperry Top-Sider Charleston Race Week. We have gone from three courses to six to accommodate the growth. That's 160 race committee on the water! Forty marks and anchor rode etc. It's just fantastic the support this event garners.

SA: What kinds of increases are you seeing in entries for 2014?

RD: We might see a slight increase, maybe 10%. It doesn't sound like much but that's 30 more boats. Right now we are way up, mostly due to the relatively new J70 class. We had to cap the inshore classes to 60 boats. Currently we are reorganizing the in-shore classes to allow us to lift the cap for the J70s where we currently have a waiting list.

SA: Where is the farthest-reaching competitor coming from?

RD: We usually will have some Europeans attending and I think we have a boat from China registered. Our state tourism board loves the event due to the fact that 85% of our attendees are from outside South Carolina.

SA: Let's talk about the online business you've owned for the past nine years, Charleston Yachting, a rigging and specialty marine store with products ranging from cordage and clothing to sails and inflatable boats. Did you launch the store?

RD: Yes I started the store originally online. I have been in the marine retail business for a long time. A few years in the sail making business then into the retail/distribution/manufacturing with a company called Chicago Yachting and Navigation. You had to be diverse to be in the marine industry in Chicago. Now the online business has evolved into more of a traditional chandlery these days.

SA: You've been professionally involved with the boating industry since the late '70/early '80s, correct? How does your personal sailing experience direct you in business, from a nuts-and-bolts R&D perspective and from an ideological perspective?

RD: My personal sailing experience has given me great exposure to all types of boats and their issues. Then there are the owners. They are successful and smart and I try to treat them as I would want to be treated and hopefully keep them coming back. Sailing is a great sport so we work hard on making sure our customers get to enjoy it as much as we do.

SA: Other than Charleston Race Week, are you involved with the local sailing community and in what way?

RD: Race Week is a big part of my life these days. It's also about what race week can do to help grow the sport and the community. I am still trying to learn the "no" word but it's not working as well as it should. I will run several races a year for CORA and help out at several of the local yacht club race committees. I did some work with US Sailing this past fall. If it helps grow or improve the sport I am still there.

SA: Are you involved in any outreach programs to youths or to involve people who are new to sailing?

RD: We started to create an organization to coordinate all the sailing initiatives in Charleston called [Sail Charleston](#). It's more of an informational website today but still an ongoing concern. Last year at race week we used Sail Charleston to invite people to an intro to sailing program where we had sailing schools, charter groups, and yacht clubs there for people to investigate. We then took them out on a chartered boat to view some of the racing with Greg Fisher commentating. It was a great start and got a lot of people exposed to the sport. This year we are partnering with [US Sailing's REACH program](#), which is a [STEM](#) program for middle school teachers and children. Hopefully we can introduce the sport and educate as well.

SA: Do you own a sailboat? Do you compete? What kinds of races get your attention?

RD: I used to have a small one design that I got involved in when I moved to Charleston. Maybe I have gotten lazy but the last few years I have been content to race with customers. I will always travel back up to Chicago for the Mac Race and I do a number of the local CORA races. I really need to get back involved in my own boat at some point. Not easy when you are in the business though.

SA: Are you native to Charleston? Did you grow up sailing? On what kind of boat?

RD: No, I grew up in Michigan. My family had boats that we would sail and race. I then moved to Chicago and spent 19 years working and sailboat racing. I arrived in Charleston in 1999. It wasn't exactly planned; I was keen on working with a dot.com startup called SailNet. I wasn't even that familiar with Charleston—it was all about the job. I created the online store and was their Director of E Commerce before I started Charleston Yachting. Now I have been here over 13 years and have watched our son grow up here. What a wonderful place. Time flies when you are having fun.