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Monhegan Island Race ends today in Casco Bay

Sailors are catching a breeze with history at the helm

By TIM DEVANEY, Staff Writer

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John Ewing/Staff Photographer
Manana class boats make the turn across the starting line to begin the Monhegan Island Race off Portland Yacht Club on Friday

Geoff Emanuel traveled all the way from Texas to sail in the Monhegan Island Race for the 34th time.

"There's something about being on a boat with buddies that you can't reproduce on land," said Emanuel, who moved to Texas two years ago. "It breeds camaraderie."

As it has since 1928, the Portland Yacht Club is celebrating its signature race this weekend. The race began at Clapboard Island in Casco Bay at noon Friday. Sailboats competing on the longest course will travel 128 miles, from Casco Bay to Cape Neddick to a buoy near Monhegan Island, then back to Portland Head Light.

The race also includes several shorter courses, for slower boats. Sailors made all-night plans and will finish today.

"When you're going 10 mph in a sailboat you feel like you're going 100 mph in a car," Emanuel said. "You always get moments in a race when everything comes together. It's exhilarating. It's a rush."

The race, founded in 1928, has a rich history that separates it from many other yacht races, organizers say. It's one of the only off-shore overnight races in Maine.

"People measure themselves against the history of the event," said Carter White, a Portland Yacht Club member. "When you finish, you definitely feel a sense of pride and accomplishment."



John Ewing/Staff Photographer
Boats in the Manana class jockey for position along the starting line of the Monhegan Island Race on Friday. The boats will race 128 miles before reaching the finish line off Portland Head Light today.

Jennifer Yahr, who in 1997 became the first female captain to win the race, enjoyed a front-row seat on a media boat Friday, helping to coordinate the event. She will welcome sailors back when they arrive today.

On Friday, she embraced the "tight community" of sailors, reflecting on the open sea.

"It's beautiful," she said of traveling through the night. "When it's clear, you can see the moon's reflection shining on the water and the stars and the Milky Way. It's just you and the world."

Many sailors who compete in the annual race won't experience that feeling this year because economic challenges have forced them out. This year, 35 sailboats were entered in the race, compared with 60-plus three years ago and as many as 130 in the 1980s.

Monty Yale, who has competed in the race, said competitive sailors pay hefty prices to keep their boats at a competitive level each year.

"If we were back in a good economy, there would be lots of boats here," he said.

Despite economic troubles, the race goes on, thanks to Emanuel. He led a group that championed the race in the mid-1990s, when it was on the verge of extinction.

"Geoff just brought a lot more enthusiasm back to it, to try to bring it back to what it was in the 1980s," White said. "He tried to rededicate the yacht club's energy."

Now, as Emanuel enjoys the vacation in Maine that he planned around the race, that energy is more evident than ever.

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