

# WISCONSIN'S FROZEN LEGACY

CHAMPIONS, INNOVATORS, AND LEGENDS  
OF ICE SAILING

by Deb Whitehorse



**T**hough frequently overlooked, the relatively obscure sport of ice sailing is significant to Wisconsin's maritime history.

The state's frozen inland lakes are a common factor shared by Olympic and America's Cup sailing champions, seven National Sailing Hall of Fame members, and prominent marine industry leaders such as Harken and Melges.

The Dutch are credited with adapting sailboats into iceboats in the early 1600s, enabling the continued delivery of goods throughout winter. Early American ice yachts began as utilitarian vessels transporting goods across the frozen Hudson River in New York before evolving



© W. P. Snyder. *Iceboats at Madison, Wisconsin—Race & Sailing on W. & Glasscock—[See Plate III.]*

The 9 March 1878 Harper's Weekly engraving of a sketch by W.P. Snyder showing "an ice-boat regatta that took place recently on the smooth and glossy surface of Lake Mendota." The illustration features the new Poughkeepsie design of pivoting runners. A key at the bottom of the image identifies the vessels from left to right: R.M. Comly, Frank Barnes, Lake Monona, Jerome, Glide, Git, Arctic. Courtesy of the author's collection.

into racing machines. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's family was well known in the Hudson River ice sailing community, and the FDR Museum has several ice yachts in its collection.

Since arriving on Wisconsin's lakes during the 19th century, ice sailing has flourished, showcasing a spectrum of boat designs from humble homemade crafts to modern carbon fiber marvels. The 9 March 1878 issue of *Harper's Weekly* magazine immortalized this tradition with a sketch by W.P. Snyder featuring ice yachts and skaters gracefully crossing Lake Monona, framed by Madison's isthmus and state capitol in the distance.

Wisconsin has multiple ice sailing clubs that span from coast to coast. To the west is Lake Pepin on the Mississippi River. In between are the Oshkosh, Neenah, and Fond du Lac Ice Yacht Clubs on Lake Winnebago, the Pewaukee Ice Yacht Club on Pewaukee Lake, and the Green Lake Ice Yacht Club on Green Lake. To the east are the Windjammers Ice Yacht Club and Marinette Ice Yacht Club on Lake Michigan around the bay of Green Bay.

Skeeter iceboats were developed on Geneva Lake and have three racing classes, all limited to 75 square feet of triangular sail. Class A Skeeters, the fastest in the world, are 32 feet long by 22 feet wide with 27-foot-tall masts.

Because this class is unlimited, every boat in the fleet is slightly different and most are built by their owners. They are piloted by a single skipper steering from in front of the mast as opposed to the original iceboats, which were crewed by two or more and steered from behind the mast.

Skippers regularly clock speeds higher than 50 miles per hour, but they can travel at four times the speed of the wind when sailing across it, averaging 84 miles per hour. To keep racers safe, however, the wind must be below 25

miles per hour and the temperature at 10 degrees Fahrenheit. When ice and weather conditions are favorable, enthusiastic crowds of recreational and racing iceboaters head for Geneva Lake.

The Skeeter Iceboat Club in the Lake Geneva area has the largest fleet of classic Class B boats in North America. Often called Boecraft Skeeters after developer Bill Bohemke, they are slower than Class A and have a 20-foot-long hull with 24-foot 5-inch-tall mast. Class C has a 20-foot hull and mast. The club's rich history spans the development of ice yachts with notable figures such as the Wrigleys (chewing gum), the Melges (Melges Performance Sailboats), and sailor Jane Pegel.

The Melges family traces back to the 1930s when Harry Melges made his mark as a champion ice sailor in the first bow-steering iceboats. Harry's son, the late Buddy Melges, achieved remarkable success in ice and open-water sailing, winning Olympic medals, an America's Cup, and multiple championships to further solidify the family legacy. Buddy often said that iceboating helped to improve downwind sailing skills on soft water. The fourth generation is still actively engaged in sailing iceboats.

Another star of Geneva Lake's ice sailing scene is Jane Pegel (1933-), who boasts an impressive list of ice and open-water sailing achievements. Pegel's parents gave her a Skeeter iceboat during high school, which ignited her passion for the sport. She later found success in DN boats (60 square feet of sail), the most popular



Mike Derusha climbs aboard his Renegade class iceboat (188). Its 67 square feet of sail on a flexible aerodynamic spar make it a powerful racing yacht in a compact package light enough to carry atop a vehicle.

ice sailing class in the world. Pegel also clinched national championships when few women were involved in the sport. Her groundbreaking accomplishments have influenced generations of female ice sailors.

Moving north to Madison, the Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club (4LIYC), established in the late 1800s, remains a thriving hub of activity. Club members continue the tradition of pooling their expertise and resources to construct and enhance iceboats, resulting in generations of champions pushing the boundaries of iceboating excellence. In 2020, the late Bill Mattison was inducted into the National Sailing Hall of Fame for his pioneering contributions to ice sailing and Skeeter design.

Current 4LIYC Commodore Daniel Hearn added iceboat racing to enhance his performance in multi-hull soft water competitions, and has built and competed in almost every type of iceboat class. He and other club members follow in Mattison's footsteps and open their shops for collaborative boat work. For example, Hearn and fellow sailors recently constructed 13 18-foot-tall Nite masts simultaneously. He also contributes to youth iceboat sailing initiatives.

The Pewaukee Ice Yacht Club's history includes the beer-brewing Pabst family, who owned stern steerers in the late 19th century. The lake's legacy of innovation continued with marine manufacturing giants and National Sailing Hall of Fame members Olaf and Peter Harken, who pioneered the development of blocks for their iceboats. They were avid racers in the Nite class, a popular choice for competitive circuits and casual riding developed by S&R Marine on Pewaukee Lake. Steve Orlebeke, a Harken

*Top: Jay Yaeso in Child's Play (U311) and John Dennis in Eagle (U194) simultaneously find some air and lift a runner in the Class A Skeeters regatta on Lake Kegonsa in Stoughton, Wisconsin, during the 2023 International Skeeter Association Regatta.*

*Bottom: Mark Isabell in his Class A Skeeter Hellsbells (V30) on Lake Kegonsa.*

engineer, achieved multiple Class A Skeeter championships, highlighting the club's association with high-speed iceboat racing.

The Oshkosh Ice Yacht Club, the largest of many on Lake Winnebago, was once the center of the jib-flying, stern-steering tradition. John Buckstaff (1888-1960) was a legendary stern steerer and a Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame member. Today Andy Gratton, the secretary-treasurer of the Wisconsin Stern Steerer Association, and a dedicated group of skippers and crews are committed to preserving the legacy of the original ice yachts. Gratton's expertise in navigating challenging Lake Winnebago conditions

on his stern steerer allows him to excel in sailing adventures where other iceboats struggle to perform.

Ice sailing has always been a close-knit community, but the Internet and social media have enabled ice sailors worldwide to track each other's journeys and adventures. Wisconsin is significant in the global ice sailing scene, serving as a hub for national and international regattas. Our most recognized Olympic champions, National Sailing Hall of Fame inductees, and innovative boatbuilders all share roots in ice sailing, highlighting its significance within Wisconsin's maritime culture.



#### References:

Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club: [www.iceboat.org](http://www.iceboat.org)

DN Ice Boat Racing: [www.dniceboat.org](http://www.dniceboat.org)

International DN Ice Yacht Racing Association: [www.idniyra.org](http://www.idniyra.org)

National Sailing Hall of Fame: <https://nshof.org/hall-of-fame>