

ON THE WATER FRONT

Blind sailors hold their own on the bay

By Paul Oliva

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

"Up two degrees ... hold it there," says tactician Al Spector to Mitsuhiro Iwamoto, steering a J24 race boat sailing a beeline toward another boat.

"Tack on a long count. Three... two... one... tack!" "Good call," says Dnette Davis.

"Good call to avoid collision?" answers Al. "Right. Hiro, beautiful driving."

It sounds like typical regatta chatter. But these tactical calls are especially important.

Iwamoto is blind. That boat they just missed — with four other boats bearing down? All driven by blind crew members.

The event was the first California Invitational Blind Sailing Regatta, organized on the Oakland-Alameda Estuary by the Marin Sailing School

and Island Yacht Club. Teams represented Boston, Japan, Canada, New Zealand, the Bay Area Association of Disabled Sailors and Iwamoto's team, called California 1.

Under international blind-regatta rules, the person at the helm is blind. A second blind or vision-impaired person handles the mainsail. There's a fully sighted tactician and a fully sighted crew member handling the foresail, but neither can't touch any other controls except in an emergency.

Crewmembers build a mental map of the boat with a systematic, hands-on tour, and they race on virtually identical boats loaned for the occasion. They turn their heads to feel the air on their nose and ears to tell them which way the wind is blowing.

Despite maneuvers just feet apart, collisions are rare. There's not even extra insurance required, though the boat owner or a rep was allowed aboard for this regatta.

For California 1, San Francisco resident Philip Kum controls the mainsail. He lost his vision four years ago during an operation to remove a tumor. Iwamoto has been blind since childhood. He lives in San Diego and is planning a double-handed sail from California to Japan. Spector owns the Marin Sailing School in Sausalito and Davis runs the school's Program for the Blind.

Such competition has been taking place since a first regatta in 1992 led to

creation of Blind Sailing International. In the Bay Area, the disabled sailors group welcomes blind and vision-impaired sailors. Yet there wasn't a specific program for blind sailing instruction until a Christmas party in 2007, when Spector and Davis decided to pair his new sailing school with her new credentials in orientation and mobility.

Kum met Davis during his rehabilitation and became the first student. Because you can't see wind, he says, sailing is one of the most accessible sports for the vision impaired. When Kum learned about a national championship, then just a couple months away in August 2008, Spector says Kum's enthusiastic response became their motto: "Who wouldn't do that?"

That championship led them to the 2009 world championship in New Zealand, then to the idea for the California Invitational.

Back at Island Yacht Club over pizza and beer, Davis rattles off a host of ways people lose their sight: macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and a half-dozen other conditions. Common to all is the devastating impact on mobility for the blind, she said.

It was a stark feeling for Fumihiro Adachi, living just north of Tokyo, when he completely lost his vision 10 years ago. Today, he's chairman of the Japan Blind Sailing Association and driver for the Japanese team; an ebullient, confident retiree. But he remembers when going out felt dangerous. It was "stress, pressure, to go anywhere."

A TV news item about a blind sailor made him muster the courage for a three-hour train ride by

himself to learn sailing. "It changed my life totally." Indeed. Now he's raising money to organize the 2013 world championship in Japan.

After nine races, the New Zealand and Boston teams took first and second place, respectively, after a tiebreaker; Canada was third. Another tiebreaker put California 1 at fourth, followed by Japan and the Bay Area group.

Armed Forces Regatta

Alameda hosted another inspiring event on its bay side last Saturday, thanks to boating school Club Nautique.

The Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard each sent representatives to compete for the American Armed Forces Cup perpetual trophy, which honors servicemen and women. The club provides identical 26-foot sailboats and professional sailing instructors for each team.

The Coast Guard won again this year. The Marine Corps, which placed second last year, was unable to participate because of troop deployments.

Dining by boat

The bay side of Alameda also offers a great option for dining by boat in the form of Pier 29 Restaurant. Located in Ballena Isle Marina on Alameda's western edge, Pier 29's the type of unfussy place that feels supremely comfortable after bashing on the bay. There's well-protected free docking while dining, plus a fuel dock and pump-out. It's open daily from 9 a.m. until late, with patio dining and sweeping views.

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