Students Steer Rice Sailing Club Back on Smooth Course

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On a windy spring day, Rice seniors Kent Voss and Lucy Malone launched their 14-foot boat from the Houston Yacht Club in Shoreacres, Texas, and skillfully maneuvered the choppy waves past a long pier and into the vast expanse of Galveston Bay.

They made sharp turns by pushing their backs close to the water and then rushed to the other side of the boat to prevent capsizing. They sailed into the wind and then with it, enjoying the pleasure of a fast ride.

A few years ago, the Rice Sailing Club wasn’t sailing as smoothly. But Voss and Charles Koontz ’97, who took over the helm as co-presidents in 1995, managed to set the club back on course. They increased membership from six to 25, hired a coach, added a new boat to their fleet of three, and began competing regularly in regattas across the country.

Last fall, the club finished third in a regatta that qualified them for an intercollegiate meet in Charleston, S.C. In that race they placed eighth among the 12 teams, which included northeastern schools where sailing is almost as popular as football.

"Placing eighth wasn’t so bad considering that most of our members had just learned to sail a few months before the race," explains Voss.

Joining the Rice Sailing Club doesn’t require much: You must know how to swim and be able to pay the $50 annual dues. Voss and other experienced members of the group will teach you how to sail in a matter of weeks. Practices are once or twice a week at the Houston Yacht Club, where the group keeps four Vanguard 420 (4.2 meters) boats.

"Once we are satisfied that our members can sail reasonably well, we let them compete," says Voss.

The Rice Sailing Club belongs to the Southeastern Intercollegiate Sailing Association, which is comprised of 22 schools from Texas to Florida and Oklahoma. There are seven college sailing associations that cover different sections of the country.

Rice participates in about 16 regattas each academic year. While winning is important, the races are hardly cutthroat competition.

"There’s a lot of camaraderie in sailing, and this is what I enjoy the most," says Voss. Opponents help each other with words of advice and students from the host school often provide housing for visitors.

At the end of the regatta, the winning team receives a six-pack of beer and a party ensues. "It’s the camaraderie that keeps the people coming back to the sailing club," Voss says.

Lucy Malone got hooked on the club two years ago. Learning to sail, she admits, was frustrating at times, especially when there was no wind.

"The hardest part was learning where the wind was coming from and knowing when to do what. But," she adds, "sailing is a great way to get away from school and release some stress."

Senior Ken Haberman started sailing last fall, and after just five weeks, he had the boat under control. Haberman progressed so fast that he managed to finish sixth in the Charleston intercollegiate race.

"I love getting out on the water and feeling the wind in my face," Haberman says. "With a little bit of friendly competition it’s perfect."

There’s another reason why Rice students might be lured to sailing. The ideal weight for a two-member team is 270 pounds, which is the combined weight of an average college male and female, Voss explains.

"It’s the ultimate coed college sport," he says with a smile.