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Maine may be buoyed by international sailing series

By MATT WICKENHEISER, Staff Writer

Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram

Thursday, March 15, 2007

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WORLD MATCH RACING TOUR

THE RACES: Two crews race against each other on a short course. Races are quick, emphasizing boat handling and knowledge of tactics and rules.

THE TOUR: America's Cup teams, Olympic gold medalists and world champions are featured.

THE BOATS: At 36 to 42 feet long, they are about half the length of America's Cup yachts.

ON THE INTERNET:
www.worldmatchracingtour.com

The World Match Racing Tour has chosen Maine to host an international competition as part of its 2007-2008 Sailing World Cup series.

The organization, which is based in England, is still setting its schedule for the season, but the Maine event would take place off Portland's East End and would span five days this fall or in the spring of 2008.

World Match Racing is a yearly global series of spectator-friendly sailing that pits top-ranked crews against each other in one-on-one short-course races. The tour is sanctioned by the International Sailing Federation and includes professional sailors, America's Cup teams and Olympic gold medalists.

Portland's East End, with its vantage over Casco Bay, is "beautifully situated for this type of event," said Phineas Sprague, who has been spearheading the deal for the nonprofit Maritime Maine, previously known as OpSail Maine Inc.

Thirty-four teams compete for the overall championship by accumulating points at each event. Last year's venues included Croatia, Bermuda, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Malaysia, Portugal, San Francisco and Switzerland.

Maritime Maine's goal is to make the Casco Bay race an annual event.

"The World Match Racing Tour event will benefit Maine on many different economic levels, including tourism, business development, boat building and marine trades," said Maine Economic Development Commissioner John Richardson in a prepared statement.

"We will promote Maine as the choice of destination to live and do business, and to brand Maine as a global boat building and marine trades leader."

According to the tour organization's Web site, the entire race series produces 155 hours of television coverage annually that reaches more than 600 million households worldwide.

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television coverage annually that reaches more than 600 million households worldwide.

"This is an amazing opportunity for the state that will allow us to showcase Maine as a premier place to live, work and visit to an international audience," Gov. John Baldacci said in the statement.

Sprague estimated that the event could draw between 30,000 and 50,000 people to the city, including spectators and those involved with the race.

Portland City Manager Joseph Gray Jr. said the city supports the event and officials plan to meet with Sprague and other organizers. "The city would be honored to have this kind of sailing competition choose Portland," he said.

Sprague said the Eastern Promenade's vantage over Casco Bay makes it a perfect spot for race spectators -- a factor that series officials considered.

"Portland's Casco Bay and waterfront present one of the most ideal World Cup Sailing venues we've seen among all of our global stops, and is a spectacular new addition to our World Match Racing Tour," said Patrick J. Sikorski, director of Worldwide Venue Development and the World Match Racing Tour, in the prepared statement.

Sprague said Sikorski scouted the coast of Maine and approached Maritime Maine last fall about the possibility of bringing a race here.

Portland has the necessary infrastructure, including the Portland International Jetport, harbor facilities, hotels and restaurants, Sprague said.

Maritime Maine is set to sign a memorandum of understanding with the tour organization, agreeing to host the race.

The nonprofit needs to raise roughly \$1 million to put on the race. That money would cover costs such as bringing judges to Portland, paying for race-related services and advertising.

The state will contribute some money, said Elaine Scott, marketing director for the Department of Economic and Community Development, but most will come from private donations, including companies that want sponsorship opportunities.

She said she does not know how much money the state will provide directly.

Sprague said he has approached businesses and has "soft commitments" for about three-quarters of what's needed.

"This is going to happen -- we can't afford not to do it," said Sprague, owner of Portland Yacht Services.

"This is one of the most beautiful, wonderful places in the world. If we use our resources well, we're going to show ourselves off beautifully. This race is going to be about Maine."

Sprague said the various venues sometimes offer their own fleet of ships for the race.

The sailboats are between 36 and 42 feet, about half the length of the America's Cup vessels. Sprague said his vision would be to have a fleet of 10 Maine-built sailboats for the Casco Bay races, but he's not sure whether the state's builders could complete the work for the first race.

Staff Writer Matt Wickenheiser can be contacted at 791-6316 or at:

mwickenheiser@pressherald.com

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