

The Ice Opti Cometh

By Stacie Kress Booker

Imagine an Optimist with a cockpit, runners and parking break. What's this you say? It's an Ice Optimist; a sleek, slick hull with an Optimist sail and rig that goes fast, real fast, on the ice.

"An ice Opti can reach speeds of 35-40 mph," says Daniel Hearn, an ice Opti dad from Madison, Wisconsin. His two youngest children, Sheridan (13) and Frankie (10) sail them. Hearn wants to build awareness of the sport in this country and is working to start up junior ice Opti programs in his region. He says it will help keep junior sailors sailing, especially in the colder climates where their soft water sailing season is short and winters are long.

Ice boating isn't new, but the ice Opti is, relatively speaking. Traditional ice boats can be too powerful for a junior sailor. A designer in Europe decided to take a standard Optimist dinghy sail plan and build a small ice boat hull for it so that there was an appropriate entry level craft for youth sailors.

The hull itself is nothing like the Optimist dinghy, but more like what's called a DN, a full-sized iceboat for adults. It's long and slender with a pointy bow. Instead of a daggerboard and rudder it has three runners (like oversized ice skate blades), two extend out from each side of the hull and one is in front. The two on the side are fixed. The one in front steers the boat. There is also a tiller that the skipper uses to control the front runner. But the ice Opti rig is exactly the same as that of the Optimist dinghy. In fact, you can actually take your Opti rig, sail and all, and use it with an ice Opti.

The ice Opti skipper sits in a reclining position, nearly laying down and facing forward, in the cockpit, with the tiller in one hand and the mainsheet in the other. The skipper remains in this position, regardless of what tack she's on; there's no roll tacking or jumping from one side of the boat to the other.

Why lying down? This lowers your center of gravity so that when you're going around a mark there's less probability that you'll be pitched out of the boat. Consider what would happen if you were sitting in a chair, without a seatbelt, and whipped around a corner real fast. The seat would tip and you'd fall out. It's the same principle in an ice Opti, staying low in the boat keeps the boat flatter.

And yet, the boat is very manageable when it comes to steering. You have the ability to make adjustments for turning radius and to tune it to get the right balance between maneuverability and steerability. "Like any vehicle, whether a car or a bike," explains Hearn, "the greater the velocity of the vehicle, the smaller amount of movement on the tiller is needed to make a turn."

An ice Opti racecourse is always windward-leeward, two to three laps. Typically a regatta will consist of four to six races a day, each race taking 15-20 minutes. Sailors get a throw out after five or six races.

PHOTO (opposite page) - Sheridan Hearn sailing at the World Ice Opti Championship in Lithuania last year.



Frankie in his Ice Opti at home on Elk Lake.

There is no jockeying for position or ‘protecting your hole’ on an ice Opti starting line. A random drawing assigns skippers their spot on the line and they all line up next to each other. Instead of the typical five-minute Opti starting sequence it’s a Grand Prix start. Flag up, flag down, the skippers get a running start to push their boat off the line, jump in, sheet in their sail and they’re racing. Half go off on starboard tack, the other half on port. All boats meet at the top mark. That’s when things get interesting.

In an ice boat you can dial up your speed by a factor of 10 or 15. “You’re not coming into a mark hailing starboard,” says Hearn, “no one’s going to hear you, it’s all happening too fast.” While the right-of-way rules are comparable to what soft water sailors are accustomed to, there is one significant difference. On a downwind leg, in ice sailing, a windward boat has rights over the leeward boat. Why? Consider this scenario. Two ice boats are sailing downwind. A puff hits

– Ice Opti, cont’d from p. 55

them both. The windward boat goes into a hike; heading up would mean tipping over. The only way the windward boat can avoid wiping out is to turn down, so the leeward boat is required to give way. This avoids calamity.

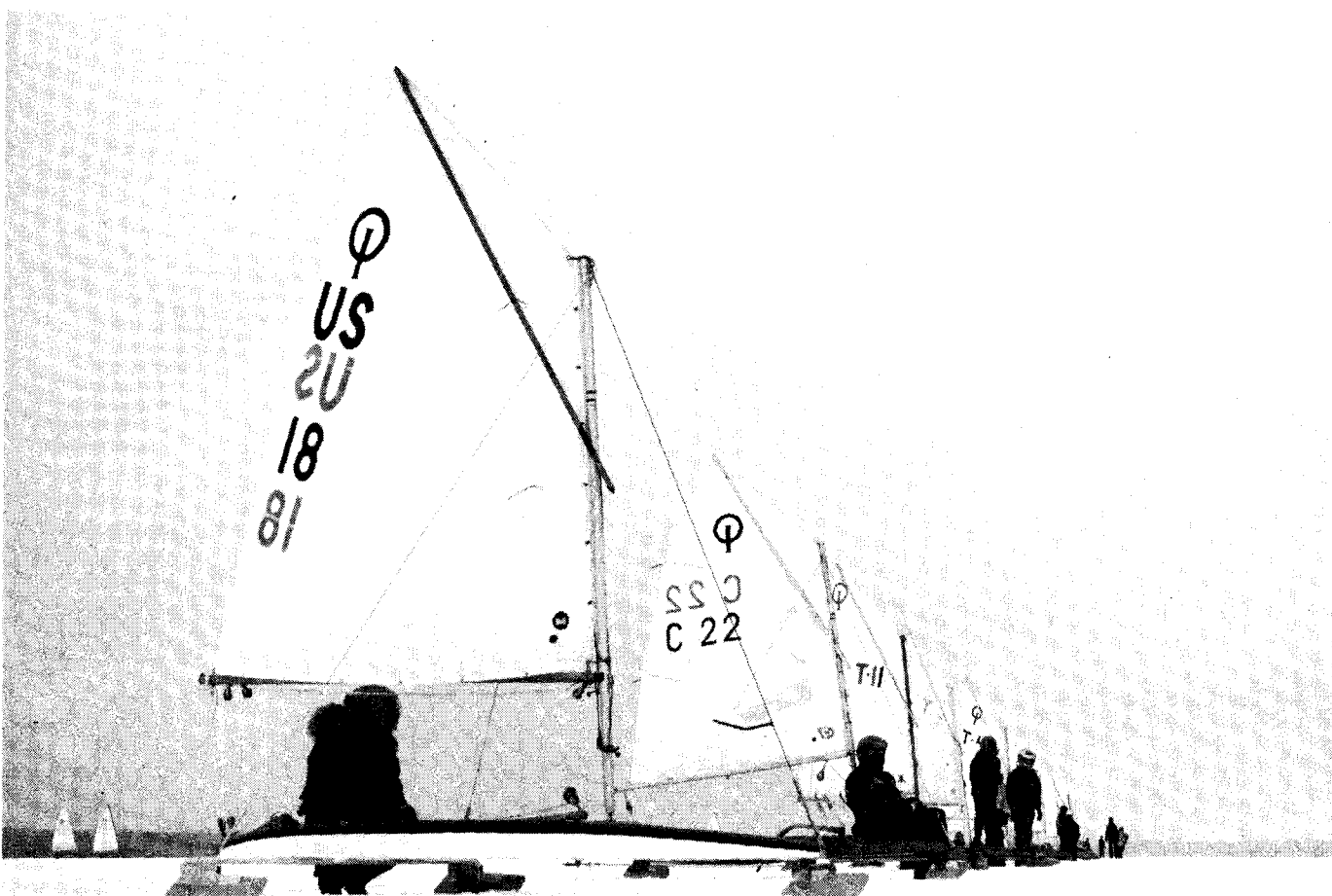
Hearn says ice boat sailing is among the most thrilling sailing experiences anyone could ever have. “It has all the same characteristics of a sailboat race – strategic positioning of your boat, calling laylines, sailing fast.” Hearn’s daughter agrees, but it’s the speed she likes best.

“I really like how fast you can go in an iceboat,” Sheridan says, “I’ve always loved speed.” Sheridan’s first experiences iceboating were with her father who used to take her in his double-handed iceboat when she was little. She remembers “this awesome feeling of having fun and I’d be laughing, other times it would be quiet and I loved hearing the sound of the blades hitting the ice; it’s a really smooth sound.”

Sheridan has sailed the ‘traditional’ Opti in summer programs at the Madison Youth Sailing Foundation, but there is not an active Optimist racing program available locally. And, their summer sailing season is



Daniel Hearn races a ‘full-size’ ice boat called a DN.



A pre-start in Lithuania. Sheridan (US 18) sits patiently waiting for the start. There's no sailing up and down the line looking for a 'hole' in this sport. (A hole on the line carries an entirely different meaning when you're talking ice!)

short. The ice Opti enables kids in her region to extend their sailing season, and Hearn hopes, will keep them in the sport.

Last year Sheridan had the opportunity to travel to Lithuania to sail in the World Ice Optimist Championship and got to see just how big ice boating is outside of the United States. It's embraced in Europe the way soccer is embraced here. Sheridan got to meet and sail against kids from all over Europe. (Read more about Sheridan's experience on p. 59) This year's World Championship is in Poland. The Hearn's aren't sure whether or not they can attend, but younger brother Frankie is hoping to get a chance to compete internationally one day as well.

Ice Optis are not yet readily available in this country. Hearn says he knows of one manufacturer in Poland who offers a ready-to-sail package for about \$2,500, but in the U.S. he says it's more

common for the boats to be home-built. He's built the two his kids sail for about \$1,000 a piece finding used Opti equipment and gear online. The sail and the runners were the most expensive, making up about 75% of the overall cost.

"The ice Opti is really just getting started here in the U.S.," says Hearn. This year, however, for the first time in the history of iceboating, Hearn and his club, The Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club in Madison, Wisconsin, are organizing the first ever North American Ice Opti Championship. It will be held in conjunction with the annual Western Challenge Cup the first weekend in December. The event will include a Junior Ice Opti sailing clinic. Sheridan and Frankie will be on hand as instructors. The event will be held on the best available ice in the Western Region. You don't have to have your own ice Opti to attend, Hearn says they plan to have several ice Optis available for newcomers to try. "We don't care who wins," says Hearn, "it's all about growth and development."



Sheridan and her Dad in Lithuania,
the experience of a lifetime!



For more information about
Ice Optimists feel free to
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608-692-4007.

All "Ice Opti" Photos
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MANY THANKS!



A Day in the Life....

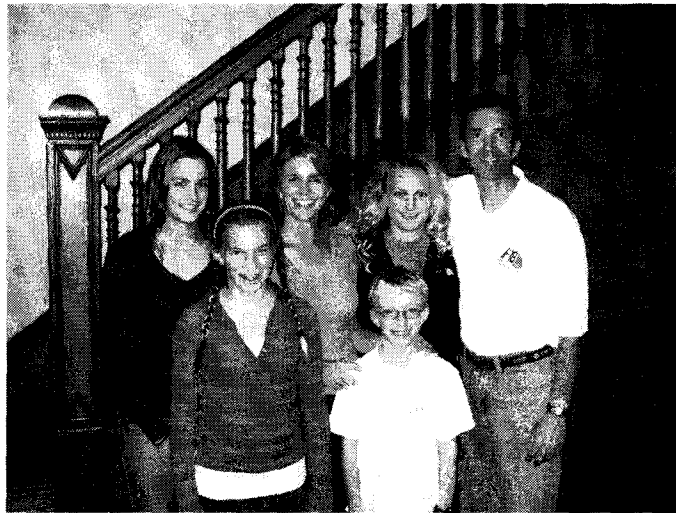
Sheridan Hearn – Ice Opti Sailor

Met Sheridan Hearn, a 13-year old ice Opti sailor from Madison, Wisconsin. Ask her what she likes about ice Opti sailing and she'll tell you, "I really, really enjoy how you can push yourself to the limit and you don't have anyone stopping you; I'm familiar with my surroundings and my boat so I can just go!"

Last year she found out just how far she'd get to go in her ice Opti – all the way to Lake Rekyva, Lithuania for the 2007 World Ice Optimist Championship last February. Her mom told her about the invitation on the way home from school one day. "I was pumped."

"In the course of 10-days I got my passport and had to tell my teachers I was going out of the country for ice boating," says Sheridan. She remembers it wasn't easy to explain to her school and she had to bring her homework on the trip. It was the first time she'd ever been out of the country. It was also the first time an American ice Opti sailor had ever competed in the world championship.

All she had to bring was her sail, US 18, and her gear, a boat and equipment would be supplied for her. There would be a couple of training days and then the three-day championship. Ice Opti racing is still very new in the United States. At home, Sheridan would usually go ice boating with her brother, Frankie, and her friend, June Whitehorse. She had never raced in an ice boat event of this size and had to get used to the flags used at the start as well as having so many competitors on the ice. It was a bit daunting, but she and her dad had discussed this before the trip and had agreed "to find the fun in every aspect of the experience."



The Hearn family: (back row l. to r.) Morgan, Dawn, Kiley, Daniel, (front row l. to r.) Sheridan, and Frankie.



Frankie's Gear List

- Helmet
- Life-jacket
- Parka & Snowpants
- Boots with spikes on the soles
- Goggles
- Hat
- Gloves
- Bear claws – multi-pronged ice pick*

*Hearn says this is for the rare chance that the ice would crack and a sailor would fall in, the bear claws would allow the sailor to pull himself up out of the water safely. "When you're talking about youth sailors, you want to be covered for any safety possibility."



Sheridan and fellow competitor Antonina Marcinak (POL). Antonina, now 13, is the reigning Ice Opti World and European Champion.

Much of that fun had to do with meeting the Mother ice Opti sailors – from all over Europe. Sheridan's first night in Lithuania was spent having dinner with other junior ice boaters from Denmark, England, Finland and Poland. "It was really fun to get to know all these different people and they wanted to get to know me too!" Sheridan says they quizzed her on her geography and she was surprised to find out they knew not only their own countries on the map, but all the states in the United States as well. She got some good-hearted ribbing for not knowing where Lithuania was on the map.

Sheridan also liked hearing all the different accents and tried to imitate them. She especially enjoyed meeting two boys from Britain who sounded just like the characters in the Harry Potter movies. She learned that the Swedes would throw you in the snow if you hit them with too many snowballs and the Poles were fiercely competitive (both in snowball fights and ice boating). They brought 50 sailors to the event.

However, when it came time for racing the Poles honored her with the Number One starting block. Racing was tough. These kids had been ice boating since they were very young. Sheridan says she never finished a race (not uncommon in ice boating where the pairing of ice and wind aren't always conducive to racing).

Sheridan remembers one particular race...

"I was in a group of about 20 boats that were close to the leader. I saw that my side stay was dangling by my boat I grabbed it and tucked it in my boat thinking that my Dad could fix it after the race. About a minuet later my whole mast came down and I had to stop because it's pretty hard to sail without a sail. So a Polish man came out and saw what was wrong and saw that my pin was missing. So he sailed back in looking for one. But then my Dad came out on Hanna's boat (a Swede) and luckily had another pin, he stuck it in the hole and I was off. I finished the lap but I was way past the time limit so I went in and got ready for the next race!"

**FOR MORE INFORMATION
about
ICE BOATING**

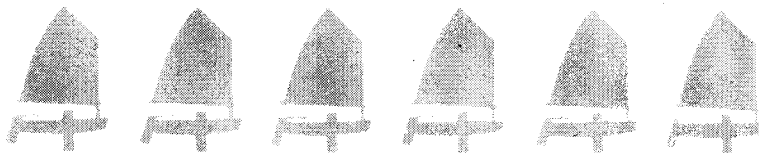
<http://www.iceboat.org/>
<http://www.iceboat.org/youthsailing.htm>
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Frustrating at the time, but later, Sheridan laughed about getting stuck out in the middle of the lake without a mast.

Overall there were 10 Ice Opti girls including Sheridan. Two of the top three at the event were girls, including the winner. When it came time to say good-bye Sheridan and her new friends exchanged emails. “What many of them told me was once you come you don’t really stop,” says Sheridan, and they encouraged her to bring more US sailors next time.

Sheridan says she’s keeping in touch via email and hopes to see them again, perhaps at another World Championship, or better yet, in her own country once the sport continues to grow here.

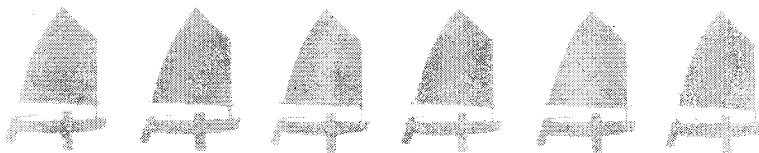
To view Sheridan's blog from Lithuania, go to <http://www.iceboat.org/optis/o7championship/rekyva.htm>

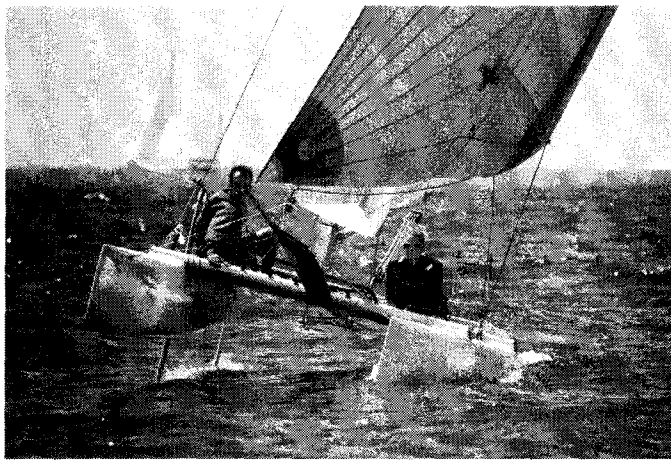
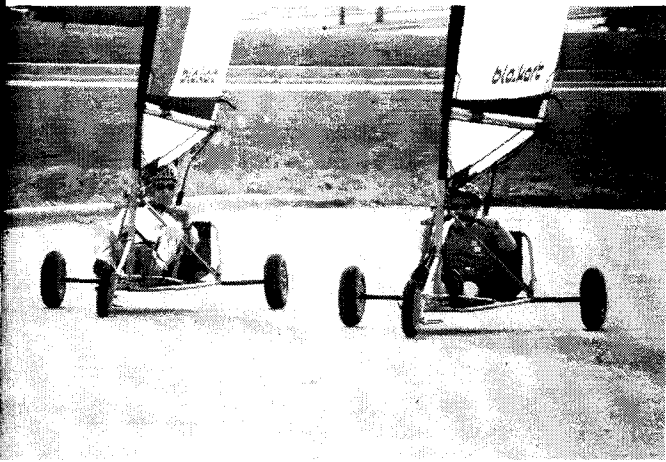


A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

– Daniel Hearn's Blog ...

“... to these kids, ice sailing is just one of those things they’ve always done. They are families of ice sailors— boys, girls, moms, dads and even grandparents. The littlest ones are viewed as the most vital of every club. The big kids look after them; the little ones look up to them like “rock stars.” I was amazed at how self-reliant these kids were. They carried their own sails. They put their own boats together. They pushed themselves out to the race course and up to the line. They sailed fast and they were great sportsman. In an entire week I never saw a single tantrum. The parents were very active participants, but not in that “win at all costs” way that seems to be plaguing youth sports of all types in America.”





When the weather is warmer, and Daniel Hearn isn't ice boating with his two youngest kids, Sheridan and Frankie, you can find him racing Blokart's with Sheridan or racing catamarans with his daughter Morgan. His eldest daughter, Kiley, has no interest in sailing and his wife, Dawn, "is very happy to spend time on shore." Still, it's a family affair of year-round sport for the Hearn's.

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