

Winter has its share of 'Skeeters'



An ice boat on Lake Mendota.

—State Journal photo

By John Newhouse
Written for the State Journal

This may be the perfect winter for ice boating.

Ice smooth as glass.

No snow.

Strong, steady winds and temperatures above 10 degrees Fahrenheit.

And you with no ice boat, unless you get to cracking.

You'll see the ice boats skimming the lake in long swooping runs, the ice a black blur beneath their runners as they far out pace the wind.

Many of them will be Skeeters, a class of front steerers and, in Madison, likely to be home made.

They're one-man boats, very fast, highly maneuverable, with the front steering and 80 square feet of sail which are the only requirements of the class.

After that, it's your ingenuity.

And one Madison man — Paul Krueger — has come up with a new design that's finding him winning many a race and eyed by ice boaters far and near.

"There are two big types of ice boats," says Charles H. Johnson, 1650 Sherman Ave., a veteran in the sport.

"The big stern steerers have been around for 150 to 200 years, or so. As late as the 1920s and 1930s, they were successful because people had the money to build them — and they could cost up to \$10,000 and \$12,000 — and could command crews to set them up and sail.

"In the 1940s, though, the little Skeeters came to Madison. They were a little risky, at first. There was the danger of tipping and pinning the skipper. But they put the front, steering runner farther ahead on a spring board, lengthened the runner plank, and they became much safer.

"The big stern steerers could be battling down the ice at 50 or 60 miles an hour. They'd spin, and whip, and sometimes they'd toss the crew out, like popcorn.

"When they hiked, with one plank runner off the ice, they'd ride on the other plank runner and the stern steering runner, and slow down.

"The Skeeters didn't spin. When they hiked, it was on one plank runner and the front steering runner, and they actually went faster."

Famous boats in Madison included the "Fritz," of Fritz Jungbluth, O. T. Havey's "Mary B.," and Phil Oetking's "Clancy." The "Mary B.," "Fritz," and "Clancy" are still sailing on other lakes, for there are still those who buy the big boats for a few hundred dollars, pay up to \$800 or \$900 for sails — they can carry from 350 'way up to 650 square feet of sail — and find the big crews.

But, for the most part, difficulties of setting up, trailering, and finding a crew have paved the way for the smaller boats.

Iceboats are reputed to have hit speeds up to 140 miles an hour, which calls for perfect ice, strong winds, and a boat designed for speed.

Madison boats tend to be designed for racing, on an upwind-downwind course between two pins placed a mile apart.

"The distance traveled is a mile and a quarter to a mile and a third, since we have to tack going up wind and the fastest course downwind is a few degrees down from straight across wind," says Johnson.

The ice boats have the ability to "turn the wind."

"This means that we're traveling at three to five times the speed of the wind," says Johnson. "A 20 mile wind will find us hitting 80 to 100 miles an hour at times, but 50 or 60 would be considered more 'normal.'"

Another popular class is the DN, with rigid specifications which include 60 square feet of sail, a hull 10 or 12 feet long, and a 10-foot runner plank. There have been about 25 in the Four Lakes Ice Yacht club in Madison.

"They're even in the Iron Curtain countries, — Germany, Poland, Lithuania, and in Holland," says Johnson. "They came to a regatta in this country two years ago."

Their rules, however, were different than those in the United States. The skippers wore light shoes designed to grip the ice, and they started by pushing the boats straight up wind, with the lead going to the skipper whose legs held out the longest as he blocked the wind from the others, then took off on a cross wind course.

"It was more of a test of the skipper's legs than the boat and the sailing ability of the skipper," says Johnson.

A Skeeter can be made at home, working nights, in three or four months, he says. Cost new is about \$1,000, with second hand Skeeters going from \$500 'way up to \$3,000 or \$3,500 for a top boat.

The DNs cost close to the same, if home made, and second hand boats range from \$150 to \$500. Only a few boats are made commercially during off seasons by water boat makers.

There are about 50 members of the Four Lakes Ice Yacht club, which meets at Bud's House of Sandwiches at 2916 Atwood Ave.

Boaters get eight to 10 weekends a year, traveling their boats by trailer for the best ice. The season generally begins on Lake Kegonsa, which freezes first, and goes then to Monona and Mendota, with Lake Geneva and Pewaukee on the traveling circuit.

Skippers wear helmets and goggles, and the war surplus cold weather clothing and snowmobiling gear has made the sport comfortable up to about 10 degrees, Fahrenheit. Below this, races are cancelled in Madison.

"It's a great sport, particularly for kids," says Johnson. "They can make the boats, which is valuable training. They can sail afternoons, getting seven chances a week to sail as compared with the two over the weekend that the man with a job gets.

"And there was more than a chance the old Hunk Barrett, at East, didn't really notice the absences of some of his kids whom he knew to be ice boaters when the winds and the ice were right!"

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Ice boater makes safer, faster craft

Paul Krueger, ice boating enthusiast from McFarland, set out to make some rather drastic changes in his ice boat for greater safety.

He wound up with the greater safety he sought, and another plus:

The boat turned out to be faster, and he went to cleaning up at the races.

And a Pewaukee firm which made the water sailboats for the Olympics is planning to make a mold of the boat, as copied by a friend, for commercial

sales.

In the usual Skeeter, which Krueger sails, the skipper sits with the boom a few inches over his head. There's maybe a foot or so of space between the boom and the hull of the boat.

"And when you maneuver, you have to duck the boom," says Krueger. "Anything down wind is hidden. You've got to duck your head, and look under, and it's an awkward position."

Last year, he moved the cockpit back,

so that he no longer had to duck his head and could see better when on a downwind course.

"I figured it wouldn't hurt, shifting the weight farther back, and might even be an advantage in strong winds," he says.

"It worked out pretty good. I was pleased."

Other members of the Four Lakes Ice Yacht club took notice, and some of them are now changing their boats.

One of them is Bill Mattison, of Star Photo, who is working with the Harken water boat firm at Pewaukee on the fiberglass molds.

"They're planning to tool up for the job," he says. "It must be going to cost them \$100,000 or so. And it doesn't seem that the market is going to be big enough to justify that cost.

"But they do say that there is a possibility that the hull could be used for sandmobiles, on the salt flats.

"They may be planning a bigger market than we realize."

Mattison has been doing the work

—By John Newhouse