

## RACING HISTORIC SNEAKBOXES

To say it was a rush was an understatement: racing historic sailboats that hadn't been in the water for years in a 30 knot breeze was "just like the old days" according an old timer commenting on the First Historic Sneakbox Race to take place on Marina Weekend in Tuckerton, NJ.

All this debatable foolishness of old sailors sailing even older Sneakboxes started when master boat builder Gus Heinrich asked me to sail a Sneakbox he was building. (It ended up winning top honor at the Ocean County Decoy Show in 2005).

Which is better we debated – putting an old Sneakbox in the water days ahead to let the wood swell or waiting to splash the day of the race and taking our chances on a lighter boat?

Race day came and the Sneakboxes were launched. The oldest competing boat was a 15' J.H. Perrine built in 1935 in Barnegat, NJ. It had been completely restored with a tan bark red sail and white deck. Skippering was Captain George Ward of Pemberton who runs our Seaport Sailing School, an ace sailor with numerous years sailing big boats, a winning attitude and smile to match.

With Gus' winning boat occupying a place of honor in the Lighthouse, I decided to race a 1942 Sharp Lane Sneakbox. Sharp Lane was a Beach Haven plumber who built boats during his off months in the winter. Restored by John Chadwick of Barnegat, this Sneakbox had been out of water for over a half-century. And quietly sitting inside at the Seaport drying out.

Grove Conrad of Lower Bank, NJ probably felt the most comfortable in his marsh grass green Sam Hunt Sneakbox. He sails it on occasion, uses it for hunting, and Sneakbox races on the Mullica River. Two weeks after our historic race Grove sailed it a la Nathaniel Bishop style (who shipped his Sneakbox by rail, then sailed down the mighty Mississippi) from Cape May to the Seaport dock in four days.

Gus Heinrich's father, "Socks," had built a Sneakbox in 1950 which Gus swore was the best sailing Sneakbox anywhere around. Before the race it was sailed for spectator enjoyment by Tom Hartley. My husband John who raced Sock's boat. It was the fastest and best heavy weather Sneakbox on Little Egg Harbor Bay that day.

My Sharp Lane boat was floating low in spite of continual bailing, so George and I joined forces in the 1935 Perrine. People lined the beach and bulkhead at the end of Green Street. Many more watched from their boats. The wind had increased and whitecaps splashed across all bows; but history had been made.

It's one thing to see historic boats in a museum; quite another to see them under sail in a hard Southwester. Our biggest thrill in the 15' Perrine Sneakbox was actually taking the old girl up on a plane. We could hear the cheers from over the crackling sail, water pouring over the bow. Did this thing ever have splashboards?

Craig Spicer and daughter Shelley agreed to run the races. "Three minutes" he hailed, his starting line and triangular course a work of art.

At that moment George crossed the starting line. "This is our only chance, we're taking on water big time over the bow and through the seams," we shouted. "Good idea, we're shortening the course to a windward/leeward," affable Craig quickly improvised, abandoning any idea of the best out of three short races. Our first over the line "honor" quickly went down a few pegs as other skippers loudly booed us.

With Socks Heinrich's old boat skimming over the fetch and four foot waves, John kept continually advanced. Our Perrine had its faults – never skipper or crew we joked – it stopped in the water every time we tried to tack, nose dived when it went faster than hull speed, and had horrible weather helm. Not to mention too much sail area and water coming into the cockpit quicker than we could get it out. How did

this large Sneakbox become one of the most popular and supposedly one of the fastest and hardest on Barnegat Bay at one time?

“We won!” George declared. “No, I did,” John retorted. “Actually I was the winner,” Grove told a newspaper reporter who had been along. “Who REALLY WON?” the young sunburned man questioned, pad and pencil in hand, trying to figure out the whole situation. “I’ve only been in a boat once before.”

Racing apples against oranges – none of the old Sneakboxes were alike in size, capability or handling – proved to be a win/win day for old boat lovers. Will the historic Sneakboxes ever race another day? We’re already gearing up the gamesmanship bit for next year ...

As for the question as to whether to put old wooden boats in the water a week before they are to be used in order to swell up, then bailing them dry? Or a quick splash? Well, it became obvious: a dry boat can out sail a leaky one anytime.

#### SIDEBAR:

The Sneakbox was a 12 – 15’ sailboat originally designed for gunning on Barnegat Bay around 1836 by Hazelton Seaman of West Creek, NJ. Painted a marsh grass green color, they were sailed out to the marshes, and covered with reeds as camouflage. Market hunters placed locally- made, hollowed-out decoys across the back, which were then anchored in the water.

Hunters lay in the bottom waiting for ducks, geese, and other birds to pass overhead. It was a way to earn a living in a rural area before the advent of supermarkets with some birds being shipped by rail to the cities of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

This one person boat got its name from “sneaking” up on the birds. 1917 Gaming Laws began the demise of the mass shooting of birds, even though it was a way to keep a family fed.

Most Sneakboxes were a cottage industry, built in the winter months by local baymen to earn extra money. By the 1930’s motors became popular, not to mention a faster way for hunting guides to get out to the sedge islands. Transoms were made heavier, and the day of sailing Sneakboxes for hunting was almost at an end.

J. H. Perrine carried Sneakbox making quite a few steps further. As a relatively mass producer for his day, J.H. moved with speed after the hunting laws were enacted. He began to market fleets of 15’ Sneakboxes which he shipped around the world from his boat works in Barnegat, NJ. Three generations of Perrines built Sneakboxes for almost three quarters of a century beginning in the 1870’s.