FROST-

BITING

Mrs. Walsh's boy never could learn to come in out of the cold

By JACKIE FARNAN

PHOTOS By JIM LARAGY

When stabbing north winds drop air temperatures to below 20 degrees and ice chunks form on the water, people sail on the Genesee River just off Lake Ontario. Not in huge, comfortable cruisers but in tippy dinghies, the size and shape of overgrown bathtubs with pinched ends. They're cold weather sailors — frostbiters. And a lot of people think they're crazy.

For good reasons. Frostbiting dinghies are unstable. A strong gust can knock one over, dumping its skipper and crew into the bitter cold water. When that happens, the shock is treacherous. Veteran sailors have panicked during such dunkings. They know life expectancy in winter waters can be as short as five minutes.

But frostbiters aren't concerned about dying. They have faith in the crash boats that hover around them, waiting to pick up capsized sailors. Frostbiters are in it for the competition.

They are racing sailors, the kind of people who won't stop competing just because the weather has turned raw. Instead, they take on the weather, too. They curse the wet snow dribbling down their necks as much as the guy who fouls them at the finish line.

They're the kind of people who go around once in life, like it and get back on for second trip. They're doctors, teachers, students, even a dietitian — vigorous people with weather-worn skin and quick smiles.

They go out every Sunday afternoon from November — when the air is cold but the water is a tolerable 40 or more degrees — to early April — when the air is mild but the water temperature is stalled at a deathly 35 degrees.

Frostbiting isn't unique to Rochester and it didn't start here. It was the brainchild of a bored newspaper reporter in New York City.

In 1931, Bill Taylor, a sports writer for the now defunct New York Herald Tribune, was transferred from full-time summer duty at the yachting desk to a winter hitch at the city desk. The story goes that he wasn't excited by his city-side beat so he got together the first frostbiting competition Jan. 1, 1932, on Manhasset Bay off Long Island.

The whole thing started as a lark and netted no more than a two-column story in the Herald Tribune's sports pages. The sailors, however, took it seriously. It attracted some of the biggest names in competitive sailing.

"You know," said sailor Arthur Knapp, 68, who was there for the first race, "it burns some guys up that they weren't there on the first day . . . they came the next weekend, and after that it just seemed to catch on. It

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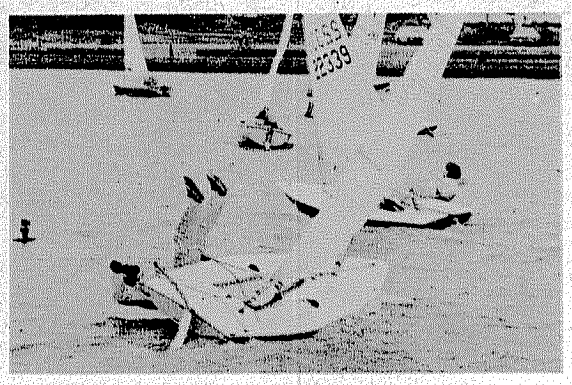
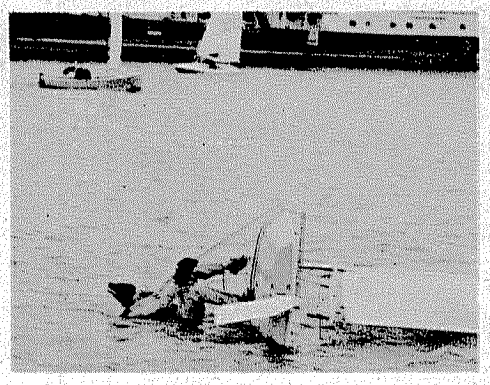
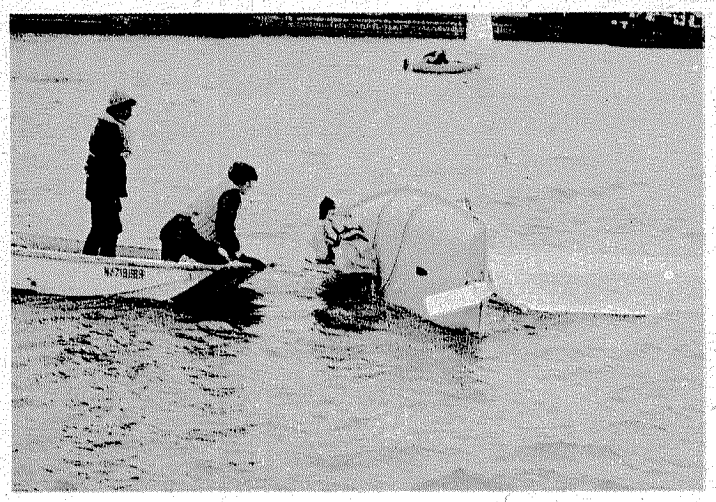
Right, The Interclub fleet makes its way to the next mark on a close reach during gusty winds in early November.





Peter Quackenbush, sailing Laser no. 15579, unintentionally demonstrates capsizing. Above, Quackenbush somehow fails to keep his feet under the cockpit hiking strap and flips into the water. Above center, the boat, without the weight of Quackenbush to counteract sail forces, capsizes and the skipper tries to keep the sail from filling with water. Above right, the crash boat speeds to the hapless skipper and right, stands by as Quackenbush attempts to right his Laser.



'It's a feeling of imminent disaster'

wasn't a lark anymore; it was serious competition."

Frostbiting started in Rochester in 1956 with one-design boats known as Tech dinghies. The Rochester Yacht Club owned about eight of them at the time. They were shared by the club's members, so no one took care of them and equipment failures were common.

In 1962, the club switched to another one-design boat called the Interclub dinghy. These are now privately owned and about 25 people, members of the Rochester Yacht Club and other area yacht clubs, pay less than $50 a year to race with the Rochester Frostbite Association. They race every Sunday afternoon, starting about 1 p.m. at the Rochester Yacht Club on the east bank of the Genesee River at Summerville.

The Interclub — which sells for about $1,200 — is a favorite among frostbiters, although some clubs race other one-design boats, including Lasers, 420s and Larks. Lasers make up a second frostbiting fleet in the Rochester Frostbite Association. They are high-performance boats that offer little protection from waves breaking over the bow. But about 10 staunch, rosy-cheeked youngsters sail a fall racing series in them anyway.

The Interclub is 11 feet 6 inches long, with a sail area of 72 square feet and a 15-inch deep cockpit. That depth protects skippers and an occasional crew (most are sailed solo) from breaking waves and spray.

But the boats are tippy. They rock and bob in the water as if they'd sooner roll over and play dead than sail. Occasionally, they do roll over, or turn turtle, as it's sometimes called.

When a frostbiter capsizes, one of two stable, crash boats motors over and hauls out the shivering skipper.

If he's wet and subject to hypothermia, the boat gets secondary consideration and the skipper is rushed to the dock for a short run to a hot shower.

Often, after a capsize, the sailor isn't wet. A good frostbiter can climb right over his boat as it goes over and end up sitting on the hull. But it's not a slow climb. It's a frantic scramble.

As one frostbiter put it: "You'd be surprised at how close you can come to walking on water when one of those things goes over."

When the wind is gusty and shifty, several boats may go over at a time. Doug Hooper, chairman of the race committee for the frostbiters, likes to tell of the time they lost three boats in one gust.

Going in the water is torture for any frostbiter. "It takes your breath away," said John McGrath, an ex-frostbiter and a real estate broker. "You don't feel cold. You feel shock, and you can't get your breath. It's not a sense of being chilled, just of great shock."

"There are some excruciating screams when people hit the water," Hooper said, "especially when they go in slowly. If the boat fills with water and sinks and you slow-ly get wet, it's awful."

"Sometimes there are a few seconds of anticipation just before you go over," said Richard J. "Knobby" Walsh, a physics instructor at Monroe Community College who's been frostbiting for more than 14 years. "It's a feeling of imminent disaster."

When several boats go over and the two crash boats are busy, the race is stopped and race boats pick up skippers in the water.

"Nothing is as important as people," Hooper said.

"Unless you happen to be winning at the time," added another frostbiter.

Competition among frostbiters is stiff. Ask anyone of them why they put up with a sport that's about as comfortable as getting a handful of slush in the face and they'll say it's the competition.

They like to boast that the frostbiting association's races attract such names as Norm Freeman from Ithaca who has represented the United States in Olympic sailing.

"The competition here is more severe than in any summer fleet you could draw from," Hooper said. "It's as tough here as any competition you could get into."

When asked why he put up with two seasons of regular capsizing to learn the sport, Dr. Ethan Welch, a

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Above, Dr. Ethan Welch trims his mainsheet and pushes the tiller to windward as he tries to peer through the snow for the next mark. Right, Peter Allen attaches his Interclub's single sail to boom. Allen has been frostbiting on and off for five years.

'It takes three seasons to

surgeon at Rochester General Hospital, said: "I like winning — I did that once.

"It's total immersion. You're concentrating all the time. I don't think any other physical thing could be as totally occupying for me."

Other summer racers like the edge frostbiting gives them.

The frostbite race course is small, usually triangular and no more than a quarter mile long. And it's tight. "You've got 20 boats in a course that's one-fourth the size of a football field," said Howard Reekers, a contractor who has been the association's frostbiting champion several times. "You're going around in circles, jibing and tacking. And the visibility just isn't all that good."

But the compact course makes for lots of short races—about eight are run most Sunday afternoons. "I do as much racing in one day here as I do in seven in a big boat and a normal schedule," said Peter Allen, manager of several trade associations, who has been frostbiting for five years. "You get eight starts, eight roundings of the first mark and eight finishes."

The number of races can be significant in helping a big boat skipper in the summer keep his edge during the winter. Good starts and the use of racing rules for strategic purposes are skills most

Above, Lasers tack for the next mark on Genesee River course. Despite overhanging curved lip around the deck of a Laser designed to keep water from splashing on the deck, the boat remains wet when winds are anything but light.

learn how to frostbite'

summer skippers would like to keep up over the winter.

And using the rules can involve a lot of snarling about them from boat to boat during a race. Veteran frostbiters Howie Reekers and Helen Ingerson are notorious for intimidating other sailors by shouting rules at crucial points in the race. They're also known for bluffing now and then.

"It takes three seasons to learn how to frostbite," Welch said. "The first two you learn boat control, the third you learn how to yell with authority."

Much of the yelling is meaningless chatter, a lot is rule quoting — usually someone demanding right of way. Occasionally, the yelling is a last desperate cry before a collision or dunking.

There is a time when everybody quiets down, however — when the wind comes up.

Then boats heel over and skippers, sitting on the rails of their dinghies lean back, fighting against pressure on the sails and the list of their boats. That's the thrill. It's a rush of excitement that verges on fright as water spills into cockpits and boats charge along on their sides.

"Driving a boat through high winds is as exciting as being on a roller coaster," Hooper said. "The

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boat's only doing about 10 miles per hour, but being low on the water gives a feeling of speed that's much greater. It's an all-out feeling. What goes with that feeling is an ability to conquer it. To keep your cool."

Keeping your cool isn't easy in high winds. They're usually shifty, which requires quick maneuvering. If a skipper turns his boat too fast and misses the safety strap he usually tucks his feet into, he's likely to fly out the other side of the boat.

But more dangerous than high winds is cold air. When the temperature drops below 20, lines attached to the sails can freeze. That often makes trimming sails impossible. Skippers may become helpless and the boat is vulnerable to any stray gust and to capsizing.

No matter how cold it gets. frostbiters say they stay warm, if only because of activity.

"I wear less clothes frostbiting than I do skiing," Allen said. "There's a lot of physical activity involved in sailing. You're running around all the time trying to keep the ruddy thing under you."

But frostbiters do get wet and cold. Even if they don't capsize, water often splashes into the cock-

pit. It's common to see a skipper bailing frantically during a slow stretch in a race. He's not worried about sinking, he is just trying to keep his feet dry — standing in six inches of cold water isn't fun.

And frostbiters' hands take a beating. Most skippers refuse to wear gloves because they're cumbersome and by the end of the day their hands are raw and too painful to move.

You can see it in the frostbiters' faces as they come into shore; they just want to get inside and get their hands thawed and their wet shoes off. But they stay outside, dragging each other's boats out of the water. Then they go inside together to drink whisky with beer chasers while they replay the races.

"There's a camaraderie here," Hooper said. "More than you'll find in most fleets. There's a real sense of belonging."

It's no wonder. Frostbiters practically go into combat together every Sunday afternoon.

"But that's the thrill of sailing," Hooper said. "You drive a boat to the limits of the person, not the boat. There's excitement, anxiety and anticipation — any tiny mistake and you're swimming."

JACKIE FARNAN is a Democrat and Chronicle staff writer.

Left, dietition Helen Ingerson attaches gooseneck of her Interclub's boom to fitting on the mast. Mrs. Ingerson campaigns larger boats in the summer months. Below, Laser no. 17287 is saved from capsize by agile skipper who scrambled off his deck and stepped on the boat's daggerboard as it began to roll towards a capsize. His weight on the daggerboard will soon right the boat and he will scramble back into the cockpit hardly any wetter for the experience.