

Making Our Yacht Clubs Essential

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Over the winter I had a chance to visit 43 yacht clubs. At every stop I talked with the flag officers, junior sailors, managers and active volunteers. Along the way I learned about two universal trends: the desire to do things better and a deep curiosity about how other clubs around the country are handling tough issues.

There is no doubt that sailing in America can use a boost of energy. There are many problems confronting yacht clubs including aging membership rosters, declining participation on the water, growing regulatory restrictions, budget deficits, rising insurance premiums, the need to upgrade facilities and policy questions like reciprocity or governance. Whew! Its enough to make your head spin. But I was heartened to find that many clubs are taking on these and other projects.

In a speech at the International Sailing Summit in Annapolis last October, retiring ISAF President Paul Henderson observed that too many clubs are run by "knife and fork" managers who don't understand that the needs of yacht club members extend beyond the dining room. Henderson had a valid point, but it is up to a club's board of directors to set and achieve its goals.

The objective should be to make a yacht club essential to the membership and the community. A questionnaire is a helpful first step. Interviews of different constituents will give further guidance.

Next a club should develop a long range plan (LRP). This should be done with great care. "Town hall" type meetings will help the LRP committee develop a viewpoint. Broad input early in the process makes selling the final plan easier.

After a mission statement is written and the long term goals are defined, the next stage is to list, in order, the club's priorities. At this point the LRP committee and finance officers should research the rough cost of these projects.

The plan needs to be marketed carefully to the membership to build enthusiasm. Remember, members tend to be passionate about their clubs. Many people consider the club to be an extension of their family and home. Expect considerable feedback. Modifications in the plan can be made at this point.

One of the more thoughtful and involved sailors on the east coast is David Elwell. His credentials include Past Commodore of American Yacht Club in Rye, NY and current Rear Commodore of the New York Yacht Club. Elwell explained to me, "a yacht club needs to interact with their community. Public access is important. An example is the cooperation between the New York Yacht Club and Sail Newport. They work together on major events and promoting sailing."

Elwell spent considerable time in New Zealand during the 2000 and 2003 America's Cups. While there he observed, "New Zealand does this exceedingly well. Sailing is not elitist there, it is a public access sport." We can learn from their example."

On growing sailing, Elwell continues, "we need to create cost efficient ways to get on the water. Inexpensive junior memberships are a good way to get young people involved."

Young people seem to disappear after college for 10 to 15 years. A club owned fleet allows sailing to take place during short time periods (a few hours). Clubs should work hard to keep this core age group involved by charging inexpensive dues, promoting junior member social activities and finding innovative ways to get them on the water. David Elwell observes, "the Larchmont YC provides a fleet of JY 15's." This is a popular program for instruction and informal racing. Many young people sign up for this type of program.

Many yacht clubs host high school sailing teams. These young sailors are all potential future members. Sailing instructors can be retained on an annual basis to run youth programs.

Several clubs have hired full time employees to manage race programs for all members. These employees coordinate many activities but do not take the place of race committees.

A major question at many clubs is whether to upgrade or expand its facilities? I encourage every club to make this a priority. (see *Sailing World* September 2003 "Taking on the Big Club Project"). Waterfront property is precious and should be

utilized to the maximum extent. The attitude should be to take on these projects at an early date. Interestingly, every club I have seen improve its facilities is thriving.

Tradition is important. Many USA clubs are over 100 years old. I'm fascinated by yacht club architecture. Most were modern styles when originally built. These eclectic buildings must be preserved and updated to be safe, comfortable and run efficiently. Special attention should be paid to docks, floats and moorings.

Clubs should create a signature regatta that builds pride and stature. The Long Beach Yacht Club (CA), for example, hosts the annual Congressional Cup. Over 250 member volunteers help out. This event is one of the most important match race regattas in the world.

Good communication brings people together. Every club should publish a regular scheduled newsletter. It is worth the money to hire an editor to collect information and produce a readable periodical. Ask members to write articles, and print lots of results (people like to see their name in print). And show lots of pictures.

Websites should be of high quality and regularly updated. Let anyone log on to the site to read about the club's mission, history and events. E-mails are an efficient way to promote happenings. Reminders are appreciated.

Schedule an editorial meeting with local newspapers to encourage more coverage of sailing activities. Television stations can also be encouraged to tape events. Providing timely information to media outlets is the key to gaining increased exposure and goodwill. Make the process easy.

There is a growing trend by yacht clubs to publish books on their heritage. The most popular volumes trumpet contemporary activities (see John Burnham's editorial *Sailing World* April 2005).

I was intrigued to find several clubs with significant libraries. Some allow members to check out books. Good libraries attract visitors. Race results, club records, contemporary readings and reference books should be included. The San Diego YC, Newport Harbor YC and the New York YC are among the best libraries in the country. You can build inventory by asking members to donate books and magazines.

Many clubs display artwork, trophies, models, burgees and photographs. My favorite impressions are indigenous to the local area of the club. Consider commissioning an artist to do a painting of the club and sell prints to the membership.

Build pride by encouraging members to fly their burgee on their boats or on their cars. Selling good, quality clothing also generates club spirit.

Invite community leaders and prominent sailors from around the world to visit and speak. Not only do attendees gain insight into the world of sailing, but these are fun, social events too. Its important to send members to regattas and serve as ambassadors.

To be essential, yacht clubs need to take leadership roles developing handicap rules, working with US Sailing on managing and growing the sport, sharing information with other clubs (everyone benefits), reaching out to the community to gain water access, participate in meaningful fundraising events and support American participation at international events like the Olympic Games.

Yacht clubs should take the time to study the experiences of other clubs to learn how they have tackled complicated issues. This is all a lot of work for mostly volunteer organizations but in the long run sailing will be better off in the future.