

John Lennihan of Osterville directs the racers from the Frosties officials' boat.

COLD-WEATHER CRUISERS

Frosty sailing catches on quickly among 'gung-ho' enthusiasts

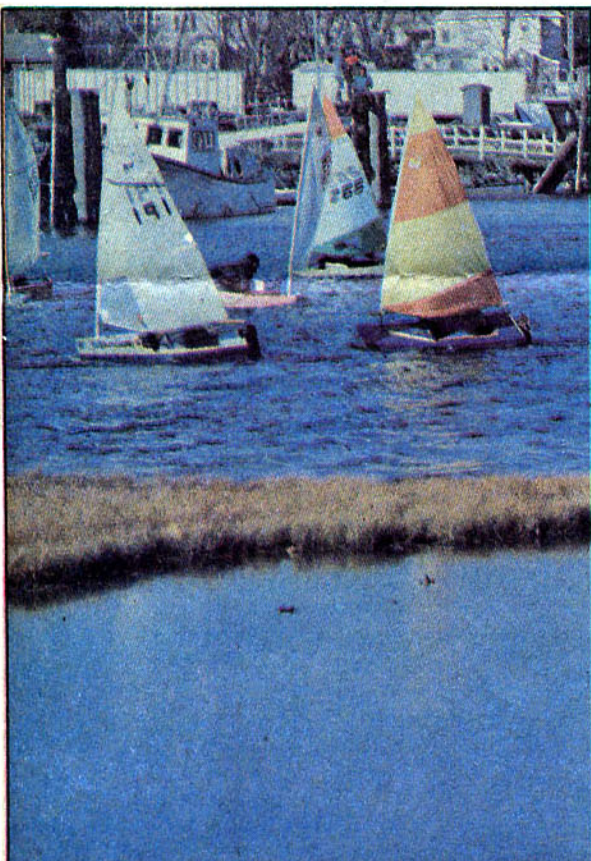
Story and photos by Steve Dowell



Frosties catch the wind to begin a race during a recent outing at Hyannis Inner Harbor.



Tom Leach, hands full, uses his mouth to hold the sheet line during competition.



With water frozen in the foreground, Frosties sail in Hyannis Inner Harbor, above. Jennifer Kano, right, of Cataumet rides the rail during a race.



HARWICH — "You're talking about a bunch of gung-ho people. They're so psyched that they just don't notice the cold," says Jackie Leach.

Jackie Leach is the wife of Tom Leach, the "King of the Frosties," the original designer and builder of the first Cape Cod Frosty, a tiny one-man sailboat that earns its name for the sport of frostbiting, or cold-weather sailing. In a fit of winter boredom, Tom built the first Frosty in 1984, and has seen his economically-minded invention grow into a fleet of around 1,000 Frosties all over the world.

"I just wanted to build something cheap that I could sail with in the winter, and there was nothing like it at the time on the Cape. I had no idea that what I threw together in the cellar would someday be a recognized class. Who could have known it would catch on like it did?"

Some may find the allure of Frostbiting hard to fathom. It is actually breaking the ice off a pond before competition can begin. It is sailing in a bathtub-size boat made of quarter-inch plywood in the harshest winter weather when the wind chill dips well below zero. It is dangling one's feet over the edge of the cramped vessel, into the water, with only inches between the top of the boat and the chilly waves. It is sometimes — though not often — capsizing the Frosty into the water, requiring rescue by the ever-present "chase boats." Though with all the discomforts of the sport, it is irresistible to an ever-growing number of people.

Leach says the Frosty craze began noticeably after the 1984 Harwich Cranberry Festival, during which a Frosty competition took place. When that was followed by the publication of a lengthy article titled "Frosty Fever" in the internationally circulated Yacht Racing & Cruising magazine, the response was overwhelming.

"I would come home from work and there would be more than 100 letters every day," explains Mrs. Leach. "People were writing from all over the world asking us how to make a Frosty, what they were made of, how much it would cost. We decided it was time to get organized."

The Leaches, Ken Simpson of Harwich and a fleet of enthusiasts started the Cape Cod Frosty Class Association after applying for a class permit, which recognized the Frosty as a "one-design" boat.

"One of the reasons I started the class was to protect my design," said Tom Leach, since the design of a sailboat cannot be patented. "Also we wanted to keep track of the number of people who were using the Frosties."

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