

The Great Event

INTERVIEW WITH PHIL RICHMOND

Great sailing events don't just happen. They are conceived, developed, planned, budgeted, marketed, managed, and massaged before they are served up to the sailing public. What it all boils down to is a lot of work, a word that tends to sound out of place in leisure activity that's supposed to be fun. Like doing anything else we really want to do, though, running great events is fun. Each event is an entrepreneurial venture of sorts. The competitors are your customers, the event is the product. When the customer likes the product, there is success. And success feels good, whether it's on the race course, in the committee boat, or in the planning room.

As the sport of sailboat racing continues to develop in this country, and as leisure time becomes more precious, there is increasing pressure on event organizers to advance their art. Today's customer expects a smooth-running event, sharp race management and fair racing, but also a good time. More and more, the events that strike a strong social chord are the ones that get entered first on sailors' busy schedules – this year and next.

Former American Sailor editor Mark Smith talked with Annapolis, MD, Snipe sailor and event chairman extraordinaire Phil Richmond about the fine art of running great events. As might be expected, Phil's formula for success involved doing a lot of things well.

AS: What are the essential keys to running a successful sailing event?

PR: As I see it, it really comes down to the three P's: perspective, personnel, and planning – not necessarily in that order, but I don't think you can run a success full event without addressing each one of those areas. Actually, perspective comes first, because you have to start by asking yourself, —Why are we here? Why are we doing this? That might sound simplistic, because obviously you're there running a regatta. But there's a lot more to it than that. In our sport – like most – we strive to develop a level of excellence which is defined and measured through the medium of competition. The lens through which that energy is focused is the event in all its aspects, not the least of which is the social aspect.

Woodstock wasn't just another big rock concert. Most people can't remember more than a few of the bands that played there, but the picture in their mind's eye is the incredible scene – the feeling of being there. A regatta committee can infuse an event with a unique identity, a high level of energy, a special feeling, or they can create a feeling of I'd rather be home mowing the lawn.

AS: How do you develop that identity for an event?

PR: You look closely at the class, the competitors, the club, the time of year, the site – note the important characteristics of all those elements. Think of your event in relation to the season as a whole. Are you filling a vacuum in the season schedule or sandwiching between other major events? Will the sailors be in the mood for serious racing or a first-class party?

The Snipe class has an annual event called the Halloween Regatta that's a good example of what I'm talking about. It's sailed on a small reservoir outside Atlanta and, year in and year out, it attracts 90 to 100 boats from all over the U.S., Canada, and Bermuda – more than any other Snipe event. It's just a weekend event, but it's at the end of the season when everyone is ready to cut loose. There's a huge costume party on Saturday night and everyone really gets into it. Half the people are still wearing their costumes on the race course the next day! Each year, some members of our Annapolis Snipe fleet participate with group costumes. A few years ago, one group went as the California Raisins! Of course, there were some other costumes I can't mention in print, but you get the idea.

There's a social continuity that's created by events like this. They're like family reunions. That's what you want to do when you set up an event – allow and encourage personal ties to be formed and to grow stronger over time. That's not to say that all events should have costume parties. There are plenty that make their reputation as serious racing events. In any case, be sure you're serious about having fun, or the event probably won't be fun.

AS: You've been in the Snipe class for years. How do you connect new people with that feeling of family and continuity?

PR: That's a good point. You've got to be sensitive to newcomers – make them feel welcome. We try to have a wagon with free beer in the parking lot as people drive in. Right away, we mix new faces with the locals and class regulars in an organized —meet and greet environment. At some regattas, name tags are used with a bit of personal information, like hometown or championships won or what committee they're on. It gives people something to talk about. We also try to put new people up in homes, not so much to save money, but to get family connections going. For newcomers in the host fleet, the event is a good springboard for greater overall involvement and socializing. All those little gestures add up.

AS: Let's move to your second P – personnel.

PR: One of the things we do when we begin to structure an event is to carefully evaluate the pool of administrative talent at the club where the event will be held. You really need to involve the home club and take their attitudes into consideration. I've seen club officers and members pushed to the side in a less than sensitive way when a big event rolls into town, and it's very counterproductive. If they feel involved and enthusiastic, it really helps grease the skids.

At the same time, event organizers should follow a very simple rule when selecting people to run an event. Get the best – no matter where they come from. I don't care if someone's from Mars, if they're enthusiastic, if they enjoy organizing things and they're able to back up their commitment and make all the meetings, I grab 'em! It's not so necessary that they be experienced, just that they be motivated to make the event a success, rather than to play to their own ego.

AS: Who are some of the key people?

PR: You know, in a six-race event with 30 or 40 boats, there are only going to be a few winners. From a practical standpoint, 30 to 40 percent of the competition is effectively eliminated from meaningful placement after the very first day. That's why there are two equally important positions in the management of any event– the offshore director and the onshore director. A club that puts strong management talent only out on the water is going to have a sterile event.

At the same time, it's absolutely crucial – no matter what character your event takes on – to have sound race management. You can't guarantee conditions, but you should be able to guarantee well-run races. I sense that competitors expect more these days, because they are dramatically more knowledgeable about the sport.

If participation in an event hasn't improved as dramatically, then the organizers must look at the way the event has been run. If you don't run a good event, people won't come back. Some of the most popular events these days are not necessarily big championships. They have great attendance because of the way they're run. I always like to involve a number of clubs in event management. You get a cross pollination of ideas that way. Clubs tend to be enclaves, doing things the same way time after time. Bringing in new people helps to keep things moving forward. In Annapolis, we have people from five or six clubs working on just about every major event and it's great. Don't be afraid to go outside your club, this is an area where the RSA's can be a big help.

Spreading the load is also very important. If any one person gets overloaded or burned out, they're gone. We rotate duties among the group that manages events. We don't use the same regatta chairman or the same facilities every year.

AS: Third P – planning.

PR: You really can't start planning too early. This may sound excessive, but you should really begin work on a big event one to two years in advance. The earlier you start, the better organized the event will be. It all begins with a regatta plan, which is just like a business plan. It should define your organizational needs, make budget assumptions, and set a long-range timetable and a tentative hour-by-hour schedule for the event itself, including all activities. If you do things right, your event should hit critical mass about a month ahead of time. You'll have people calling on the phone asking to help and people traveling from places you never dreamed of.

When you plan the budget, be flexible. Take into account what would happen if ten fewer boats show up than expected, or ten more. One of the worst things that can

happen is to run a good event and then find you're wiped out financially. I know, because it happened to our fleet once a long time ago. Luckily, some people generously bailed us out. If they hadn't, what may now be the biggest Snipe fleet in the world wouldn't exist. Finances are not everyone's favorite subject when they're participating in leisure activities, but losing a bunch of money can spoil a good time fast. Also, the earlier you start, the easier it will be to accomplish your fundraising goals.

AS: Speaking of money, events can get costly to run. How do classes and clubs raise money for events?

PR: Well, sponsorship is a big topic these days, and for most event organizers, some sort of sponsorship is a fact of life. I've always tried to keep sponsorship to a level where it doesn't take over the event – maybe 10 to 15 percent of the total budget. Most people picture sponsorship as an exercise where, one month before the regatta, you go out and beg someone for money. They also tend to expect to get something for nothing– they try to sell a page of advertising in a program for a 50-boat regatta for \$1,000. If you can talk your local Budweiser distributor into a deal like that, you can come to work for my company any day! You have to be prepared to offer an advertiser or sponsor a reasonable gang for his buck. You can't burn a sponsor and expect them to come back again next year. A good sponsor, at the same time, will respect what you're trying to do with your event.

So, sponsors are definitely a source, but then there are entry fees, T-shirt sales, bake sales, raffles, lotteries– the object is to get everyone involved in fundraising. Most event organizers hate to up their entry fees, but the rest of the world keeps getting more expensive. Sooner or later, entry fees have to follow the trend. In some classes, there is a system where every sanctioned district event chips in a few dollars from each entry fee to a big event fund that builds up over the years. Then, when they want to put on a big show, there's maybe \$10,000 sitting there that becomes the backbone of the budget.

Our own fleet is even more aggressive this way. We have regular drives that build a fund which essentially gives us some independence from the district organization, the class and sponsors.

AS: Event management and race management are two of the great unsung roles in sailboat racing. Where is the payoff? What are the rewards?

PR: To me, it's very simple. All events have one winner the person who finishes first. If you put together a well-run event, one where everybody there has a good time and gets what they came for, then I say everybody who organized the event or worked on the race committee finishes a close second. I really believe that. If you watch a 60-boat fleet coming downwind after the second weather leg and the fleet is absolutely evenly split on different jibes all the way down the leg; when you see a fleet charging off the line spread out evenly with no premature starters – it's thrilling. You can feel the enthusiasm

and energy from the sailors. And, you helped make that possible. There's a great deal of pride and satisfaction to be found in doing a job like that.

There's another thing I've noticed in the last few years: While the competitors may be more knowledgeable and demanding, they also are showing more appreciation for a job well done. The role is not so unsung anymore.