


Sailing o
Slivers o
Steel

SCRAM



Eleven-year-old Mitchell Aase held on for dear life as the 43-foot-long iceboat—resembling a giant preying mantis on ice skates—screamed across frozen Lake Geneva.

The fire-engine-red boat, named the *Fritz*, nimbly turned when it reached the far shore, then flew 45 miles per hour back across the lake before slowing to a stop as it approached a group of Scouts and Venturers.

“That was fun,” Mitchell said with a grin as he climbed out of a mesh basket, one of two at the rear of the boat holding two passengers and two drivers. “It was sort of like a really fast roller coaster. It was scarier than I thought it would be.”

“I was a little freaked out on the first turn; I thought we would tip over,” said Devon Wilcox, also 11. “It was really cool. Ice sprayed in my face.”

Mitchell and Devon, members of Troop 33 of DeKalb, Ill., were among 16 Scouts and Venturers and eight parents and Advisors who sampled iceboating, most for the first time, on a crisp, breezy March day on Lake Geneva, Wis. The annual winter event attracts Scouts and Venturers anxious to experience a little-known sport that has a long and storied history in southern Wisconsin and a few other places around the world. ▶

BY DOUG SMITH / PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBB HILL

With one hand on the tiller and another on the mainsheet, Troop 33 Scout Jordan Johnston whizzes by in a DN-class iceboat.

From Dutch Boats to The Detroit News

The history of iceboating stretches back to the 1600's in the Netherlands, when sailboats were fitted with runners and used to transport cargo. Dutch settlers introduced the craft to North America on New York's frozen Hudson River in the late 1700's.

Iceboating as a sport grew quickly. In 1861 the Poughkeepsie Ice Yacht Club was formed, the first in the nation. Soon afterward more clubs organized, and iceboating regattas became popular on the river.

The ice yacht clubs catered mainly to the wealthy, such as the Vanderbilts and Roosevelts, but young people could enjoy the fun, too. For 25 cents, a group of teenagers could send off for a set of iceboat plans and build it with materials costing \$10 to \$15.

Today there are many different sizes and classes of iceboats. The most popular in the world is called the DN—originally introduced in 1937 by *The Detroit News* newspaper. The small boats can be built at home, offering an inexpensive avenue to the world of iceboating. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the Class A boat, the granddaddy of iceboats, which can top 100 m.p.h.

Speed definitely is a primary attraction for many enthusiasts.

Records are conflicting, but some say the likely world speed record for iceboats was set at about 150 m.p.h. in 1947 on Lake Winnebago, Wis.

Others say the 143 m.p.h. achieved by a boat in 1938 is the record to beat. Still others cite the 148 m.p.h. sailed by an iceboat in 1977 as the fastest ever.

Regardless, last winter, an iceboater with a high-tech craft clocked almost 156 m.p.h. on a one-mile course on Lake Monona in Madison, Wis. —D.S.

"This is the iceboating capital of the world," said Bill Sills, who has been zipping around Lake Geneva in iceboats for more than 50 years. He is Skipper of the Sinnissippi Council's Sea Scout Ship 1 in Fontana, a picturesque burg of 1,800 people nestled on the shores of Lake Geneva.

Each winter Sills organizes iceboat outings for Scouts and Venturers, sharing his passion for the sport with a new generation. He rounds up a few local iceboaters willing to give rides and teach the youths to sail on ice.

"There's nothing in the world like iceboating," Sills said. "And the kids love it [because] it's something they can master. Where else can a kid go 60 m.p.h. and not get into trouble?"

David Williams and his son, Michael, a member of Lake Geneva's Troop 235 and Sea Scout Ship 1, brought their two-person, 17-foot iceboat for the Scouts to try. Williams has been iceboating since he was 5, and he and his family frequently hoist the sail on their iceboat during the winter.

"It's exhilarating," Williams said.

Added Michael with a wry grin: "The speed is thrilling."

Iceboats vary in size, shape, and color. Small 17-footers like the boat used by David Williams resemble darts and seat one or two. They generally have three razor-sharp stainless steel blades—two stationary in the rear



Brad Schaaf gives fellow Troop 33 Scout Russell Cook a push-start to get his boat sailing across the ice.

and a front one for steering. Weighing a few hundred pounds, the boats are relatively inexpensive, and easy to sail.

Then there are big iceboats like the *Fritz*, a classic, carefully restored wooden beauty built in 1937 that weighs 2,400 pounds—the same as a small car. A tiller in the stern is used to steer the craft. There are only a few iceboats like it in the world, and it draws gawks whenever it's on the ice. Owner Fred Stritt of nearby Delavan, Wis., races the boat, which can hit 120 miles per hour, when he's not cruising around Lake Geneva just for fun.

Brad Schaaf, 14, of Troop 33, leans back in the stern of the *Fritz*. The restored 1937 iceboat usually travels 40 to 60 miles an hour over the ice, but it has gone as fast as 120 m.p.h.



The speed of iceboating has always been its allure.

"Until man learned to fly, the fastest he had ever gone was on an iceboat," said Stritt. Usually the *Fritz* travels 40 to 60 m.p.h. and hits 70 to 80 m.p.h. in races. But Stritt has been aboard when it approached 120 m.p.h.

"Driving any big stern-steerer in a

you're only a few inches off the ice, it seems like you're going faster."

Enthusiasts call it "hard-water sailing." It's the flip side of "soft-water sailing" done during the summer. The two sports have similarities: Both use sails, depend on wind, and utilize lakes. Experience at soft-water sailing can help a novice learn to sail an iceboat.

is less resistance on the runners, so you need less sail."

"You control your speed by how tightly you pull in your sail," David Williams told Zach Hathway, 17, of Venturing Crew 519, Janesville, Wis. "Many people think it's like soft-water sailing, where you keep your sail out. But you have to trim it in. It looks easy,



Boy Scouts and Sea Scouts inspect equipment aboard an iceboat. Wisconsin's Lake Geneva is a hotbed for the winter sport.



Rick Hemmig, left, and Todd Knop, right, steady the *Fritz* while Alex Terch, 15, hops off after her ride.

stiff wind is like holding onto the tail of a dinosaur," Stritt said.

Whether large or small or something in between, iceboats offer a unique outdoor experience. The Scouts and Venturers described it simply as "awesome."

Michael Williams has been sailing the family iceboat since he was 8. He pushes off to get his 17-footer started, then slips snugly inside the coffin-like cockpit and lies down. He steers with foot pedals that turn the front runner. That leaves his hands free to work the sail, tightening it to go faster or loosening it to slow down. As with all iceboats, there are no brakes.

Michael keeps his head down, because the boom, attached to the sail, swings from one side of the boat to the other, depending on wind direction.

"If your head is up too high, you'll get hit by the boom," David Williams said with a grin. "That's why we wear helmets."

Iceboats travel three to seven times faster than the wind speed. "So you're going 45 to 50 m.p.h. with a 10-m.p.h. wind," said David Williams. "Because

But there are obvious differences for winter sailing: the ice and speed.

The Sea Scouts in the group were experienced sailors, but few had ever even seen an iceboat. "The sails are smaller on an iceboat," Sills explained. "There

but you don't just point it and go."

When you do go, the experience is unique. Imagine lying on a child's snow sled doing 50 m.p.h. And there's the subtle sound of steel blades on rock-hard ice: a soft rumble like a bowling ball rolling down (continued on page 40)



(Left to right) Dustin Schultz, Jacob Sand, Alex Terch, and Danielle Reimer eat lunch while waiting for winds to pick up across the frozen lake so they can go iceboating.



Jordan Johnston stands by a DN, a boat design introduced by *The Detroit News*.

a lane or the tearing of wrapping paper. Devon had another sound in mind: "It sounded like ice grinding in a blender."

"Iceboating is not inherently dangerous, but spills can occur," David Williams cautioned. As a standard safety measure, all the Scouts and Venturers wore helmets, and no one tipped over during a ride. (Goggles or a face mask are also helpful, to fend off the occasional spray of ice.)

The right amount of wind is critical. Too little, and the boats go nowhere, while too much can be dangerous. As a result, iceboaters often have to wait for the right wind.

Flags barely fluttered on a 30-degree, sun-splashed March morning as the Scouts, Venturers, and their leaders gathered on the slippery 20-inch-thick ice covering Lake Geneva. The ice was thick enough to support cars, trucks, ice anglers, and numerous iceboaters, who waited for several hours while the wind offered only lame gusts.

"Iceboating requires some patience," Sills observed. "We're hoping for enough wind today. Seven to 15 m.p.h. would be perfect."

Finally, as steel-gray clouds

rolled in and the flags started flapping, Stritt and the Williamses and a couple dozen other iceboaters hoisted their sails. Soon, a swarm of iceboats of different sizes and colors scooted around the bay like choreographed dancers.

Bundled in winter jackets and boots, the Scouts and Venturers took turns sailing in the Williamses' 17-footer or a smaller one-person craft. Others caught a ride in the fancy *Fritz*.

"It was fun," said Danielle Reimer, 16, of Ship 500 in Muskego, Wis., among the first to climb in with Michael Williams and go for a spin. "It was like sailing a small boat."

Later, she got a ride in the bigger boat. "I love going fast," she said with a grin. "But I was afraid it would tip over."

It didn't. Many of the older boats are classics that have been preserved and restored like vintage automobiles; a crash can cause thousands of dollars of damage and require extensive repairs. Iceboaters avoid spills.

Alex Terch, 15, another member of Ship 500, also was impressed after a ride in the *Fritz*. "It was a lot faster than downhill skiing—and cold, too."

"It was very relaxing," said Mike Wittlieff, an Advisor for Venturing Crew 519 of Janesville, Wis., who rode the *Fritz*. "I was surprised at how smooth it was."

"It was really fun," beamed Kathy Luglio, an assistant Advisor. "I've got to get one of these."

For veteran iceboater Bill Sills, speed is only part of the al-

For safety, Danielle Reimer wears a helmet and goggles aboard the *Fritz*.

Sailing in the Ice Belt

Southern Wisconsin is an iceboating haven for three reasons: There are lakes. They freeze solid in the winter. And they rarely are covered with snow.

The lack of snow is key because iceboats are built to travel over ice, not snow. Go farther north, and there are plenty of frozen lakes, but too much snow. Go farther south, and there's little or no ice.

Lake Geneva, home to one of the largest iceboat fleets in the country, usually is mostly free of snow. The lake is large—nearly eight miles long and two



Scout Brad Schaaf talks to a group about his ride in a DN-class iceboat.

miles wide. And while some winter anglers fish the lake, ice fishing houses—potentially dangerous obstacles—aren't numerous as they are on some northern lakes.

But the Lake Geneva area isn't the only hot spot. It is within the "Ice Belt"—an area about 150 miles wide circling the globe near the 45th parallel, where iceboating also is popular. Other iceboating areas include Minnesota, Michigan, New England, Ontario, New York, Montana, northern Europe, and Russia. —D.S.

lure of iceboating.

"You're controlling nature," he said. "It's intellectual. It requires intense concentration and an awareness of what's going on around you. It's a sensory thing."

And also just plain fun. ☺

Doug Smith is an outdoor writer for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

