

Sailing Helps People in Wheelchairs Feel Empowered

By Eric Shackleton
The Canadian Press

Barriers faced by people in wheelchairs who want to get out on the water are slowly being lowered. There are ramps for landing-craft style boats, and mechanical contrivances include a system that lets someone use their breath to control a sailboat. And disabled sailing groups have developed sophisticated training programs for sailors and volunteers that help to maximize the independence of participants while racing in competitions or sailing for pleasure.

"You're in control. It's not the disease that's in control," says Katie Gerke, who is in a wheelchair because of multiple sclerosis and regularly goes out for three-hour sessions during the summer in a sailboat on Calgary's Glenmore Reservoir.

"I find that to be a really big break for my psyche, for my spirit," adds Gerke. "I feel empowered ... It really is a change from asking for help."

Gerke, 42, is commodore (commander) of Disabled Sailing Alberta, a group that helps people with mobility challenges to gain better access to sailing facilities. When Gerke was first diagnosed at age 24, she could sail without any aids. Now, with the strength in her arms ebbing away, she must move on to other devices to stay on the water.

Technology available to people with disabilities ranges from an autohelm, a power-assisted steering and sheeting system, to a sip 'n' puff device that allows sailors to control the rudder and sails by breathing into a pipe.

The autohelm is fitted into the front of a Martin 16 sailboat, a keeled fibreglass craft specially designed not to flip over, says Kathy Burns, a volunteer at the Calgary club. "That's what gives so many of these disabled sailors a sense of independence ... they know they won't end up in the water."

The autohelm works the same way as a joystick on an electric wheelchair. Instead of moving the wheels, it's attached to the sheets, or ropes, and also the rudder. "Depending on how you push this joystick ... it will let the sails out or pull them in, or steer the boat," said Burns. A volunteer usually sits behind the sailor.

For quadriplegic who have no strength in their arms, there's the sip 'n' puff system, says 57-year-old Lawrence Mazur, a paraplegic and commodore of Disabled Sailing Manitoba in Winnipeg.

It consists of a pipe that connects to the Martin 16's power equipment. At the end of the pipe is a ball, said Mazur, whose spine was damaged in a shooting accident when he was a child.

"When it's in one setting when you blow in, it will push the sails out and when you sip in, it will pull the sails in." For the rudder, "if you bite on that little ball and blow out, it will

turn you left, and sip in will turn you right. It's just like sipping a cup of coffee," said Mazur, who recently retired from the police department.

The staff at the Winnipeg club are all well-trained to help hoist people into the sailboats, said Mazur. Volunteers "lift them straight from the wheelchair with a sling ... right down into the boat," he said. Volunteers also help them to secure their position in the bucket-type seat.

Mazur hasn't had to use many assisting devices yet, but his shoulder is deteriorating. If it gives out, "I know I can continue sailing by switching to the autohelm ... or if I lose use of my arms then switch to sip 'n' puff," he said. "It's a relaxation thing I know I can continue doing."

For Gerke, whose arms "don't work any more," the sip 'n' puff seems the best way to go. "I'd really like to do that this summer," said Gerke, who sells home and office decor solutions.

There are specially designed boats provided by sailing clubs and boating groups across the country _ many paid for through charitable donations.

At the Calgary club, Burns said facilities aren't just used by people with mobility problems.

"We take out autistic children," she said. "We have a couple of blind sailors ... They have markers on the sheets ... (and) feel to pull the sail in and out," or control the rudder.

No statistics are available on how many people with disabilities are also boaters. But about 45 sailors from Canada and elsewhere attended last year's Mobility Cup regatta in Calgary, said Burns.

For those who don't want to leave their comfort zone, Connor Industries in Parry Sound, Ont., has designed a craft with a front-end ramp that can be lowered to allow people to drive on their wheelchairs.

Michael Lee, owner of Two Harbours Marine in Brampton, Ont., and an agent for Connor's Stanley boats, sold the first "bullnosed" craft to Bob Havens of Owen Sound, Ont., last fall.

The 8.5 metre boat, made of aluminum alloy, has "a big carrying bay in it," said Lee. "It can also carry 8,000 pounds" _ just the thing for Havens, who takes disabled people on tours in Georgian Bay.

Havens, 59, a teacher who broke his neck in a traffic accident one month before retirement, had the boat out a couple dozen times before freeze-up.

It's "very seaworthy," he said approvingly.

Lee sees a growing need for the boats. As the baby boom generation ages "some of us are going to have limited abilities just through the aging process," he said.

He also envisions some changes to them, such as side doors that drop down vertically becoming ramps, and consoles being equipped with joysticks so people with disabilities can operate them.

The sailboats are also being constantly upgraded, said Gerke. The autohelm needs to be a "bit more tightened up." It can be "quite clumsy."

Otherwise, she said, "it's go, go, go!".

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