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HEART & SOUL OF KANSAS SPORTS

Whitecap Regatta

BY JEFF JACOBSEN | JULY 16, 2022



Sailboats of all shapes and sizes jockeyed for position during the Whitecap Regatta at Cheney Reservoir.

The face of Kansas forever changed in the 1960s as work began on creating what is now 24 reservoirs spread across the state. The work by the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation gave Kansans relief from floods, improved water supply, provided farmers needed irrigation and allowed Kansans new recreation opportunities.

One of those, Cheney Reservoir, sits on portions of Sedgwick, Reno and Kingman counties, 35 miles west of downtown Wichita. It ranks as the fifth largest lake in the state. It also ranks as one of the top 10 windiest reservoirs and lakes in the United States. Thus, it is no surprise that the Ninnescah Sailing Association is the largest sailing organization in the state.

Last Saturday, sailors raced in winds that averaged 11mph and peaked at 22mph as temperatures climbed to 104 degrees. The two-day Whitecap Regatta hosted sailors from three states. Their boats ranged from 20-foot San Juan sailboats with a small cabin area to the small 14-foot flat-bottomed Sunfish that can be transported on the top of a car and piloted by a lone sailor with one triangular sail. A San Juan has enough deck area for one crew member to sit on the deck, soaking up the sun throughout Saturday's races.

A Hobie Catamaran, captained by a father with his son as crew, won the three Saturday races. With their tall and slender mainsail, the twin-hulled sailboat gave the lively vessel a menacing look. A flag tied to the mainsail harkened back to pirates of old, and the desire for independence further helped the look.

“Catamarans are like dragsters,” one sailor said. “The others are like Formula 1 cars. Much more tactical and strategic.”

The final class of boats was one of the most popular in the world. A Snipe is a 15.5-foot-two-person dingy that allows beginning sailors to enjoy time on the water at an affordable price. Yet, in the hands of a skilled sailor, the boats offer an exciting racing challenge favored throughout the world.

Veteran Snipe sailor James Rix allowed me the pleasure of joining him during a shakeout spin on the reservoir. With camera in hand, I followed every command needed to tack the boat and thoroughly loved slipping my feet into straps to hang off the side with arched back as the Snipe heeled against the force of the winds. As I captured pictures of Rix doing the same, I noticed Rix's eyes were always locked on what tell-tale signs the rolling water presented. He pointed out darker areas of water that revealed where stronger puffs of wind awaited to propel the small boat even faster.

Back on shore, as the sailors awaited the pre-race meeting, stories began to flow with delight that I suspect only true sailors can fully appreciate, as they should.

Rix recounted stories of one sailor, Eddie Williams.

“He invented the Bunny Regatta,” Rix said. “He'd come up with crazy races sailing with no rudder attached to the boat, sailing with no dagger in the boat, ending a race as though you had a mechanical problem and needed to take your mainsail down and rig the jib sail to the mast.” He went on recalling races with the skipper blindfolded or all the crew sailing with one arm tied behind their backs. His easy smile and laughter had other sailors nodding their heads in agreement with broad smiles on their faces.

Then Rix reminisced on the balloon races. “People would have six balloons trailing behind their boat. Of course, the more balloons you had at the finish, the better your score. So, what does Eddie Williams do? He pulls out a pocketknife and tapes it to his whisker pole. He's like some Thor or Viking popping other boat's balloons with his whisker pole.”

On the water, the crew of the Committee Boat set the course with four buoys and anchored the boat to form a line with one buoy to create the start and finish line. Thus began four enjoyable hours of bobbing and rolling on the water as the winds began to pick up and boats jockeyed for position for the starts of various races set by the committee and displayed from a board on the side of the boat.

As I waited for the sailboats to make their downwind and upward legs near me, I listened to more stories of sailing glory and humor while everyone gulped down water to counter the hydration sucked out of us by the wind and heat. I happily answered all their questions about cameras, lenses, photography and how I ended up on this boat with them.

They convinced me I had to come back for their Wednesday night regattas by showing me phone pictures of the bigger sailboats docked in the cove coming out to play as the sun sank and the glory of early evenings in Kansas were on display. Oh, and a regular reminder that the World Senior Snipe Championships will be contested at Lake Perry on the first weekend of October.

As I walked along the docks and looked at the vast array of sailboats after a final shotgun blast signaled the Committee Boat had returned to the harbor, I remembered one of the best stories of the day regarding one crew member missing that day, Rix's mother.

Even now, at 90, Rix's mother, Mary Ann, regularly crews with her son and downs a few Coors after the racing. However, Rix's mother had another commitment for Saturday's races, so his son, Daniel, came from Kansas City to crew for this father.

“She went for a sail on her first date with my dad. On their honeymoon, they went to Colorado,” Rix said. “On their way back, they went to Omaha, so my dad could crew with my grandfather at Omaha's first regatta. As my mom sat on the shore, she figured out she better learn how to sail.” Which, of course, she did and still does.

After a fascinating day at Cheney Reservoir, it would be hard to argue with that logic.

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ABOUT JEFF JACOBSEN

Jeff Jacobsen has photographed practically every big event the sports world has to offer during a professional career that spans over 53 years. Jacobsen has seen things up close that only a diehard sports fan could in their dreams. His work for the Topeka Capital-Journal, Arizona Republic, Kansas Athletics, Inc., many national publications and now Action Images Photography, Inc., cemented his reputation as one of the nation's finest sports photographers.

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