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Inside the Fastest Winter Sport You've Never Heard Of

How iceboating went from transport to sport.

By Robin Catalano



Photo courtesy of Dideric van Riemsdijk

Winter adventure class is in session, and your first exam begins now: What's the fastest solo winter sport?

You might be tempted to pick speed skating, snowboarding, bobsledding, or even [alpine skiing](#). But a sport you've probably never heard of [eclipses them all](#). In iceboating, skippers regularly clock speeds of more than 50 mph as they sail—feet first—across frozen lakes. And that's on the low end. When it's gusty out, these athletes are going faster than any [sailboat](#) in the America's Cup ever could. The sport is also speedier than luge, which is ostensibly the "[fastest sport on ice](#)." Oh, and did we mention that iceboats don't have brakes?

Next year is the 50th anniversary of the [Iceboating World Championships](#), and marks the return of several regattas suspended because of the pandemic and too-warm weather. Now the opposite is happening: The tail end of a [triple-dip La Niña](#) weather pattern, which led to early fall cooling in northern latitudes—a bonus for iceboaters—may prolong the season. Despite the

fickleness of Mother Nature and the danger inherent in traveling over an unforgiving surface at top speeds, the sport is catnip to a certain segment of sailing enthusiasts. Ron Sherry, a Michigan-based iceboater and winner of eight world and 15 North American championships, sums up the appeal this way: “It’s the speed, the thrill of the acceleration. It’s the most fun you can have with your clothes on.”



Photo courtesy of Dideric van Riemsdijk

From transport to sport

Iceboating, or ice yachting, got its start as a functional method for moving people and goods across frozen surfaces in 17th-century Holland. But how and when it first appeared in the United States is murky, says Henry Bossett, a 1980 Olympian in summer sailing who got involved in iceboating 50 years ago and now researches the sport.

Some historians say the Dutch brought it with them when they settled [New York's Hudson Valley](#), starting in the early 1600s. Others credit New York-born boatbuilder Oliver Booth, who, in 1790, is said to have slapped a pair of runners on the bottom of a wooden box, and added a tiller for steering and a sail. Yet while early paintings of iceboats do depict the ships as boxy, Booth was actually born in 1823, nearly 40 years after his supposed invention.

What we do know for certain is that iceboating became a leisure pursuit of the Hudson Valley wealthy by the late 1800s. Even future president Franklin D. Roosevelt was a fan, racing a large craft dubbed the Hawk, which is currently in the collection of estate in Hyde Park, New York.

By the 1860s, Poughkeepsie had become the epicenter of iceboating, with members of the Poughkeepsie Ice Yacht Club [racing alongside trains on the banks](#) of the Hudson River, as train conductors rooted them on. Other clubs sprang up over the next few decades, including in Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, [Michigan](#), and [Wisconsin](#).



[Photo courtesy of Dideric van Riemsdijk](#)

Building the perfect boat

19th-century ice yachts were massive—up to 68 feet long with 1,000 square feet of sail—and were operated by a crew of six or seven. They became smaller, one- and two-person craft over time. The biggest technological advance came in the 1930s, when the placement of the steering tiller was reversed to the bow, and the runner plank was switched to the stern. This increased rudder traction and reduced the boats' propensity to spin, sending crew members on their own up-close-and-personal journey across the ice. The result? Faster, safer crafts.

Smaller boats also made the sport more egalitarian, according to Deb Whitehorse, racing official and secretary of the [Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club in Madison, Wisconsin](#). “Back in the day, to haul those big boats, you had to have a crew to do it,” she says. “Modern boats are homemade, they’re small-scale. You can put it on top of your car and drive.”

Besides being much more available to the average person now than it was in the 18th or 19th century, it's also one of the rare sports in which men and women compete together. “Iceboating has been far more welcoming of women [than soft-water sailing],” says Newport-based Karen Binder, secretary of the [New England Ice Yachting Association](#) and ranked 13th in the world. “They’re excited for women to get involved.”

Binder grew up soft-water sailing on the [Chesapeake Bay](#) and was part of the competitive dinghy team at St. Mary's College. Many years later, an old college friend introduced her to iceboating on a frozen lake in Fall River, Massachusetts. “I got in his boat and I just took off across the ice,” she recalls. “It was the fastest I’d ever gone sailing. There was something so beautiful about being on a frozen lake with no one else around, just experiencing nature in a whole new way.” A competitive racer was born. So was a new relationship: She’s now engaged to that friend, James “T” Thieler, the world’s number one-ranked iceboater.

Currently, about 10 classes of iceboat make regular appearances at regattas, including the super-speedy Skeeter, which has a lightweight, carbon fiber hull that allows it to whizz across frozen surfaces at more than 100 mph. The most popular is the lightweight, wood-hulled DN class, which clocks in at 12 feet long and about 8 feet wide, with a flexible, 16-foot mast. Ron Sherry, the Michigan-based champ, says it's something you can build at home and transport easily. "It takes 10 minutes to put together before you're out sailing. And it's more affordable." Plus, the DN is also highly customizable to the size and weight of the skipper.

A home-built DN class iceboat was the first item to arrive at the [Sailing Museum](#) in Newport, before its opening in 2022. It now hangs, sans mast, above the main exhibit space. "We really wanted to talk about different waterways here," says museum executive director Ashley Householder. "Sailing doesn't only happen on the ocean, and the iceboat is representative of lake sailing." The museum is also the home of the [National Sailing Hall of Fame](#), which boasts several iceboating honorees.



Photo courtesy of Dideric van Riemsdijk

Chasing speed—and the perfect ice

Similar to [bobsledding](#), iceboating begins with racers running and pushing the craft along the ice, and then hopping inside its fuselage. Once in motion, the sailor's expert handling skills keep the boat moving. If it slows too much, the runners grip the ice, and it's game over. The wildest part of a race comes when boats round neon markers, often tilting onto a single blade to cut as sharply as possible. Most regattas include three heats, leading up to a final championship run in each class.

Iceboating is dependent on two factors: ice and wind. "Ideal conditions happen when there's an early winter and the temperatures start to drop quickly," Binder explains. "You get hard black ice that's at least four inches thick. It's the easiest and the fastest to sail on because there's no resistance or friction. The boats are literally just gliding across this clear, black surface. It's gorgeous."

As winter progresses and the water thaws and refreezes, creating lumpy, pockmarked white ice, sailing conditions deteriorate. Snow is another enemy of the iceboat. While they can still race in up to a half-inch of powder, any more than that hinders the gliding action of the blades.

Because ice craft travel at three to four times the speed of the wind, the best—and safest—sailing happens when wind speeds are in the 10 to 15 mph range. But iceboaters are a persistent breed, and races still happen when the wind gusts at 20 mph, which increases the chance of collisions and sailors being tossed from their boats.

If wealth was the biggest barrier to iceboating participation in the past, today it's climate change. Up until 2000, skippers could plan on regular racing seasons. Now it's hit-or-miss, with regattas often canceled. "Thirty years ago, we were boating as far south as New Jersey," Binder says. "It's definitely getting harder to find sailable ice."

As a result, the sport has moved to the most reliably teeth-chattering locations, including the [American-Canadian border](#) states and provinces, as well as Scandinavia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, and [Poland](#)—the last of which sports the largest number of sailors.

This suits Bossett, who has spent much of his time sailing on Budd Lake, a glacial water body in northern New Jersey. For him, nothing in the United States compares to the glassy surface of Lake Champlain. At 120 miles long and 12 miles wide, with little coves that freeze early in the season, [Lake Champlain](#) is protected from snow coverage by the surrounding Green, Taconic, and Adirondack Mountains.

Iceboaters and fans can keep track of regattas on sites like [DN North America](#) and [Iceboat.org](#). The world championships alternate between the United States and Europe each year. Next year, they will be held on or around February 10, most likely in Lithuania. The North American championships will take place during the last week of February in the Eastern Great Lakes Region.



Photo courtesy of Dideric van Riemsdijk

Around the world in an iceboat

Ice scouts constantly monitor conditions in different locations. When the freeze is right, the regatta location and date is called, often only a few days to a couple weeks out. Like storm chasers, iceboaters hop in their trucks or on planes and go—just for a few minutes of floating on ice and air.

The spontaneous travel, says Binder, is “part of the fun.” She recounts the 2020 North American Championship season, when organizers planned for the contest to happen the last week of February in the Midwest. She and Thieler started driving from Rhode Island. “We left on Wednesday and we didn’t find out until Friday that the championships were going to happen in Montana”—more than 1,000 miles away. She grins and summarizes, “It’s an adventure.”

Sherry, who has raced all over the world, names Siberia’s Lake Baikal as his favorite racing location. The oldest existing freshwater lake on the earth, dating to about 25 million years old, it’s more than 12,000 square miles in size and over 5,000 feet in depth. “It’s just beautiful and clean, with nothing around for miles and miles. You can sail forever, even up to caves,” he says. “You’re kind of on your own out there. It’s a very spiritual place to go sailing.”

When iceboaters are asked what keeps them coming back to the sport, almost all say the same thing: the speed. But camaraderie is a close second. Following races, skippers typically gather at a local pub to share a pint and their best tips for what went well—and what didn’t—on the ice.

Bossett adds, “It truly is a family. At the higher levels, you meet people of different nationalities—Polish, Swedish, Dutch, German—and it’s really cool to find out about them and their lives. It’s a really inclusive sport.”

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