



Sam Russell solos a 420 in a rising wind.

The headwaters of the Piankatank River begin at a humble crossroad called Powcan in King and Queen County. At the intersection of Powcan Road and Poor House Lane begins Dragon Run Swamp, which meanders a course east-southeast down the Middle Peninsula, forming the boundary between King and Queen and Gloucester counties on its south bank, and Essex and Middlesex counties on its north. As the crow flies, Dragon Run and the Piankatank together are no more than 30 miles long. By boat, it's more than 50.

SAILING FOR ALL AGES

The Junior Sailing Camp at
Fishing Bay Yacht Club

Story and Photos by William Westbrook



Dan Crouch goes for a wild ride on a club laser.



“Of course, you're having a good time, but uncleat the jib!”

Hence, its name: In the Algonquian language, the language of the Powhatan tribes, ‘Pianka’ is thought to mean crooked and ‘tank’ water. Piankatank... Crooked Water.

Where Dragon Run gives way to the Piankatank is the spot at which the river becomes navigable. Ten miles on to the east, the Piankatank reaches a spit of land that resembles an upside-down Cape Cod, only in miniature. This hook, called Stove Point, forms Fishing Bay, the last fully protected bay on the Piankatank. Sail around Stove Point and you’re in the big water of the Chesapeake.

For sailors, Fishing Bay is an ideal anchorage. It offers shelter from the summer’s prevailing northwesterly winds and refuge from the full force of waves that come crashing up the Atlantic Coast from the south during hurricane season. Captain John Smith discovered this while mapping the river in the early 1600s. So too did the charter members of the Fishing Bay Yacht Club when they founded the organization in 1939.



Sam Russell helps his friends out of a pickle... er, a turtle.

Fishing Bay Yacht Club is a sailor’s yacht club. As one of the premier racing clubs on the Chesapeake Bay, it boasts the gamut of sailing classes, from the smallest one-designs to some of the most competitive offshore racers. Most recently, the club played host to the 2007 Flying Scot North Americans. More than 70 boats turned out.

But how does one go from land-lubber to champion of a highly competitive North American one-design fleet? If you’re a member of FBYC, it may well begin with the instruction offered by the club each year during its Junior Sailing Week.

This year, Junior Week took place from June 18-22, the week prior to the Flying Scot Nationals. Instruction was open to anybody between the ages 7 to 17. These kids learn and train in Optimists, Lasers, 420s, and even Flying Scots. The club has offered this junior program for more than a decade. In years past, it has seen as many as 120 kids enroll and, in less well attended years, as few as 60. Lately however, junior sailing has been on the rise, and this year the club provided instruction to 97 enthusiastic would-be future champions.

A club’s sailing programs are only as good as its instructors. At Fishing Bay Yacht Club, the instructors are some of the best. Diego Ravecca, from La Plata, Argentina, was this summer’s lead instructor. At age 34, he has already had an extensive career coaching Optimist and Laser teams both in North and South America. Most recently, Diego served as head coach for the Optimist and Laser teams of Puerto Lucia Yacht Club in Salinas, Ecuador. In 2001, Diego led his PLYC sailors to win the first international Optimist championship in



The 420 fleet heads downwind on a light air day.



Counselors and campers of the 2007 FBYC Junior Sailing Week

Ecuadorian history. That same year, his Laser Radial team placed fourth place in the Bolivian Games, the best finish by an Ecuadorian team in Lasers to date.

Ravecca's assistant coach this

summer was Luis Canuto from Rosario, Argentina. Two years ago at the age of 23, Luis was crowned Laser Radial Champion of Central and South America. Most recently, he placed ninth overall in the 2006 Volvo

Youth World Championship held in Weymouth and Portsmouth, England. He has represented his country at many other international events including four Laser World Championships in Spain, Canada, Italy and Brazil.

This summer's Junior Sailing Week was partitioned by experience. Beginning and intermediate Optimist sailors were grouped together. For them, the week was spent learning rigging, basic boat-handling skills, and sail trim. By week's end, these novice sailors were introduced to racing.

For the others, it was all about racing. The kids in the Optimist racing class



The Laser fleet practices starting drills

spent the week working on race starts, improved sail trim, better tacking and jibing technique, and race strategy. By week's end, visually, it was magnificent to see. Coach Ravecca set a short line and called start after start. After a three-minute starting sequence, he let them beat to windward just long enough for the kids to witness how their individual starts affected their positions on the first upwind leg of the racecourse. Then he would blow the whistle, call them all back, and start them all again. He did this time after time. For these young Opti racers, it required intense concentration. It was an excellent drill to impart the importance of boat positioning on the starting line.

For the older kids, those in the Laser and 420 classes, the week was also

about race starts, improved sail trim, better technique, and race strategy. In addition, it was about reading the wind, understanding shifts and knowing on what side of the racecourse to be when they happen. On the final day of their racing regimen, the wind reached its crescendo. Gusts on that day approached 20 knots, yet wave action on Fishing Bay was nearly nonexistent—perfect conditions for these advanced young dinghy sailors.

From here, many of the FBYC Junior Sailing attendees would go on to race against their peers from other clubs up and down the Chesapeake. Some would even go forward to race in international regattas throughout North America and Europe. Future great champions of the America's Cup and the Volvo Ocean Race?

Possibly. For now, the members of Fishing Bay Yacht Club can be proud that their junior program prepares whole new generations to become expert sailors and seamen.

William Westbrook is a writer-photographer who lives in South Russell, Ohio. He has written on a diverse range of sports and outdoor pursuits. He has also translated from French several books on European professional cycling. When not writing or shooting, he typically can be found walking his black Lab in the woods, with a rod in his hand, on the deck of a sailboat, or on some distant road riding his bicycle.