

Bahamas trip not a tough Sell

By GARY FALLESEN

The odds that Sally and Ralph Sell would both return to Rochester from sailing to the Bahamas were about as long as Zippy Chippy winning a horse race, as the Washington Generals beating the Harlem Globetrotters, as Buster Douglas KO'ing Mike Tyson.

OK, upsets happen.

“We didn't even know about it until we came home,” Sally Sell says about the friendly wagering that was done behind their backs.

“One of our closest friends said, ‘You know, I was the only one who said you were going to make it.’”

The Sells were both 58 when they left their jobs and set sail from Sodus Bay to the Bahamas on a route that covered canals, rivers, the Intracoastal Waterway, and the Atlantic Ocean.

The couple, married since 1972, spent nine months together on a 35-foot Pearson sailboat. That, Sally Sell remarks, was “close quarters.”

“We knew people who bailed out by the time they got to the Hudson,” she says.

The Sells made it down the Erie Canal to the Hudson River, reached New York City and escaped into the Atlantic Ocean off the New Jersey coast. Their boat, the Sandpiper, ducked into the Delaware River and took the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal to the Chesapeake Bay.

“The trick is you have to wait until hurricane season ends,” says Ralph Sell, who quit his job at the Center for Governmental Research while his wife quit her job as the manager of a dental office.

“I'm kind of on the chicken side.”

That explains why the Sells stuck mostly to the Intracoastal Waterway from Norfolk, Va., to Miami.

“We went on the ocean once in a while, but you don't have to,” Ralph Sell says. “You can stay in protected waterways.”

They did have to hit open water from south Florida to reach the Bahamas. They also needed to navigate through the Gulf Stream, which flows north against any southern-bound boat.

“We did it in the middle of the night,” Ralph Sell remembers. “It was blowing really bad. You feel lonely out there. You're by yourself.”

Except for the passing Carnival Cruise Lines ship.

“Cruise ships go by fast, and you don’t go fast,” Ralph Sell says about their sailboat, which traveled about 5 mph.

Sailing fast — or at least trying — actually caused some problems in the Sell household. The couple used to race together on Irondequoit Bay with the Rochester Canoe Club.

“We decided we could stay married or we could race together,” Sally Sell says, adding they opted for marital bliss.

“We both continued racing, but with different people. He had his own crew and I crewed on another boat.”

That split on the not-so-high seas entered Sally’s mind when they decided to sail south. She didn’t want the marriage to go south.

“But cruising is different than racing,” Sally says. “It’s not split-second decisions.”

Unless, of course, the weather turns on you.

Off the coast of Georgia, a thunderstorm rolled in over the Sandpiper.

“We went out one of the harbors of Florida,” Ralph Sell says. “You look at a map and you can see the temptation to cut the corner (to the Carolinas). We took the straight line. We were 15 miles out, where you don’t see any land, when a big lightning storm came through.

“We heard ‘small boats seek harbor’ over the radio.”

Too late.

“That was kind of scary,” Ralph Sell recalls. “There were lightning bolts the size of tree trunks.”

But Sally says, “We didn’t even yell at each other.”

Calm in the center of a storm. The tempest didn’t rock the Sells’ marital boat.

While this trip wasn’t completely Shangri-La, the couple did manage to anchor out for most of the nine months, living on the boat outside of marinas. “That’s how you get away from it,” Ralph Sell says.

The Sells had dreamed of such a getaway for years. They started boating when they went in on a \$150 “tub” (Ralph’s word) with Sherry and Gary Jacobson.

A few years later, they were racing Thistles in the Rochester Canoe Club, where they’d learned to sail.

“When we got sick of being flipped in Thistles we upgraded,” Ralph Sell says.

In 1997 they bought the Pearson with a long-distance sailing trip set in their minds.

“It progresses from something you want to do to planning ‘let’s do it next year,’ ” Ralph Sell says.

Both husband and wife shared the dream.

“I would really strongly suggest that people who think they want to do this, do it,” Sally Sell says. “Don’t wait for the perfect boat or the ideal situation. Do it before you can’t.”

Some more advice: “Roll with the punches,” Sally Sell says.

The key to it all is surviving together.

Did the Sells have their moments? “Oh, no,” Ralph Sell answers, playfully.

He’s not saying. Even if all bets are off.

Sailing south

Seminar on “Taking Your Boat South via the Canals and Intracoastal Waterway,” presented by Sally and Ralph Sell of Rochester at 7 p.m. Tuesday at BoatU.S., 1850 East Ridge Road, Irondequoit. The Sells will talk about preparing a boat for a long-distance trip as well as experiences they shared while sailing from Sodus Bay to the Bahamas and back last year. For information, call (585) 323-2040.

Sailing on a shoestring

By GARY FALLESEN

Bob Elliott walked along the banks of the Genesee River, watching the sailboats heading toward Lake Ontario and wishing he was onboard. Since growing up in sail-free eastern Ohio, he had dreamed about boating.

The fantasy was fueled by books, magazines and television.

When he moved to the North Coast and settled in Rochester in 1969, he had \$1,500 set aside for a boat. Then a boatload of unexpected expenses came along and his boyhood dream was sunk.

It was 10 more years before he could buy his first boat.

“I never really had the discretionary money to buy a boat, and I didn’t know any other way to get into sailing,” says Elliott, the rear commodore of the working-class Genesee Yacht Club. “If I knew then what I know now, I might not own a boat yet.”

What he knows now is you can learn to sail for free. Or at least without the sticker shock of a new boat.

Some expensive sailboats sit at docks while races are held on Lake Ontario, the Finger Lakes and Irondequoit Bay during the sailing season. The reason: No crew.

“Over the course of a single season, there are probably hundreds of vacancies in sailboat racing crews,” Elliott says, “vacancies that skippers would be glad to fill with inexperienced sailors willing to learn.”

Tony Gambacurta is the sort of crew member skippers are eager to meet. He began sailing on a Genesee Yacht Club member’s boat in 1991. He says he “essentially learned it all from scratch.

“Most crews welcome new sailors, especially if they’re enthusiastic. It’s fun to help someone learn who wants to learn.”

Now, the Penfield resident says, “I sail more than some people who own their own boat.” He races up to three times a week during the summer season, often turning down invitations to race more because there aren’t enough hours in the day.

There is little expense involved for the novice sailor.

“Sneakers and a \$15 pair of sailing gloves are the only investment required,” Elliott says.

“Good foul-weather gear is a must,” Gambacurta says, “but you can even borrow that sometimes. If you stick with it, plan on spending \$200 to \$300 on clothing.”

You may even want to buy your own boat someday. But that can wait.

“The cost of buying, maintaining, insuring and berthing a boat can be substantial, to be sure,” Elliott says. When you volunteer to crew on one of those boats, he adds, “it is difficult to spend more than a few hundred dollars.”

The reward can be life-altering.

Gambacurta says sailing teaches patience and teamwork and builds self-confidence. “Even to an engineer who has some understanding of the physics, every time I go out, it is a different experience,” he says, “and it is always magic.”

Elliott recognized that from the shore. He couldn’t wait for the sensation of being aboard a boat, riding the waves, being driven by the wind. He didn’t realize he could experience that long before he had enough money to pay for his dream.

“If I’d known then what I know now,” Elliott says, “I probably would have been out 10 years earlier.”

Gaining knowledge the old-fashioned way: paying for it

You can always pay for lessons, too. Clubs offering sailing instruction:

Canandaigua Yacht Club, 3524 County Road 16, Canandaigua. The club on Canandaigua Lake offers eight 2 1/2-hour classes from late June to early August for \$125. Call (585) 396-9200 or go to www.sailcyc.com.

Newport Yacht Club, 624 Seneca Road, Irondequoit. The club on the west side of Irondequoit Bay has a six-lesson session. Call (585) 352-2978 for details.

Rochester Canoe Club, 2050 Bayshore Blvd., Irondequoit. The sailing club, also on the west side of the bay, offers a week of lessons July 1, 2, 3 and 5 for \$95 (\$85 if you own a boat). Call (585) 377-0271 or visit www.ggw.org/rcc.

Rochester Yacht Club, 5555 St. Paul Blvd. The club on the east side of the Genesee River offers basic sailing by appointment. Call (585) 342-5511 or click on www.rochesteryc.com.

Racing to learn

The Genesee Yacht Club, on the Stutson Street Extension on the west side of the Genesee River, starts its racing season Tuesday. Aspiring crew members can contact rear commodore Bob Elliott to find a skipper with vacancies on his crew for Tuesday-evening or Saturday-morning races (beginning May 25) by calling (585) 723-5856 or e-mailing relliot1@rochester.rr.com. For more on the Genesee Yacht Club, visit:

www.geneseeyc.org

High school teams sail right along

By GARY FALLESEN

Practice for some high school sports can be tedious to the players, even something they dread. That's not the case in sailing.

There was weightlifting at sailing practice Tuesday at the Rochester Yacht Club on the Genesee River. But it involved a hoist, which put each of the 14-foot sailboats in the water.

After pushing a button to lift and lower the boat, practice was a breeze.

"It's practice, but it's fun," said Mike Wilde, a McQuaid junior who is on the combined McQuaid/Mercy team, one of four area high school squads.

"We don't have to run sprints, which is always a plus."

Sailing is growing at the high school level, where many junior sailors have long found the school year to be an off-season.

"This is good for staying in shape for summer," said Wilde, one of North America's better junior sailors in the Laser class.

When Steve Wilde, Mike's father and the coach of McQuaid/Mercy, started running Tuesday and Thursday practices in the fall and spring two years ago, "we had three or four boats out with a half-dozen to a dozen kids." This spring there were 28 students signed up for practices, which are run through the RYC's Junior Sail Program.

"This takes racing to a whole 'nother level," said Tom Hart, an Irondequoit senior who has taken lessons with the RYC Juniors. "We get a lot of actual practice and unbelievable competition."

McQuaid/Mercy, Irondequoit and Aquinas are among the 41 member schools in the MidAtlantic Scholastic Sailing Association, a division of the national InterScholastic Sailing Association. Webster is another area school with a team.

Steve Wilde's dream is to build a bigger league in our watery backyard.

"With all the lakes and all the yacht clubs around, it would be nice to see more schools do this," he said.

The cost this spring was \$182 per sailor. The fee — \$13 a day per person — gave students access to the RYC's Club 420 double-handed sailboats for 14 practices.

Some of the student sailors competed in five fall regattas and five spring regattas this year. The RYC hosted a local regatta last weekend, drawing six teams (Youngstown and Williamsville joined the Rochester-area squads). The regatta was won by Irondequoit.

Most regattas are held at colleges, where boats are available. "That way high schools don't have to lug equipment," Steve Wilde said.

Jen Fulton, a recent medical school graduate who is waiting to start her residency, used her time off this spring to coach the Tuesday-Thursday practices. Fulton sailed in college and previously coached in Maine and New Jersey.

“I like teaching here a lot,” she said. “This is a competitive group of kids. They’re going to be intercollegiate sailors.

“There’s a lot of talent in this group. You can’t get lazy in this fleet.”

Tegan Vay, a Mercy junior who is a competitive figure skater, has sailed since she was 5. Her cousin, Dave Warner of Irondequoit, was in the high school program and told her about it.

Now she is wrestling with skating or sailing in college.

Fulton has tried to give the girls in the program an opportunity to skipper the boats. Often, female sailors in co-ed programs are put in boats to serve as crew because they are lighter.

But Fulton skippered in college, and knows women are capable of piloting the boat. She’s also aware that two of the best sailors to emerge from Rochester in recent years were women: 1996 Olympian Louise Van Voorhis and two-time Rolex Yachtswoman of the Year Cory Sertl.

Fulton put Jen Norton at the rudder in last Saturday’s regatta on Lake Ontario.

“It was not the greatest experience,” said Norton, who is a junior at Mercy. “It was really choppy.”

While she wasn’t pleased with her performance, Norton wasn’t intimidated by her new position as skipper. Nerves were not a factor.

“The first day I had her skipper (in practice) was our windiest day,” Fulton recalled. “She didn’t care.”

She didn’t have to run like the wind, only sail in it. That’s always a plus.

Spring meet

McQuaid/Mercy, which finished seventh in the fall MidAtlantic Scholastic Sailing Association championships, placed third out of 18 schools that qualified for the spring finals Saturday at SUNY Maritime in Throgs Neck, The Bronx.

For more information on the MidAtlantic Scholastic Sailing Association and InterScholastic Sailing Association, visit:

www.highschoolsailingusa.org

The sail of a lifetime

Participants in Hospice Regatta carry heavy hearts

By GARY FALLESEN

Jay Tovey admits his first Hospice Regatta was “nothing more than another sailboat race.” But when he won the charity event for the second time in three years he wasn’t just hoisting another sailing victory, he was celebrating a person’s life.

The name Hazel North was taped to his boom last year.

She was the aunt of his girlfriend, Jo Case, and a woman who had been helped to the end by the hospice services of Genesee Region Home Care.

“At the sponsors party the Friday before Saturday racing, they dedicated the race to loved ones who had died,” said Tovey, 42, of Penfield, who will defend his Rochester title at the fourth annual Hospice Regatta at 10 a.m. Saturday on Lake Ontario.

“They read the names of all these people. I had tears in my eyes.”

When Tovey went to the National Hospice Regatta Championship he carried those names with him. He put the list that had been read in Rochester in his pocket and sailed to what appeared to be a first-place finish last April in Annapolis, Md.

“I dedicated my effort to them,” said Tovey, whose boat ended up second after a protest.

The Hospice Regatta is unique in a world full of cookie-mold charity events. It is the only championship of its kind — on the local and national level.

Bill Northwood of Genesee Region Home Care, which helps families in Monroe, Wayne and Seneca counties care for loved ones with terminal illnesses, says his non-profit organization would rather be “one of one charity regattas than one of 250 charity golf tournaments. It’s gratifying to us the way the sailing community has adopted us as a cause.”

After winning the inaugural Hospice Regatta in Rochester in 1999 (and then finishing fourth at nationals), Tovey says he “got the chance to meet all the people who run this group. I was immediately impressed.”

It was no longer just another sailboat race. It was a race for a cause.

Northwood says as many as half of the 70 or 80 boats expected in Saturday’s regatta will be racing in memory of someone touched by a hospice.

Since opening in the late 1970s, Genesee Region Home Care has served the families of more than 10,000 terminally ill patients.

The regatta features a Memorial Boat Sponsorship that has two levels — the Hospice Hero (with pledges over \$250) and the Hospice Helper — with proceeds benefiting hospice services.

Marvin Hill of Webster and the Pultneyville Yacht Club is a hero. He could be in the running for the Hildebrandt Trophy, which will be awarded to the skipper of the boat that raises the largest amount of money.

When Hill sent in his registration form he included 26 checks — ranging from \$5 to \$50, according to Northwood.

“His wife, Ann, was a patient of ours earlier this year,” Northwood said. “He’s sailing in her memory.”

Tovey is sailing with the memory of last year’s National Championship.

“It was ‘mission accomplished,’ ” recalled Tovey, who is competing this weekend in the J/29 North Americans at the Rochester Yacht Club. “We were done.”

While Hospice Regatta competitors sail their own boats in local races — of which there are 17 nationwide — the winner advances to a championship race where the boats are supplied.

In Annapolis in April, the skippers and crews sailed J/105s worth an estimated \$130,000 each.

“These people care enough about the cause to let us use them,” Tovey said about the J/105 owners.

Tovey steered his borrowed boat to first place in four of the regatta’s five races. Or so it seemed.

Another skipper protested a technicality.

“There’s a pole that extends from the bow,” Tovey explained. “When you’re ready to go downwind and going to pull out the spinnaker, you pull out this pole. The rule says you have to do it at the mark. The rule is for safety, so you don’t extend it and hurt somebody (in another boat).

“In our excitement we did it a boat length ahead of the mark. No one was around us. We were so far ahead of the pack. There was no advantage for us. We just did it eight seconds early in our excitement.”

Those eight seconds, that boat length, cost Tovey the title.

“I tried as hard as I could to win it for them,” he said at the time about the names on the list in his pocket, “and for their survivors. We did not.”

The effort was for a good cause.

“My aunt used a hospice service several years ago,” Tovey said.

“They’re an unbelievable group of people.”

Larry Sill, the commodore of the host Genesee Yacht Club, has said “this event is a perfect opportunity to support those who support us during our most trying times.”

Win or lose, it’s a chance to celebrate life.

Special sailing

Four fleets: Separate courses will be set for boats entered in the Hospice Regatta. The event, which benefits the hospice services of Genesee Region Home Care, is open to all boats that normally sail or race on Lake Ontario. The overall winner from the Spinnaker Fleet will advance to the National Championship to be held next spring.

Jay Tovey of Penfield has represented Rochester two of the first three years with Hank Stuart of Rochester winning the 2000 race locally and finishing fifth nationally. For more on the national race:

www.hospiceregattas.org

Spectator boat: Tickets are available to watch races aboard the Harbor Town Belle from 1 to 4 p.m. There will be a barbecue after the regatta. It costs \$25 to attend the party (\$15 for ages 4 to 11) and \$30 for the boat cruise and party (\$20 for 4-11). Call (585) 214-1575 or go to:

www.rochesterhospice

regatta.org

“Fish” takes to water: Tovey’s J/29, called The Fish, is the only boat in its class in Rochester. This type of sailboat (30 feet long and 11 feet wide) is no longer built. “It’s the perfect boat: it looks big and has a big-boat feel,” Tovey said. “It’s as big as you can possibly get and feel OK trailering it down the highway.”

Tovey is a “road warrior,” driving to Key West and St. Petersburg, Fla., each year, as well as making two annual trips to Annapolis, Md. “It gets as many highway miles as it does water miles,” Tovey joked.

The Fish is in home water this weekend. Thirteen boats from six states and Canada came to the “fleet of one” for the three-day J/29 North Americans, which concludes today.