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Molly Hayes Tue Aug 30 2011 2 0 Recommend

First day a success for disabled sailing regatta

It was the perfect night for a beer and a reunion as the first leg of the 2011 Mobility Cup kicked off at the Royal Hamilton Yacht Club on Monday night.

The Cup — Canada's national regatta for people with disabilities — kicked off with opening ceremonies Monday evening, following practices early in the afternoon.

Some climbed and others with more severe disabilities were lifted in and out of their boats, by cranes or lifts, back into their wheelchairs as sails were rolled up on the docks.

The Burlington Teen Tour Band got the ceremony rolling as volunteers and participants gathered to celebrate another year of sailing.

Local TV personality Connie Smith emceed the night's ceremonies, with speeches by local politicians, sponsors and special guest Lieutenant-Governor David Onley.

Onley himself is disabled and uses an electric scooter to get



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around after suffering from polio as a child.

All the wheelchairs around the dock are named. In past years, it became chaos trying to match each sailor up with their respective chairs.

One of many small details organizers have had to figure out and adapt to over the years.

"As I say, the first day's always rock 'n roll," said Paula Stone. "It's organized chaos."

The Montreal woman has volunteered at almost ever Mobility Cup, and competitors can always recognize her by the nickname stitched on the back of her hat — "dock bitch."

Everyone involved with the Mobility Cup calls it the "regatta of possibilities."

The competition is fierce, but, for many, it's the thrill that matters most.

"I think it's really important for people with disabilities to get the opportunity to take some safe risks, to experience that thrill of a challenge," said competitor Tracy Schmitt.

She's been sailing since she was seven years old, but this was her first time competing as a racer.

"It's very different. There's definitely more pressure, more competition," she said.

She was born a four-way amputee, and said she spent her first season on the boat falling in the water. Over 30 years later, she's a member of the Queen's Quay Disabled Sailing Program.

For people with no use of their arms or legs, "Sip 'n Puff" technology uses hydraulics to allow sailors to operate the boat by sucking and blowing on a straw.

Rene Dallaire was one of the first to take advantage of "Sip 'n Puff." The Montreal man has been a quadriplegic since an alpine skiing accident in 1970.

He competed in his first Mobility Cup in 1994. On Monday, he wore his shirt from that first event for good luck.

"It was the first time I was able to do something on my own, it allowed me to be competitive," he said of his introduction to sailing.

"It's the fact that no matter the level or disability, all people are able to leave their wheelchair at the dock and enjoy the freedom."

The event started in 1991, created by former Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan after a skiing accident left him paralyzed at the age of 19.

More than 60 participants — from Australia, Europe, the U.S. and Canada — gathered for the competition this year.

Christina Rubke came with the Bay Area Association of Disabled Sailors all the way from San Francisco.

"This is sailing heaven here," she said, looking out over Hamilton Harbour. "Especially for me; I get overwhelmed when the currents are too big, or there's more traffic."

But a bunch of the sailors are used to the local waters; many are members of the Burlington Sailing and Boat Club or the Royal Hamilton Yacht Club.

Danny McCoy, who splits his time between Burlington and Finland, has been sailing for years. He suffered a spinal injury in a car accident in 1994, the same year his sailing buddy Cam Perry suffered a stroke.

It took a long time, but both were able to get back to it eventually.

McCoy is the founder of the Disabled Sailing Association of Ontario. He was thrilled to see so many young competitors out, and to catch up with old friends.



Hamilton hosts Mobility Cup

Bruce Millar wheeled his way down the dock at the Royal Hamilton Yacht Club Saturday, folded himself at the...

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"It's a devastating thing to have a spinal cord injury. To try to get a new life after that is a very difficult thing," he said.

"Sailing saved my life."

Races officially start Tuesday morning.

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