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Port Ludlow Etchells fleet busy most of the year

By Susan Colby,
Leader Contributing
Writer

On any given Thursday at noon, visitors strolling the docks of Port Ludlow Marina will find a couple of dozen sailors preparing their Etchells sailboats for the weekly races.

On closer inspection, they will note that these are not youngsters but senior sailors, with more gray hair and more bald heads than in any other Etchells fleet in the country. With the youngster of the fleet a mere 56 and the oldest just turned 80, the combined years of sailing experience number into the thousands.

The Port Ludlow fleet is a resilient group. For 10 months of the year members are on the dock, getting ready for the weekly races. It can be snowing



Hank, a retired fighter jet pilot, is permanent crew on Zest and considers himself "rail meat" on the boat. Here he replaces the cover on the main after an afternoon of sailing. – Photo by Susan Colby

and raining, and these guys and gals suit up and head out. There are very few times the races have been called for weather. With almost 40 races a year, broken into three series and a summer regatta, the competition is fierce and competitive.

John Golden, who passed away in August, and his wife, Diane, sailed one of the oldest boats in the fleet, Finnegan's Wake. Theirs was the first Etchells in Port Ludlow.

"It all happened spontaneously," John told The Leader earlier this year. He and his wife began racing in the Port Ludlow Yacht Club PHRF fleet, severely trouncing the other boats, and when other sailors saw how much fun it was to sail one-designs - and specifically the Etchells - the fleet was born. The Golden's sailed double-handed, seldom taking the usual third crewmember.

Diane, a diminutive person, does the foredeck. "I wanted to do the foredeck myself," she said. "We've sailed together for so long, a third person gets in the way."

The 2006 fleet captain, Frances Marik, and his wife, Andrea, also sail double-handed. Andrea is much more competitive than her husband, saying with a bright smile and in her charming Hungarian accent: "I don't like being at the back of the fleet. But my husband just likes to sail."

Ask Dave Harris, a lifelong sailor who owns the sailboat Bananas, about how he came to be part of the fleet. The story goes that Dick Duoss, who early this year sold his boat Zest to another fleet member, got wind of several donated Etchells at Orange Coast College in Southern California.

"The first time I saw the boat it was on a truck trailer with Zest," Dave laughed.

"Bananas came with oodles of inventory," but mice had made some inroads into some of the spinnakers. He spent hours in the Etchells online forums asking questions and getting good help and advice on bringing Bananas back to life. "Lovingly reconditioned," is the way he puts it.

Sailing in Port Ludlow Bay can be tricky, with extreme tides and currents challenging even experienced sailors. Summer sailing can see the fleet barely ghosting through the water on an ephemeral breeze. Early spring sees gusty, strong winds that give the sailors a real workout. With a small fleet - just 10 boats this year - there is no regular committee boat to tow the boats to and from the starting line. The group decided that all the boats would have small outboards for emergencies and for forming the starting line more easily.

Camaraderie is the predominant feeling that runs through this fleet. Although there is the typical yelling and noisemaking on the course, once onshore, they are the best of friends, gathering in the gazebo for a local brew. And because most of the sailors are retired, "Thursday afternoons are not a problem," said Dan Darrow, fleet scribe and lifelong sailor.

"It's low key and friendly. People help each other and share knowledge."

Hank West, a retired fighter pilot and long-time cruising sailor, considers himself "rail meat" on Dan's boat, Zest.

"You do what you're told," he laughed.

The Onyx team represents a typical crew. Terry Barnes and Charles Beauchamp, both retired, are long-time sailors but didn't know each other before the Etchells group. A couple of years ago, after crewing on various boats in the fleet, they went into partnership together and bought Onyx. Terry is driven to win, while Charles is more laid back. Their helmsman, Chris Colby - not retired but wishing he were - is the baby of the fleet and joined the crew last year, bringing with him extensive dinghy and off-shore racing experience.

Not all the sailors have years and years of experience, though.

Take Jack Rigger. At 63, he is a brand-new sailor. He had never sailed in his life but was looking for something that he could do with his grandchildren when they are older. Just this year, he bought a third share in Lightning.

"I've got a few more years to get the experience I need to teach the grandkids," he said. "The oldest is 4, and when they are older I will put them in the Port Townsend sailing program and then we can do something enjoyable together."

Among so many experienced sailors, Jack has the benefit of that experience wearing off on him. In his opinion, there is not a better boat "in the whole world." The rest of Fleet 26 agrees with him.

These sailors won't settle for a non-performance boat, and they all agree Etchells are the ideal boats for them.

The Etchells Class is a one-design, 22-foot sailboat designed by Skip Etchells and previously known as an E22. It is a popular craft for sailing stars such as Dennis Conner, Russell Coutts and John Bertrand.

Potential sailors can contact Harris at daharris@olympen.com or 437-0814. And you don't have to be retired or a senior - youngsters are welcome too.