

[News](#) »

Sailors say ‘aye-aye’ to Creekfleet

By Gina Joseph
gina.joseph@macombdaily.com;

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Macomb Daily staff photo by David Dalton Bruce Emmons and Barbara Lass both of Beverly Hills enjoy a Creekfleet race at Stony Creek.

You’ve heard of pick-up hockey and sandlot baseball where anyone with an interest in the sport can jump into a game going on in the street or nearby park? Here in the Great Lakes State we have what is known as Creekfleet.

Every Thursday night during the summer, small-boat sailors are invited to show up at Stony Creek, and race whoever happens to be there.

“For an overcast night we still got a pretty good turnout,” said Lindy Rymill, Creekfleet founder and a longtime sailor on a recent Thursday. At 60-something, she still races, but on this night her deck was a picnic table overlooking Stony Creek. Armed with bottled water, logbook, binoculars and a stopwatch, Rymill watched the sailboats tacking into position for the first race. Among them was a boat crewed by a father and three little girls.

“They are the crew of Creekfleet,” said the dad, Wayne Graves of Royal Oak, smiling at his crew giggling on the dock. “All right, girls, lifejackets.”

At the sound of the order, Paige Vandlen, 8, along with Charlotte Graves, 6, and her sister, Hailey Graves, 8, climbed into their jackets and jumped aboard, and off they went, headed toward the cluster of small sailboats juggling position at the starting buoys. A dozen boats turned out for the weekly race.

“We have all abilities racing here, from some who are just learning how to rig their boat and leave the dock, to those who are truly world-class sailors who come just to see if they can help someone out,” Rymill said. “It’s kind of nice to see. I’m sure it’s great for them too, seeing that they helped someone new or younger

learn how to sail.”

Rymill’s dad, who built several boats himself, used to sail out of Jolly Rogers Sailing Club, when Rymill lived in Toldeo. Her father was a logistician for the U.S. Army, so their yacht club memberships changed several times, except when living in Japan. “Nobody sailed there,” Rymill said.

In 1968, the family moved from Pennsylvania to Michigan. Growing up around sailing, but finding herself excluded from the sport because of her age and sex, are why Rymill wanted to start Creekfleet. She also saw the need for a sailing community, free of fees or restrictions based on skill and boat size.

“I first tried sailing in college when I was invited to sail on a friend’s boat,” said Edith Tannaru. “I’ve always loved sports like sailing and skiing and biking where I can come close to a feeling of flying. I had a chance to rent a Sunfish (one-person sailboat) a couple of times when my kids were growing up, but I didn’t learn to sail until I found the (Creekfleet). My husband isn’t fond of being on the water, so having me sail with a group makes him a little less apprehensive about me (sailing alone).”

“The Creekfleet makes it so easy to learn to sail,” said Mary Pawlicki, who skippers a Catalina Expo 14.2. “With everyone being so helpful, it makes a big difference in that you are not alone trying to figure it out.”

“I would welcome you to come out any Thursday evening and see what we are all about,” said Marc Meyer, Creekfleet sailor and organizer. “Most boats arrive between 5 and 6 p.m.”

The first race horn is heard at 6:30 p.m. and the last, around 8:30 p.m. The summer racing season runs May 31 through Aug. 30. Fall races begin Sept. 9 and go until they can sail no more.

Sailors pay no fees other than the cost of entering the park, and are free to come when they like.

“As soon as you have a day set aside for sailing — and everyone knows Thursday night is it — they will come if they can. They’re here all the time,” Rayhill said, while waving to the little girls and their dad. They had just crossed the finish line and were standing up cheering, and waving, but all on one side. Before Rayhill could warn the girls to split up, or risk capsizing the boat, down it went, girls, dad and the sail.

Rymill grabbed the binoculars.

Then she proceeded to give everyone on shore a play-by-play.

“There are the girls, there’s dad,” Rymill said, “OK, the kids are laughing. They’re doing fine.”

Not all of the sailors come to learn.

“I enjoy it because it gives me something to look forward to during the week. And I like the camaraderie. I didn’t know a lot of sailors but now I do and many of them are good friends,” said Wayne Waldrup of Troy, who has four teenagers who join him occasionally.

Younger sailors such as Patrick Grabowski, who is entering sixth-grade this fall, said it’s fun sailing with his dad, Tom Grabowski, and sister Alexandria and — jumping overboard when it’s hot and sunny.

“I used to do it as a kid,” said Graves, after the races were over and the girls dried off. “So, I thought it might be nice to sail again — with the hope that the girls would go out with me. Finding out that Creekfleet was out here made it much more enjoyable, and the girls really have fun.”

“Standing on the bow is the best part of sailing,” said daughter Hailey.

Charlotte agreed, but added that she also likes the lemonade that her dad brings along.

“That was my first time sailing and I thought it was a good experience,” added Hailey’s BFF, Paige.

For more information on Creekfleet visit www.avonsailboats.com/stony_creek_sailing.html.

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