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# Fifty Years of Frostbite

by Peter Isler

**Chicago YC's fleet has changed, but the 50th birthday celebration of the Timme Angsten regatta proved that the spirit of college sailing's Turkey Day tradition remains the same.**

**Photo credit:** [Billy Black](#)

Fifty years ago, a group of Northwestern University sailors decided to host a little regatta -- a sort of year-ending affair over the long Thanksgiving weekend at Chicago's Belmont Harbor. Now, if you've ever been to Chicago in the winter, you know that the concept of racing sailboats there in late November is more than a little bit crazy. Nevertheless, invitations were accepted by seven other schools in the newly formed Midwest Collegiate Sailing Association (MCSA). The boats, provided by Chicago YC, were 10-foot lapstrake Dyer Dhows, which a crew of two could barely squeeze into. Each team fielded an A and B division crew in the classic collegiate dinghy racing format still in use today. Thus was born the Northwestern Invitational Regatta, which would be renamed as a memorial to the regatta's primary instigator, Timme Angsten. Reports from that first event indicate a less than auspicious beginning. The first problem was the weather -- 1947 witnessed Chicago's coldest Thanksgiving weekend since 1871. Teams struggled to break out frozen centerboards with copious amounts of boiling water. The saltshakers mysteriously disappeared from the club's dining room, with their contents appearing later in the bilges and on the mainsheets of the dinghies. Boats swamped in the harbor's shifty winds, and the host team ran away with the event, winning by over 65 points. In fact, the only features that hinted at this regatta's future potential were the shoreside activities, which included plenty of libation, song and dance. Of course, what would you expect from a group of college students, frostbiting and partying together, away from home on Thanksgiving weekend?

Less than a year later, the regatta's founder and defending champion, Timme Angsten, died tragically. But his event would live on, thanks to the commitment of Chicago YC. Somehow the word got out about the crazy competition with all the great parties, because in 1948, three teams from New England made the Turkey Day trip. It was another great success, with Yale prevailing, and so it was that this unlikely regatta began to gather steam.

I first sailed in "The Timme's" in 1976. By then it had become the collegiate regatta of the fall season, drawing teams from across the nation to race Lehman 10 dinghies in the weird and frigid waters of Belmont Harbor, and to bask in the warm atmosphere of CYC's floating clubhouse. During the Timme's, the yacht club's interior looks more like a ski lodge, with piles of thermal gear, hats and gloves thrown about. But through the sometimes steamed-up picture windows, you can watch some of the best racing (and capsizes) in the world. Because of the unstable nature of the dinghies used at the Timme's, on windy days the spectating compares favorably to a demolition derby.

## **Top 10 reasons to cancel racing at the Timme's (based upon actual events):**

10. You see the shore crew using a blow torch to thaw out the crashboat engines.
9. Your crew has just gone into hypothermic shock.
8. Teams are having trouble getting to the club because Lake Shore Drive is under water.
7. The rescue boat is attempting to retrieve the boat you just capsized (and sank) with a grappling hook.
6. It's blowing harder than yesterday, and yesterday the Lehman 10 storm sails were too big.
5. The floating clubhouse isn't quite stable because all the cables broke in last night's storm.
4. You're faced with the ultimate Angsten dilemma: finish last or sacrifice yourself and crew by becoming the fifth boat to flip, forcing the RC to abandon the race.
3. The harbor is frozen over.
2. Half the skippers have been sent to the emergency room after sucking on mainsheets soaked in anti-freeze and rock salt.
1. They can't complete the rotation because one skipper's bare feet are frozen to the bottom of boat No. 2!

Today there are more major collegiate regattas, and the Timme's no longer can boast of being the "autumn national championship," but it is still alive and well, with a tradition and history that is arguably the richest in intercollegiate dinghy racing. That reputation was further burnished by a grand 50th birthday celebration held during this year's event. During those 50 regattas, over 2,600 sailors have braved the icy waters and enjoyed CYC's hospitality. In the '50s, Northwestern's sailing program waned (it has since recuperated), leaving the regatta's operation in the hands of CYC's many volunteers. In that regard the Angsten is unusual in college racing -- a collegiate regatta "owned" by an established yacht club.

Like many CYC members, Rick van Mell literally "grew up" with the Timme's, working the docks as a junior volunteer, then racing in the event (for Dartmouth, '61 and '62) and ultimately serving as race chair. CYC has always been a bastion of racing in the Midwest, so it is fitting that there is no single "home team" at the Timme's, but rather an entire division (MCSA). To recognize that bond, there is a trophy for the top Midwestern team (won this year by Notre Dame). Since the late '50s, when the Angsten first attained national appeal, six Midwestern teams have been able to win this trophy as well as the overall title.

Competing in the event has always required some holiday sacrifice. Teams that drive face the prospect of a Thanksgiving meal at a truck stop, and the racing ends by noon on Sunday to give participants barely enough time to make it back for classes on Monday. Given the prospect of sub-zero weather, Chicago's frostbite season ends the weekend before the Angsten, so the fleet (which has evolved from lapstrake Dyer Dhows to Lehman 10s to Dyer Flyers to 420s) is literally put away for the winter with the end of the regatta.

Even if it is above freezing, racing in Belmont Harbor can be a maddening experience. Due to the proximity of the city to the west (the prevailing wind direction), steady winds

are non-existent. A common Angsten race track might be called a triangle course, but it will likely feature winds from around the clock on every leg. As alumna crew Charlotte (Gordon) Fisher (Tulane '81, '82) noted after one race, "We went from last to first and back to last again in 29 seconds."

Blake Middleton (Green Bay '79 to '81) recalled watching the races from atop a nearby apartment building: "The puffs hit the water like mushrooms, fanning out in all directions."

Open eyes and a malleable ego are important characteristics for success. This year, however, St. Mary's B division team of Anthony Kotoun and Courtney Cook seemed to possess a "cheat sheet," amassing only 36 points in 17 races -- nearly a second-place average in the 17-boat fleet. "The key was finding and sailing in the puffs," explained Kotoun. "It didn't matter whether you were headed or lifted. Sometimes we would leave a puff before it was gone to get into position for the next one. We were always looking at the water up beyond the top mark."

Shifty winds are nothing new to college racers, but the potential for extreme cold is a feature unique to this regatta. Fortunately the races are short, and the two-division collegiate format guarantees that, for at least half the day, you'll be watching from the toasty interior of the clubhouse. This year was mild, with temperatures above freezing for two of the three days. But talk to any Angsten veteran (including the 64 sailors who returned for this year's alumni event) and it won't be long before the recollections turn to the weather. Duane Pierson (Northwestern '47) recalled the first Timme's, when "everything was freezing; the mainsheet got rock hard," and retold the tale of the mysterious disappearing saltshakers. Bill Bentsen (Denison '48) remembered that to thaw the mainsheets his year, "We would bring them upstairs and put them on the radiator." Peter Harken (Wisconsin '58) added, "After a night of partying they threw *us* on the radiators to thaw out!"

Has college sailing changed over the years? The competing alumni egos were too big to admit that the current crop of sailors are any better. Everyone remarked upon how quiet the undergrad racing was. Even at crowded mark roundings it was rare to hear a raised voice. But all agreed the biggest difference is the attire. Whereas thermal underwear and drysuits are now standard equipment, things have not always been so cushy. "We wore war surplus raingear," said Jim Martin (Notre Dame '48). "The goal was to keep any one spot on your body from getting too wet."

Peter Shumaker (Michigan '74, '75) recalled that teammate (and renowned naval architect) John Reichel always wore a trench coat at the Angsten, and my crew, Susan "Mads" Daly, (Yale '74-'76) reminded me of the year when N.Y. Maritime's Joe Balconis sailed the entire regatta (one of the coldest on record) in bare feet.

In the spirit of vintage racing, Harken donned a jacket and blue jeans reminiscent of his period in college sailing. For him and his fellow alumni, racing in another Angsten regatta was a ton of fun. Regatta chair Janet Baxter scheduled a full day of alumni racing on the same racecourse as the undergraduates, which generated some good natured complaints when the alumni compared their Dyer Flyers to the undergrads' 420s. "The Dyers are 3.5 by 10 feet -- about the size of two bath tubs -- and they sail like a bath tub, too," commented Pat Healy (Wisconsin '67 to '70).

Despite the low-tech nature of the fleet, we "alumni" were ready to go. After all, most of us had raced the Timme's aboard Lehman 10s, another catboat that exhibited bizarre

(and terrifying) characteristics when hit by a 20-knot puff from astern. Our fragile egos were no doubt spared as Saturday dawned crystal calm. The drifting conditions minimized the chance of a dreaded capsize and mixed the fleets out on the racecourse. Frequently a dozen 420s and a dozen Dyers all arrived at the mark overlapped. "It was incredible," Harken noted. "None of the kids yelled at the alumns. Here we are, out there for yucks, and they are going for the gold -- yet they were so polite." Given the dearth of puffs, anything could happen. Blake Middleton recalled, "At one point we sailed around a 420 and I overheard the crew say to the skipper, 'I can't wait to go home and tell the team that you were passed by a Dyer with an old-timer sailing it.'" While St. Mary's took control of the undergrad racing after the third flight, the racing on the "senior" alumni course was less predictable. Tom (Michigan '71) and Christine Ehman (Michigan '78) looked untouchable after winning the first three races, but they fell prey to Belmont Harbor's spell and finished midfleet in a race they had led by nearly a leg. In the end, Gary Jobson (N.Y. Maritime '69 to '72) and Karen Chandler (Purdue '88) proved the value of consistency, edging the Ehmans out by a point. In the "junior" alumni division, Dierk Polzin (Xavier '76, '80) and Karen Gottwald held off Olympian Steve Bourdow (Tulane '86) and Doug Wefer (Michigan '80 to '82) to win. It's no secret that intercollegiate racing has, over the years, been a vital proving ground for America's sailors. In its 50 years, the Timme Angsten has played a major part in this role. Angsten alumni have gone on to great heights in the sport including winning the America's Cup (Ted Turner won the Timme's for Brown University in '57), representing the U.S. at the Olympics, and claiming countless national and international titles. The 50th anniversary Angsten regatta was a celebration of the past, but it also focused on the future, generating seed money for the Timme Angsten endowment fund to help promote the event in future years. Tax deductible donations can be made to: Chicago YC Foundation -- Timme Angsten account; c/o Janet Baxter; 3200 North Lake Shore Drive No. 1002; Chicago, IL 60657.

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