

Reflections on the Opening of the Sailing Season of 2023

by Tim Harvey

The finest qualities of the Salt Spring Island Sailing Club (SSISC) were on full display at the annual Sail Past and symbolic opening of the sailing season on Sunday, April 30, 2023. The day featured impressive piloting of ships in close quarters, a bagpipe procession, champagne toasts and High Tea. What struck this newcomer to the club as the day's defining character was the welcoming, collaborative spirit and *joie de vivre* of club members in attendance, from the newly minted to the most well-seasoned among us.

Our own approach to the club was from the northeast by sea, as any excuse to go boating is a good one. My twin eleven-year-old deckhands and I were met by a curious first glimpse of the days' activities: a Lilliputian armada bobbing blithely past the F dock in what must have been, to those scaled-down sloops, the equivalent of Cape Scott swells. We were witnessing the culmination of a three-day regatta of International One Metre (IOM) radio-powered sailboats hosted by the club, thanks to the efforts of club member Martin Herbert and regatta organizer Peter Grim.

Whimsical as the sport appeared, racing these diminutive ships is no small matter to those involved. The Salt Spring regatta was an official event on an international circuit, an opportunity to accrue points towards qualification for the most prestigious regatta in IOM racing, the World Championships to be next held in Valencia, Spain, in 2024.

We spoke to Chris Sullivan, who had travelled from San Francisco to sail his high-end IOM racer at the club. "This region is a hot spot for IOM sailing," he explained. "You have so many opportunities to get involved and compete without much travel."

Herbert, himself a recent National Champion, overheard the conversation while packing away his own pint-sized yacht. He kindly suggested we "come down to the club on a Wednesday and you can give it a try." My boys were thrilled: we had yet another reason for excitement about the sailing season. A season which was, officially, at last under away.

It was the hour of the "muster", when club vessels lined up according to protocol to sail past the club and salute that human embodiment of the club itself, Commodore Roy Marlatt. Scanning the many ships slicing harbour waves, I saw the Commodore's unmistakeable mane fluttering like a whitecap as he stood by the port gunwale of the jaunty cutter *Coconutz*.

Watching the sailboats heel and tack in the breeze, it was impossible not to feel what John Masefield called "the call of the running tide." I told the boys to grab their lifejackets and board our Sea Clipper canoe. We paddled southeast into the gathering chop, then let the bow swing north like a compass needle. The wind carried us close enough to *Coconutz* to admire the blue-green tartan of the kilted highlander, Rod Macdonald, astride her foredeck. We gave the Commodore a hearty salute as the seas swept us swiftly on.

Club members flanked the route as the Commodore migrated from ship to shore, serenaded by the bagpipe's mournful seagull warble. Marlatt opened the season with a rousing speech noting the crucial role of the many volunteers who make the club function, and spoke of the upcoming opportunity to help stage the annual Round Salt Spring Race and festivities.

As champagne and orange juice flowed, I found myself speaking to April Faget, whose coordination of the youth sailing program exemplifies the important impact of volunteerism at the club.

"Your boys' instructor Rhys has said what great potential they have in racing," April mentioned, and noted the regattas we could look forward to in future years. The pure enthusiasm our children have developed for sailing is a testament to what a success the sailing school has been.

We sat near Bo Curtis and Catherine Young for scones at High Tea, which in my case consisted of a dark and frothy beer. Bo shared the story of inadvertently recruiting himself as club Wharfinger. He had been overheard saying it was the one board position he wouldn't absolutely rule out for himself. This was taken as a ringing self-endorsement. The then-incumbent Wharfinger generously vacated the position for Bo.

I was drawn out onto the ocean-facing deck, that all-important architectural feature every sailing club must have. Conversation emanated from a group including Lawrence Stuart, an irrepressible humorist whose journalistic flair has set a high bar for writing about club affairs. While discussing the politics of moorage in Ganges Harbour, we were joined by Bob Jones, the club's House and Grounds Coordinator, whose nautical visage had so impressed my boys on the dock that afternoon.

Bob explained that at the best of times, the club is a thriving social body fueled by the energies of its volunteers. "We need a staff captain," he mused, and I wondered if, like Bo Curtis, he was already halfway to appointing himself. "This club is like a flywheel. Like all flywheels, it takes a bit to get it spinning. Covid slowed it down, but now we have it spinning again. When this flywheel speeds up, it's a powerful social engine!"

As my young paddlers and I floated back to the *MV Northern Freedom*, I reflected on how blessed the SSISC is to have such strong community spirit. This spirit keeps the flywheel spinning from one racing weekend, one facilities upgrade, one champagne-toasting celebration of community and ocean cruising to the next.



