

Regionalizing for Youth Sailing Strength

Part One: The Scene in the South



Optimist dinghies racing at Schoelcher International Sailing Week in Martinique. 'We hope to see more Caribbean teams'

Youth2Adult — Y2A — is a series of articles celebrating sailing's role in youth development for Caribbean children.

There is strength in numbers. Together we succeed. Both are worthy mottos and never more true than when applied to Caribbean youth sailing.

The idea of doing more regional training and sailing events — not only as a Caribbean region, but also by focusing on smaller naturally occurring regions within the Eastern Caribbean — is drawing focus and analysis. It could become a strengthening agent for Caribbean youth sailing.

The subject of regionalization for this article raised two recurring themes: prohibitive costs (for boats, equipment and travel) and the problem of different countries utilizing different class boats for their youth-sailing development, which creates a stumbling block when hosting regional regattas on a shoestring.

All island nations responding to my query on the subject indicated that regional transportation was the most limiting factor.

Voices from both the north and south of the Eastern Caribbean said that, owing to proximity, youth sailing clubs cluster in the north to include the BVI, the USVI, Puerto Rico, St. Barths, St. Maarten, Anguilla and Antigua. To the south, the congregating seems to be in Martinique, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Grenada, Trinidad and Barbados.

Based on resounding responses to my queries and the importance of understanding the particulars of where the challenges and opportunities lie, we'll examine this subject in a two-part series.



...but getting boats and sailors to other islands' regattas is a problem

seven-year gap in our youth sailor population. We are in the process of starting all over again, re-building old boats and trying to squeeze a few dollars where we can.

"Interest and participation is at an all-time low and the poor state of the economy is not helping. Trinidad and Grenada are in the same situation, SVG perhaps even worse off.

"There are a few interesting ideas that we hope to get off the ground in the next few months, and I will update when I can. The Barbados Sailing Association aims to start hosting and participating in reciprocal coaching and racing events later on this year. Currently we are working on getting our Optimist, Sunfish, Laser and GP14 fleets in good working order and looking at the possibility of introducing a high-performance dinghy class to see if we can attract youth interest from those who have learnt the basics but find our older dinghy classes not 'sexy' enough.

"The costs of boats, parts, sails, air travel and accommodation are severe limiting factors to regional participation. Transporting youth on a yacht from Barbados to Trinidad or Grenada for events is not feasible, and the reverse trip even less so due to wind and current.

"Grenadian businessmen Kelly Glass and Matt Veinotte are stirring sailing interest with Grenadian and Vincentian youth by importing four O'pen Bics to Bequia and nine to Clarke's Court Marina in Grenada. Easy to rig, maintain and sail, the nine-foot Bic is a self-bailing single-hander designed for kids eight to 16 years old. We are expecting their use in the 2017 Bequia Easter Regatta, and regional participation to include Trinidad, Grenada, Martinique, and Barbados. This great initiative is on trial with the view to a new Southern Caribbean event next year."

Gus concludes, "Things have changed; many young sailors today do not want to spend the time and effort to learn to sail well. Somehow we need to build or re-build a 'culture of sailing' in these islands. Easier said than done!"

In the middle of the Eastern Caribbean, Martinique hosted its 27th Annual Schoelcher International Sailing Week (SISW) in late February. Regional attendance was poor. Michel Zougs of Cercle Nautique de Schoelcher says, "We had 130 boats on the water in eight classes: Optimist, Laser 4.7 and Radial, Sunfish, Sport Catamaran, Bic 293 OD windsurfer and, for the first time, a Cruiser Surprise. One hundred and eighty sailors participated, from Belgium, France, Corsica, Norway, Sweden, Antigua, Cuba, St. Lucia, St. Barths, Guadeloupe and Martinique. I personally regret so few sailors from the Caribbean area come to our annual regatta. I think it's really a problem for CSA to solve. We need to have an effective youth program

This month's Part One will focus on the more southerly region. Let's hear specifics from youth-sailing advocates:

Gus Reader, President of the Barbados Sailing Association, has an interesting update: "Here in Barbados we experimented with turning youth training over to a commercial operation because of lack of volunteer manpower and money/sponsorship. It has been a dismal failure and has left us with a

"Next year, the SISW will be held February 9th through 13th. On February 8th, 2018, an official pre-regatta clinic will feature head coach Brun. We hope to see Swiss, Swedish, Norwegian and French teams — a really more Caribbean nation's teams."

To give an idea what first-rate French racing costs each youth, 100 Euro SISW registration for four days racing and three days' meals, and a one-time 60 Euro buys a four-day boat charter; additionally the four-day pre-regatta, 30 Euro and associated boat rental is 60 Euro.

Perusing Optimist regatta registration fees within the Eastern Caribbean, tuition fees per child per day are in the US\$18-to-\$82 range, with daily boat running \$16 to \$50. Several clubs indicated that they allow visiting youth to utilize their club inventory for free.

A Different Perspective

For countries where youth sailing programs are newly developing — that developing sophistication and sustainability — regionalization can take a tone. For instance, in St. Kitts & Nevis, which formed a national sailing federation only in recent years, persons on both Kitts and Nevis are collaborating to send sailors to each other's island for events within their twin-island nation. This of regionalization that is successful in the Bahamas, Belize, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and certainly could be viable within the Grenadines region. Petite Martinique and Carriacou.

Nicholas Dupre, coach of St. Kitts Yacht Club Youth Sailing, shares a unique idea. To celebrate the opening of their new facilities, they held a 7.5-mile sail creating a regional-type experience for 14 young sailors: "Spread across Optimists and a Laser, youngsters sailed themselves along the Southeast Point. The older kids of the group led the way. Some of the younger ones, as you years old, followed their lead. The trip started at Spice Mill on Cockleshell Bay, the new St. Kitts YC in Frigate Bay as the final destination. Accompanying them were three safety dinghies, three Hobie Cats and three sailing yachts carrying the volunteers, parents and yacht club members. It was a beautiful day on the water."

Veering away to a western Caribbean perspective, Belize has a prolific youth sailing clubs dotting its coast. The clubs share resources and receive from their umbrella organization, the Belize Sailing Association (BzSA). Rob Public Relations of BzSA, says, "Caribbean regional exposure has been important for the sailors to gain experience in conditions that we normally don't get with the protection of our Belize Barrier Reef. This also helps the BzSA to identify training support that could help sailors progress, especially after they reach their fleet."

The CSA Weighs In

"The Caribbean Sailing Association (CSA) favors more regionalized training opening the doors to youth from less privileged clubs and backgrounds. The CSA will always find their way to regional and even international competition. The CSA, being a relatively small non-profit organization with limited income, naturally doesn't have the financial resources to support any regional training initiatives at the moment. But certainly the CSA Sailing Development Committee is moving towards driving youth-sailing development across the region, albeit slowly because it's an all-volunteer committee. We are working toward a training syllabus and identifying potential income streams to support it. The CSA can assist the nations most in need," says CSA President Kathy L.

She continues, "World Sailing [the world's governing body for the sport] has resources that can be tapped into, but it's not particularly easy to access them and they need to be accessed through routes not necessarily available to islands with underdeveloped sailing programs. More initiatives, such as the Emerging Nations Youth Training program that World Sailing hosted in Antigua a couple of years ago and has hosted in other emerging nations, are a step in the right direction. Our region could use more of that type of initiative, especially for the southern islands."

"The CSA applied for a membership in World Sailing last July. Although it is approved in principle, we await ratification by a WS Council vote. Once that ship comes through, CSA can make inroads into World Sailing funding for regionalized training."

Regionalization can build Caribbean youth sailing through heightened coordination of inventories and long-term one design acquisition strategies as well as working together to overcome boat, equipment and travel costs. There is still much to be done. Together we succeed.

Look next month for "Y2A: Regionalization for Strength Part Two", where we explore perspectives within the Leeward and Virgin Islands area.

Ellen Birrell attributes her opportunity to cruise the Caribbean aboard S/V Icarus to life skills built in childhood. Believing swimming and sailing are essentials, youth, she supports grass roots and competitive junior sailing, and serves as a sailing development for Caribbean Sailing Association.