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MODEL RACERS

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Model day at the races



JOHN BELL / DAILY RECORD

Rain couldn't stop the Roostertails from hosting the N.J. Heat Racing/District Points competition on Saffin Pond in Jefferson.

Threat of storms doesn't deter enthusiasts from competition in Jefferson

BY RICH KNIGHT
SPECIAL TO PLUS

JEFFERSON — The rock-strewn parking lot at Saffin Pond was filled with cars, and all of them were unoccupied except for one with a long-haired teenager with his head down, playing a Game Boy.

It was a sleepy Sunday morning, and dark, ominous storm clouds slowly filled the sky. With a light, chilly wind, the clouds moved into town and rudely set their place in the sky to stay. Here, they rested for the remainder of the day and threatened all below with the possibilities of a tremendous downpour.

That didn't stop the Roostertails, a Morris County

team that builds and races motorized boats, from hosting its N.J. Heat Racing/District Points competition. That's because the Roostertails, like many other teams around the world, belong to the North American Model Boat Association, an international nonprofit organization where people of all ages come together and share their ardent passion for building boats and racing them.

They do it for the sheer thrill of it all. June 25 was their day to host the competition, and nothing in the world, not even a little bit (or a lot) of rain was about to spoil their fun.

The path down to the pond was rocky and shaded by verdant trees and vegetation, and at a distance could be heard the sounds of wildlife and ... the revving of engines?

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'Dying hobby' still a big hit for young, old alike

RICH KNIGHT
SPECIAL TO PLUS

JEFFERSON — The people who showed up at Saffin Pond to race their boats on June 25 were just as varied and colorful as the boats that they had constructed.

One such person was New Brunswick resident Dave Rychalsky, 47, a goatee-and-glasses sporting racer who could be seen working on his cleverly crafted Frosted Flakes

boat under a black tent. Underneath the boat hood was about 50 percent nitro methane, 35 percent methanol and 15 percent castor oil — just to give it that extra kick.

Rychalsky is a 2005 member of the North American Model Boat Association Hall of Fame and the current District 1 director.

A newcomer to the Roostertails, a Morris County

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Bill Ruffin of Queens works on his unlimited hydro scale Winston Eagle model boat at Saffin Pond.

PLUS

Saffin

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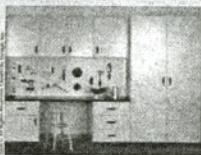
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The whirring noise of a sputtering engine that sounded like a race car could be heard loudly cutting corners in the water and splashing all about in the distance. Through the limbs of the trees, a red flash could be seen darting across the water like a laser beam and cutting a sharp turn around what looked like an orange buoy that sat placidly in the pond.

Nearer to the pond, not only could these water rockets be heard, but they also could be smelled, as a metallic scent wafted in the air and collected in a person's nostrils and on the roof of the mouth. That's the smell of methane from nitro- and gas-powered boats, and that's the heat that raced on Sunday. Electric boats also are known to race, but they hold a separate competition since they are generally faster and more efficient than gas or nitro.

Doug Twaits of Stanhope, a member of the Morris County Electric Boat Club and a former president of NAMBA from 1991 to 1993, was one of the first to



JOHN BELL / DAILY RECORD

Contestants prepare their entries for the N.J. Heat Racing/District Points competition on June 25. Contestants were entered into heat races across Saffin Pond in Jefferson.

introduce electric-powered boats to the club. He was also the first person a visitor saw when entering the camp set-up for the day.

With graying hair and a cordial smile, and wearing a bright red shirt and blue overalls, he resembled an older version of Super Mario. His thumbs were nestled behind the straps of his overalls as he sauntered over with slow and deliberate steps

to a bench that sat near the pond and said something in the ear of a man wearing jean shorts, a red shirt and an M&M's baseball cap. The man with the cap (who had an M&M-modeled boat to accompany the hat) laughed. The man was David Neelman of Bloomingdale, president of the Roostertails.

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Racers

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group that is part of NAMBA, Rychalsky said that he's well aware that building model boats is a "dying hobby because there aren't a lot of people who want to actually build boats anymore." That didn't prevent him from getting his 6-year-old son enthused in the hobby, as he, too, is building boats, which he enters and races in the Kids R Boaters program for children up to 12 years old.

Rychalsky said most of the current competition isn't from younger racers but rather from people more his age group.

"A lot of us are old-timers who have been doing this for a long-time," he said.

David Neelman of Bloomingdale, president of the Morris County Roostertails, who is turning 40 this year, said that anybody in the Division 1 area of New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia is free to join the Roostertails and that he welcomes them. Neelman himself is from Passaic County and said he participates in model boat racing because he "love(s) it as a hobby, and money's not important."

Racer Jerry Muro from Parsippany was once a member of LIMBA, the Long Island branch of motorized racers.

Muro said he met a friend named Joe from Bloomingdale while there and moved over to New Jersey. After that, the pair formed their own group within the Roostertails and "J and J'd it all the way," he said, pointing to his small yellow boat emblazoned with the initials "J & J."

Pricey pastime

Pieces for boats, depending on whether they're electric (the new thing) or gas- and nitro-powered, vary in price but can be bought for as low as \$400 or as high as \$2,000 depending on what a potential racer is looking to construct.

Leighton Henry, 28, from Queens may be living proof that model boat racing is not strictly for the baby boomers and card-carrying crowd. Even though his group, the A-Hydro Racing Team from Queens, is of an older age bracket, he said he doesn't think age is a factor.

"We like having fun," he said while showing off his small, nitro-filled boat called Ninja. "Every time you put the boat in the water, you get a rush."

William Overton, a one-of Leighton's partners at A-Hydro, said he races because he simply

likes the calming thrill of modeling boats.

"This is my passion, man. I'm retired, I'm 67, and I have more time to build model boats and that's what I do," he said.

Owner of William's Hobby Room, Overton said he has traveled all over the country showcasing his boats in a competition called "concours," where model boat owners simply show off their creations. He said he also plans to drive down to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., where the NAMBA Nationals are going to be held this year.

As a Division 1 racer, Overton said he doesn't race for money, as there isn't any to be won. He and Steve Ng, also from New York, said they do it because it's what they love to do, and they wouldn't trade it in for the world.

Ng, 44, wearing glasses and a meek smile, won most of the events on Sunday and said he races because "it's like a dream." He, like almost everyone else who participated in day's N.J. Heat Racing/District Points competition, said he feels like a family member with his fellow racing buddies. And even though he is not affiliated with any groups like the Roostertails or A-Hydro, everybody still seems to know his name.

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PLUS

Saffin

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David Neelman and his father, Herb Neelman of Boonton, watched attentively as racers for the day, wearing galoshes, hurled a variety of boats into the water to take off. This is called mill time and is practice before the actual events. David Neelman turned around on the bench and introduced his father and Tracy Hunt of Rockaway, a redheaded woman wearing shorts who kept the stats.

After meeting other members who came to the event not too much later, Neelman discussed the rules, then got on the microphone and enthusiastically said, "Racers, start your engines." The men with their boats raced to their tables and set up shop, revving their engines with a partner and readying their boats to toss into the water to take laps.

An onlooker, standing relatively close to the racers, was told to step back by Neelman. The man backed up. The sky was getting darker.

At the start of the first race, an official boxed voice on a radio counted down how much time the racers had to get their boats ready to send out into the water: "22, 21, 20..." Two boats were sent out on the pond; they shot out on the water like racehorses. They flew past the orange buoys at the end of the pond and then took a sharper turn around a green buoy in the middle.

At that moment, one of the boats went down. The counter continued: "3, 2, 1" and then a bullhorn bellowed, and the last boat at its station got out just before the horn went off. That final boat was flying at such an exhilarating rate that it couldn't make the first turn. It fell out of the race and hit a dead stop.

Only one boat made it in to the finish line. All the other dead boats had to be scooped out of the water by a member willing to go out in the retriever boat.

Another race finished with only two winners, and then it was on to the one-eighth-scale race, an exciting one. In this competition, all the boats were modeled after actual boats but only one-eighth the size of them. There are strict guidelines for this competition as to the size of these models, and for all their worth, they looked very close to the boats they were detailed after. In this race were two Budweiser boats, one



JOHN BELL / DAILY RECORD

Dave Rychalsky, of East Brunswick, works on his model boat, Miss Budweiser, before his turn to race the pond.

brown, one red; a Miller High Life boat; a Chrysler Jeep boat; and an Olympian Beer boat.

As the boats were thrown from the pit area, the buzzer just went off. It was a tight one; the red Budweiser boat and the Chrysler were close until the Chrysler sank, but in the end, only three boats made it in. Budweiser Red was up front, followed by Olympian Beer, followed by one last boat.

And then ... rain.

It finally came down. Everybody rushed under tents they had set up for such an occasion. Some left their boats out uncovered on tables, but nobody really cared. It already was coming down too hard and too fast for anybody to really notice. Once covered underneath his tent, Herb Neelman commented, "We used to race in more than this."

The deluge lasted for about an hour and a half, nonstop, and everybody pushed the pockets of rain off their tarps as the rain continued to come down hard. Tracy Hunt spent the time slapping horse flies off her uncovered legs while most others shared stories about how their boats just weren't holding up that day, probably because of the weather. And while it rained, a blue snake slithered through the stream made by the mud, possibly signaling that the rain wouldn't last much longer.

Moments later, the rain stopped almost miraculously. And like a cavalier of warriors, everybody came out from under their tents, set up their boats and were back on the pond that now looked like glass. Smoke sputtered out from their creations, and they raced as if it had never even rained.

If you go

Information about the North American Model Boat Association can be found on its Web site at

www.namba.com. For information about the district in which Morris County participates, contact district Director Dave Rychalsky at (973) 724-4607 or at dave.rychalsky@namba.com.

The remaining District 1 schedule in Morris County, the host club and the contact name and number are as follows:

■ Sept. 7-10
Randolph Park, Randolph; Electric Nationals, all electric classes; Morris County Electric Boat Club, Chris Costanza, (570) 828-9147.

■ Sept. 10
Saffin Pond, Jefferson; NAMBA Sanction: 06-068, heat racing / district points, all nitro and gas classes; Morris County Roostertails, David Neelman, (973) 838-7925.

■ Sept. 23
Randolph Park, Randolph; NAMBA Sanction: 06-071, heat racing / district points, all electric classes; Morris County Electric Boat Club, Doug Twaits, (973) 347-5765.

■ Oct. 15
Horseshoe Lake, Roxbury; NAMBA Sanction: 06-074, heat racing / district points, all nitro and gas classes; Lakeland Area Model Boaters, Doug Twaits, (973) 347-5765.

■ Oct. 29
Randolph Park, Randolph; NAMBA Sanction: 06-075, heat racing / district points, all electric classes; Morris County Electric Boat Club, Doug Twaits, (973) 347-5765.