

2012 Atlantic Nationals

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When 22 teams of sailors haul their ~ 4500-lb., 30-foot boats out of the water and tow them 400 miles from Long Island Sound to Maine for a full week of sailing, you know something special is going on.

That would be the 84th Atlantic Class Nationals, held in Blue Hill, Maine, on August 21-24, and attended by a record-tying 41 boats, whose committed crews were rewarded with a week of tense racing and nightly parties.

Light and shifting breezes made this year's Nationals a contest of staying where the wind was—and away from where it wasn't. The skipper who did it best was Norm Peck III, of Niantic Bay Yacht Club, who held off strong competition with steady, mistake-free sailing over four races to drive Nonesuch, A137, to his second Nationals championship.

"Find the wind, find the wind, keep in the breeze," said Peck, explaining the formula that was a constant, mental mantra for all who competed, but almost impossible to carry out consistently.

With the challenging conditions jumbling the series standings repeatedly, Nonesuch, which placed first, fourth, second, and seventh, was the only boat that had no races in tenth place or above—all others had at least one double-digit finish. "We didn't do that much better this time, but basically the other boats fouled up," Peck said.

The fleet was so mixed, race to race, that none of the top five overall finishers was among the top four boats in race #4, which would be the final race. And despite the strong showing, even Nonesuch hadn't bagged the championship until a fifth race was abandoned on Friday due to lack of wind. The decision to call it a day and a series sealed the win for Peck, and the loud cheer from the winning crew carried across the calm water.

Peck, who also won in 1981, credited his team. "I've had the same crew for 15, 20 years, and when you have that level of automation in the boat, you just can concentrate on other things. They did an outstanding job."

Others in the running were: Ben Wells (Questra, A32), of KYC, finishing second, with 21 points; Terry Britton (Thea, A38), of KYC, in third, with 26 points; Norm Peck Jr. (Miss April, A130), of NBYC, fourth, with 27 points; and Bill Barton (One 4 All, A141), of KYC, fifth, with 29 points. The defending champion, KYC's Ian Evans (Try Again, A44) who won in Niantic Bay last year, came in seventh.

This year's event, hosted by Blue Hill's Kollegewidgwok Yacht Club, tied the Atlantic Class record, set in 1947, as the largest-ever Atlantic Nationals, with 41 boats from five different clubs. It also featured the largest number of Atlantics ever to go on the road for a Nationals, with 22 Long Island Sound teams making the trip. The participation was a clear indicator of the continuing enthusiasm that keeps the Atlantic Class going strong after all these years.

"It's an old class, there's great competition, and it's just a lovely boat to sail," said Britton, regatta chairman. "The great attendance shows the health of the class."

Steve Benjamin, skipper of Cassidy, A128, the sixth-place finisher, agreed.

"The venue was just spectacular, and the yacht club there is really into it," Benjamin said. "It seems like everybody pitched in to make it a good event. The boats are fast and fun to sail, and the competition is as tough as I've seen it ever in that class."

Wells added, "We've grown up with these boats, and we all love them. They're old, and there's not much you can change. They're just old school. It's fun."

The 2012 Nationals featured a new event, the Starling Burgess Cup, named for the legendary designer who created the Atlantic Class in 1927 as a kind of prototype for the America's Cup winners he would later design. The Burgess Cup, a 15-mile contest around Blue Hill Bay's Long Island, was a different kind of experience from the usual, windward-leeward buoys courses, at about three times the normal length, and with unpredictable reaches and the island's bold shores marking the route.

That race had the week's most dramatic finish, as Benjamin, A128, edged past Wells, A32, in a tense, mile-long duel from the northern end of Long Island to the finish line to capture the first Burgess Cup.

As the boats emerged from a hole in the lee of the island, Benjamin refused to drop his chute even as the wind freshened and came forward of abeam, and managed to fight his way past several attempts by Wells to head him up. "My crew wanted to drop and go to the jib, but we were still going fast. I said, if we take it down, we're second," Benjamin said. "I just told them, whenever we get headed, just dump the air from the chute, and that's what they did. They were great."

Under pressure, Wells also eventually went with his spinnaker, but too late, and Cassidy's momentum was enough to slide by to windward for the win. Barton, A141, finished third.

"Our big downfall was we should have set and drag-raced," Wells said. "Instead, we decided to try to push him up. Then in the dogfight we lost speed while that was going on. It was really exciting, though."

The race, framed by the rocky shores of the island and the nearby mountains of Mt. Desert Island, showcased the special beauty of Blue Hill Bay.

"The biggest impression on me was the success of the around the island race," said Ken Legler, Tufts University sailing coach and professional race manager. "I found that to be an absolutely fascinating race. It was really a great test of reaching skill, and it was anything but a parade."

Legler's foot-sure course-setting and efficient race committee leadership was a widely remarked feature of the regatta organization.

He also brought a special perspective, as a professional regatta manager, on the class and overall event. "We had terrific sailing and competition. In a class like this that's been around for a while, they may not be professional sailors, but they've mastered the boat, and it's hard to win against the best of them. Local knowledge is way overrated when it comes to a national championship."

The spirit of the event showed in the several nights of high-energy parties that were held on the grounds of the John Peters Inn, with its view overlooking the harbor. The party tents also served as race headquarters during the week. The well-organized festivities filled five late-summer evenings with good food, including one tasty lobster dinner, and excellent live music.

Diverse bands such as Flash in the Pan, a steel drum act, and top Portland bands Retrospecticus and the Mallett Brothers kept young ones, old ones and everyone between up dancing past their regular bedtimes. With such big-production events, the experience was a bit like attending five weddings in a row, and keeping up with the program proved a different kind of stamina test for the racers. Not that anyone minded.

"One thing that motivated us is we love Atlantics and want to promote the class," Britton said. "We wanted to make it a real blow-out. Everyone took responsibility and worked hard and it came out well."

Other post-race entertainment included local ladies singing group Ellacapella, the Cool Breeze Jazz Trio, and the Rick Semler Band. There were also a handful of memorable, spontaneous acts, including a very talented pop-cover-singing pair of young sisters from Connecticut (*daughters of Dave & Kelly Solway*), a group sing-a-long to a KYC club

song (who knew we had one?), and Arvid Brandstrom's multiple, spirited performances of something called Helan Gar (whatever that means).

A number of the boats got out on Monday, August 20, for some practice starts and boat fine-tuning in a steady southwesterly of 8-13 knots. The wind didn't return for the first official day of racing, unfortunately, despite strong August sunshine that normally delivers a good sailing sea breeze to Blue Hill Bay. The fleet finally gave up after several hours of drifting, dozing, and diving off the boats in the hot sun.

On Wednesday, a moderate, 5-10 knot breeze from the south and southwest enabled the fleet to complete three windward-leeward races. The next day, the boats made their way to the line under a picturesque blanket of fog that soon burned off for another light-to-medium breeze day under sunny skies, good for one Nationals series race followed by the Starling Burgess Cup race. On Friday, hopes for at least one more race were spoiled when a light breeze faded to zero, stranding the fleet mid-race. The wind eventually came back from the northwest to power a pleasant sail to the harbor, but with boat-hauling scheduled, time for racing had run out.

Race organizers made special efforts to have a clean, green event through the Clean Regattas certification program promoted by the group Sailors for the Sea, emphasizing recyclable materials and environmentally conscious choices in all aspects of the event.

Sponsors for the Nationals included a cross section of local and regional businesses: The Jackson Laboratory, Marlintoni's Grill, Maine Magazine, Points East cruising magazine, The Bank of Maine, Brooklin Boatyard, Parker Ridge retirement home, Acadia Trust, Bianco foods and catering, Morris Yachts, Main Environmental Research Institute, Downeast Properties, and Trade Winds supermarket.