SWINGING IN THE BURG

WHAT USED TO BE A SLEEPY WINTER REGATTA DESTINATION IS NOW THE MOST HAPPENING PLACE IN WESTERN FLORIDA. BY DAVE REED, PHOTOS BY PAUL TODD

When Tampa Bay turns on its charm with flat, quiet and cool winter breezes, it’s a magical place to race.
It was way back in 1998 when the NOOD Regatta first rolled into St. Petersburg, Florida, a time now so long ago that most of us can hardly remember what it was like. President Bill Clinton’s Monica Lewinsky scandal was just winding up, Dale Earnhardt was winning the Daytona 500 on his 20th attempt and one-design keelboat racing was on the up, with the emergent classes of the day being the Corel 45s and the Mumm 30s. Raceboats were loaded with sailors willing to hike their butts off all day in a simple open exchange for rum, beer, crew gear and maybe a red Mount Gay ball cap.

The NOOD Regatta scene was an eclectic mix of new and old one-designs when 149 boats assembled at St. Petersburg YC for that GMC Yukon-Sailing World NOOD Regatta. We’re talking Henderson 30s, J/22s, J/24s and J/20s, and the “level racing” classes. The mash-up of transient 20- to 30-footers transformed the marina across the street from the big yacht club into what could pass to an unsuspecting passerby as a nautical flea market, what with all the wet sailing gear hanging from lifelines and booms.

“This wasn’t your average club fleet,” is how the editors of this magazine described it. “More than 100 entries came from places like Michigan, Texas and New York.”

Trailering big keelboats to Florida for a midwinter regatta used to be a big deal. Nowadays, with sportboats practically living on their trailers year-round, and a slew of Southern regattas that connect Miami to parts north, keelboat portage is the norm. While the classes have changed — level is now PHRF, and the J/70s and Melges 24c have usurped the Sonars in St. Petersburg — the yacht club, with its busty figurehead and stately yardarm welcoming guests at the front door, hasn’t changed one iota. It’s been there long enough now to have a hormonal teenage boy, it’s only getting bigger, more mature and way more active after dark.

The big clubhouse, with its busy social calendar, caters to an affluent pool of members who have access to a top-shelf Sunday brunch, a circular sunken bar with crossing lounge singers on the weekends and an outdoor pool and tiki bar, as well as giant ballrooms for weddings and big regatta parties like the NOOD. All the essentials are there to satisfy the members’ annual dues. Plus, there’s a parking garage out back, as well as front-row seating for the annual IndyCar Firestone Grand Prix of St. Pete.

Across the street from the club, on Demens Landing, is where the magic happens though. The Sailing Center, a tall, white warehouse-looking structure on city property, is practically a year-round hive. The club’s lease with the city stipulates that the center provide inexpensive access to the water, which is dam near impossible to find in Florida these days.

On any given day, the center has a steady flow of member and nonmember kids in Optis, adults in club-owned J/70s, high schoolers in 420s and the city’s new millennial workforce dipping toes in one watersport or another. Its staff and waterfront team are young and much more in touch with the desires of competitors these days, and as racers themselves, they know how to run a top-notch regatta on and off the water.

Across the street from the yacht club, on Demens Landing, the Sailing Center has seen its fair share of street art, like this one by Azorean artist Pantónio, are around every corner.

The scenery at the Sailing Center in February during the 2018 Helly Hansen NOOD Regatta isn’t much different than it was when NOOD Regatta organizers added the event to their series as its seventh and only midwinter stop. The trailers in the parking lot no longer have J/24s but J/70s, and the Lightnings have replaced another. Its staff and waterfront team are young and much more in touch with the desires of competitors these days, and as racers themselves, they know how to run a top-notch regatta on and off the water.

Yet, while much of the club and its sailing center’s appearance remain unchanged, what has been dramatically transformed over the past 20 years is the city of St. Petersburg itself. The place is hopping, and anyone who hasn’t been to a NOOD Regatta in two decades should pay a visit. Be prepared to be blown away. St. Pete is enjoying an explosive growth spurt, and like a hormonal teenage boy, it’s only getting bigger, more mature and way more active after dark.

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If it isn’t already, especially with Key West Race Week on permanent hiatus, St. Pete may just be the next great American regatta destination. Sure, Miami’s sailing conditions might be better, but it comes with a price.
Top row: In its 20th year, the Helly Hansen NOOD Regatta in St. Petersburg continues to attract out-of-state teams hoping to sail in the sunshine. The local PHRF fleet, including Joseph Toth’s Morgan 36-5 Abeona, enjoys close racing. The crew of Taz Caffey’s Annapolis-based 3/70 douses the spinnaker. Middle: Todd Patton’s J/88 Blondie 2, from Milwaukee. While waiting for winds, Northerners don’t mind a 69-degree Tampa Bay dip. Bottom: Lightning’s are now thriving thanks to a number of local spark plugs. The historic social hub of St. Pete is the Vinoy. Genoa trimming on local Raymond Mannix’s J/29 Semper Fi.

Top row: The North Bay Trail, which runs 6 miles along the waterfront, is one of numerous city trails and paths. Glasswork on display at the new Imagine Museum. St. Petersburg YC bought a fleet of J/70s for use by members locally and at regional regattas. Middle: J/111s were new to the St. Pete NOOD in 2018, including Jim Connelly’s Slush Fund, from Annapolis. Bottom: With their world championships slated for 2020, nearly 40 A Class catamarans raced the NOOD, half were of the foiling type. The St. Petersburg YC, established in 1909, is a critical piece of the waterfront.
Plus, St. Petersburg is simply a friendlier place to play. "St. Petersburg was, I'll admit, a dead city," says Mayor Rick Kriseman. "There used to be two jokes about us. The first was that you could shoot a cannon down Central Avenue and you wouldn't hit anything or anyone, and the other was that the average age of our residents was 'deceased.'"

The average age, he adds, is now 42.7, and it's the No. 1 city in the state for millennials. Kriseman is early in his second term when we meet, having recently eked out a "very expensive" election over his Republican rival. His re-election is a good thing for sailing, and for the club, because he's keen to keep improving his city's waterfront. Under Kriseman, the city has blossomed financially and physically, which one would think would bode well for an easy re-election, right? Not so, he says. "We had issues ... with the sewers."

When Hurricane Hermine dumped its load of tropical moisture on the region in August 2016, St. Petersburg's antiquated sewage system pumped more than a reported 230 million gallons back into waterways. The ensuing public outrage spurred Kriseman's government into action. Millions of dollars in grants are now in play, and big infrastructure projects are underway. Tampa Bay's water quality, and the preservation of St. Petersburg's waterways in particular, says Kriseman, is a priority.

"It's a unique time in the city right now," he says. "And our waterfront is the key driver. The community is incredibly protective of the waterfront, and they don't let anything go without paying careful attention to it."

The city is surrounded by about 244 miles of shoreline, and the stretch of east-facing waterfront, which spans from the Coffee Pot at its northern end to Lassing Park in the south, is undergoing a considerable face-lift as part of a large-scale development plan. The vision is to make the city a destination approachable by water, rimmed by an interconnected park system with widespread public access and green transportation options, which Kriseman says bodes well for attracting and catering to future sailing events, such as the A Class Catamaran World Championships in 2020.

Anchoring the development is the completion of the New Pier. The gaudy, spaceship-looking structure that once jutted into the bay north of St. Petersburg YC was demolished years ago, to the locals' delight. Its replacement is now full-scale and operational, the 75-foot-tall geodesic glass panes, with no two exactly alike, much like one-design racers do have to get up for boat call, after all. There are now many more attractions should Tampa Bay rear its uglier, glossier, windside face.

Yes, the venue can be notoriously light (the winter average is 9 knots), and as the downtown concrete jungle grows, so too may the impact on the sea breeze filing in from the ocean side of the peninsula or the northerlies that blow in the winter months. Should racers find themselves listening near the yacht club's figurehead under a limp AP flag, however, the St. Petersburg visitors guide has pages upon pages of daylight options to explore, starting with the Salvador Dali Museum just down the road from the club. In the opposite direction is the Museum of Fine Arts. Impressionist painters not your thing? A few blocks west is the Morean Arts Center and the mind-blowing Crafts Movement.

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