



*Escape
on a Lake*

ILLUSTRATION • DIANE SHANTZ



Discover your inner sailor on a lake close to home

BY ART KILGOUR

I learned to sail when I was 12, in the frigid, salty waters of Georgia Straight, near our home in Vancouver.

I began in a two-week, learn-to-sail program at a local yacht club. We started with the theory of wind while sitting on dry land, but by the afternoon, we were out in a training boat with an instructor at the helm. By the third day, we were sailing and racing by ourselves, two students to a boat, with our teachers supervising from a small motorboat nearby. At an age when I couldn't legally drive a car, I was enthralled to be skippering a sailboat.

An early part of our instruction was to intentionally capsize our 13-foot Flying Junior (we did this in negligible wind). We would then right it, climb back in and bail out the excess water. Once we'd done this a few times, any fear of dunking was banished. When the real thing came along, in heavier wind, we were ready.

I actually preferred sailing at a camp I attended near Vancouver Island for three summers when I was a little older. We had more independence, and it wasn't all about racing. We once took a fleet of boats out for several days, with camping equipment, food and water. It was like canoe tripping, but with the power of the wind, navigating through the Gulf Islands, with an eye on the tide charts. Talk about self-sufficiency. I loved it.

Still, I don't think I truly fell for sailing until I returned to it as an adult, here in Ontario.

I rented a small planing dinghy one summer when we were camping at Killbear Park near Parry Sound. In Vancouver, sailing had been cold and uncomfortable. My hands were always sore and

ABOVE: Belwood Lake Sailing Club member Mike Bibby.

PHOTOGRAPHY • ANDY BLACKMORE

LEFT: Guelph's Harri Palm, foreground, and Jack Peirce of Barrie race at Guelph Lake during an Ontario Laser Masters Championships event.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GUELPH COMMUNITY BOATING CLUB



TOP: Jan d'Ailly, skip, and Melissa Moogk-Soulis from Conestoga Sailing Club.

PHOTOGRAPHY • MARCEL SCHLAF

BOTTOM: Ed Hone and daughter Jordan, left, sail alongside fellow Belwood club members Colin King and Terianne Rouleau.

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AT A GLANCE

- The largest lake is Belwood (by surface area), although you might not think that when looking at a map.
- Belwood and Conestoga lakes are very close in size (each is seven to 7.5 square kilometres or 700 to 750 hectares).
- The smallest is Guelph (350 hectares).
- The largest club (by membership) is the Guelph Community Boating Club. This is because of its proximity to the city and because it includes canoes, kayaks, etc., hence its different name.



salty. Imagine my delight to be sailing in the warm, sweet waters of Georgian Bay, where it was merely a pleasant swim if you capsized. Plus, there was rarely a day without wind: the sun warming the land next to a large body of water guaranteed a steady onshore breeze every afternoon.

Now, I pined for the windiest days, so I could get the high that comes from testing the elements in a small craft. I spent several summers in rented boats, attempting to teach my family the rudiments of the sport, and was rewarded when my wife gave me a surprise present for my 40th birthday: a used Laser. It's a sports car of a dinghy: one large sail, a tiny cockpit, and a hull that looks more like a surfboard than a boat. A Laser goes fast, even it is prone to tipping over in an unexpected "death roll."

That's what I sail now, mostly by myself, but occasionally with a child or small adult for company, near our cottage in northern

Georgian Bay, where I keep the boat year-round. But there are sailing possibilities much closer to home, which I explored late last summer, on assignment for this magazine.

I was excited to go racing at the Belwood Lake Sailing Club near Fergus one Sunday afternoon with a stiff wind blowing from the west. I was the guest of club member Al Madden of Orangeville, as crew in his two-person CL 16, a popular, family-size boat. It took me the first race to adjust to his timing, but by the second race we judged our start perfectly and were close to the race leaders as we headed upwind.

Suddenly, there was an ominous "thud" in the lower part of the boat. I looked at Al. "That sounded like the centreboard," I said, referring to the retractable plank that extends below the hull, giving the boat stability and preventing it from being

pushed sideways by the wind.

Madden tried to turn the boat into the wind, so we could round the course marker and head back to the club, but it wouldn't go. So he turned away from the wind – "jibing" in racing terminology – and we noticed half the centreboard floating away. Yikes! We're not sure what did that. Perhaps a submerged stump in this artificial lake? The water was low in August because of the summer's lack of rain.

Anyway, our race was over, because we couldn't control the boat properly, although we did manage to sail back safely to the club. C'est la vie.

I also went sailing on Conestogo Lake one evening. I'd never visited the large, northern reservoir and had never even glimpsed it, despite having lived in Wellington County since 1989, since it is off the beaten track.

The winds were very light, which made

racing a challenge, but we were rewarded with a beautiful sunset over the club as we completed the last of three races. It reminded me that sailing isn't only about thrills and spills – it's also about time for contemplation and reflection. You never see anyone looking at a smartphone on a sailboat!

The area's three clubs have several things in common: they all use artificial lakes created by dams on local rivers (the Conestogo, the Grand and the Speed), and the three clubs are all tenants of the Grand River Conservation Authority. Conestogo Lake has the longest shoreline; Belwood Lake has the broadest open stretch of water; Guelph Lake (the smallest of the three bodies) is also the closest to a major city, just 10 minutes away.

All three clubs are adjacent to their lakes' popular conservation areas, but each

has its own access road, with entrances separate from the parks. All offer storage and launching for members with their own boats, and two of them let non-owners sail a variety of club boats, as a way of getting started in the sport. All three provide great spots for a picnic, use of club barbecues, and easy access for swimming, canoeing or other watersports.

Each club also has its own history, personality and unique strengths. Conestogo, established in 1961, is the oldest; Guelph is the newest, starting in 1978, four years after Belwood. Of the three clubs, Guelph seems to have scored the most beautiful location, situated on a prominent point that sticks into the northern part of the narrow, twisting lake, just beyond the "island" (really a peninsula) where the Hillside Festival happens in July.

Their seasons begin in the spring, really take off in the summer, and are in decline

by September as the lakes' levels fall. Two of the three run sailing camps for kids through July and August (Guelph and Conestoga), and these two also offer adult instruction. All the clubs hold racing, social events and special events like regattas. And in June there is a competitive regatta between the three clubs, with the race victors taking the Wellington Cup, reflecting the fact that all three are in the same county. This year's Cup is to be held June 11 at Belwood Lake.

In each case, a visit to the club brings you a fresh appreciation of the outdoors, just 10 to 30 minutes drive from Guelph or Kitchener and Waterloo – even less if you happen to live near Belwood or Mapleton. Les Sherratt, whom I sailed with at Conestogo Lake, says "the best thing about sailing and racing is that you have to concentrate the whole time, so you forget about everything else in your life."

Margaret Hull of the Belwood Lake club

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– an appropriate name for a lifelong sailor!
– says, “I love the camaraderie of sailing, and the fact that there’s always something to be learned about racing.”

Harri Palm of Guelph Lake is very proud of his club’s focus on youth sailing. “We’re producing loads of good young sailors to replace us older folks as we age.”

Here’s your handy guide to the three clubs. For directions, see the clubs’ respective websites.

Conestoga Sailing Club

The Conestoga Club offers formal instruction for both youth and adults in the summer. The kids’ camp includes a daily bus that transports participants from K-W and Elmira every morning and returns them home in the afternoon. It’s the only club with formal adult lessons, and it supplements these with informal “practice nights” where experienced sailors mentor the rookies.

Conestoga also has affiliation with the universities of Wilfrid Laurier and Waterloo, and offers discounted student memberships. On Friday evenings in the summer, they offer “cruise nights,” which are simply guided sailing explorations of their large lake, without any racing competition. As you might expect, these are popular with families, sometimes followed up with a campfire onshore as the sun sets.

One other bonus for Conestoga members: the club has a large fleet of its own boats, various sizes and shapes – a total of 30 craft that any member can try, giving newcomers a chance to find the style of boat they like before purchasing their own. Two of the club’s craft are accessible, meaning they can be piloted from a cockpit, with no moving around necessary.

Belwood Lake Sailing Club

Although reservoir lakes are typically narrow and spindly in shape, which can make for tricky sailing, Belwood Lake has a large bulge near the dam at its bottom end, where the club is located, perfect for setting

up a large, triangular race course.

So Belwood offers two race sessions per week, on Sundays and Wednesdays. And the club is also a favourite for catamaran sailors (Hobie Cats, Darts, Vipers) because the lake gives them space for turning their larger craft. The club also tore a page out of Conestoga’s book recently and started offering Cruise Evenings, on Mondays, a non-racing family event.

They are a good way to explore the long lake, which stretches six kilometres up to the village of Belwood.

Guelph Community Boating Club

Guelph Lake has a unique feature: powerboats are prohibited, which makes it very friendly for sailors, canoeists, kayakers, wind surfers and stand-up paddleboarders. So the Guelph club includes all these watercraft, although the sailors are the most numerous.

Like Conestoga, Guelph offers lessons for children aged seven to 15 throughout the summer. Adult group lessons are arranged on demand or by private lesson. Also like Conestoga, Guelph offers club boats for new member use, although you have to purchase a “co-op” membership to access this program.

An older, two-person racing boat, the 15½-foot-long “Snipe,” is very popular in Guelph, and the national championships for the class were held at Guelph Lake in 2016, with club members Harri Palm and Molly Kurvink being crowned top Canadians. 🇨🇦

Websites

Conestoga Sailing Club:

www.kwsailing.org

Belwood Lake Sailing Club:

www.blsc.on.ca

Guelph Community Boating Club:

www.guelphboating.ca

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