



Joshua Harsch's pocket cruiser vessel, named Blue Heaven, carries passengers around Lake Shawnee while a smaller vessel sails in the distance recently for the explore sailing lessons through the county and Shawnee Yacht Club.

EVERT NELSON/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

Club survives changing tides

Organization has given Topekans a place to sail for 82 years

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Lake Shawnee has a long tradition of sailing boats.

Even before the Works Project Administration lake was completed in 1939, local enthusiasts couldn't resist getting on the water to glide across the then-flooded fields.

"While they were building the dam and the lake, people were in their garages building their home-built sail-

boats from kits," said Mike Gorman, a longtime sailer and governor on the Shawnee County Yacht Club board.

Two years later in September 1941, those enthusiasts came together to establish the yacht club that still operates today.

Gorman still recalls those days as he secured a vessel after helping out at an explore sailing event at the club recently.

"Back in the heydays of the '60s, '70s, '80s, we used to have, you know, 20, 30 boats out here twice a week racing, and

now we don't."

Changing currents of activities in Topeka area

Like the winds that push vessels across the water changes, so does the popularity of sailing in Topeka.

The explore sailing event Gorman and others were at is a new approach Shawnee County Parks and Recreation and the yacht club started offering for

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It's all smiles for Eric Stephenson, left, and Joe Glasgow as they adjust their sails and catch the wind on the water at Lake Shawnee. Glasgow has been helping Stephenson, a new member of the Shawnee Yacht Club, with sailing lessons this past summer. EVERT NELSON/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

Sailing

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those interested a chance to get on the water.

Since July, the county and yacht club have hosted exploring sailing lessons with the next being from 2-4:30 p.m. Sunday and Oct. 8. The cost is \$15 per session with participants receiving credit toward the normal \$25 fee for sailing lessons. Those interested are requested to register at the county website.

"This is not a sailing lesson that you're going to walk away and know how to sail. It's sort of an exploratory, you know, see what it feels like," said Jim Thompson, current commodore of the yacht club, to the group last Wednesday.

Thompson arranged for the eight participants that day to be split up between three boats. Two vessels, known as fractional sloops, came from the yacht club fleet and a third vessel, a small pocket cruiser with a keel, belonged to fellow member Joshua Harsch.

Harsch first took to sailing while a student at Shawnee Heights under the

direction of then commander of the Navy JROTC program, Jeff Richards.

"I am actually legally blind, and I was losing my vision at the time," Harsch said, "and I was trying to find something I was good at, something I could do. As soon as I touched the water, I was like: 'This is me. This is who I am.'"

The feeling was shared between a few other participants before they took off from the docks on the west side of the lake.

Eric Stephenson dedicated time this past summer to taking sailing lessons from the club and plans to become a permanent member with his own boat by next summer.

Stephenson said the feeling of using the natural elements to guide you around was what got him on board.

"You get a little bit of exhilaration, you know, when that wind picks up," he said. "That's when you kind of get hooked on it."

Sailing in Topeka

Members like Stephenson and Harsch are a few newer additions to the yacht club that has survived for 82 years.

Since the club's inception in the 1940s till the mid-1990s, sailing was a



Shawnee Yacht Club commodore Jim Thompson, middle, helps Joshua Harsch, right, attach his pocket cruiser vessel, named Blue Heaven, to the dock to board participants at a recent exploring sailing lesson at Lake Shawnee.

EVERT NELSON/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL



Club boats sit covered on trailers at the boatyard at the Shawnee Yacht Club. Members of the club are able to use the vessels with proper memberships.

EVERT NELSON/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

popular activity not just in Topeka but worldwide.

Until then, the yacht club operated independently from the county and took advantage of its own building, parking lot, gazebo and boat yard. After a decline in popularity though, the club formed an agreement with Parks and Rec to help take care of the boat yard, which had fallen in disrepair, in exchange of opening the yacht club building, parking lot and gazebo to the public.

"We're moving in the right direction," said Gorman, "but we'd like to get the clubhouse back and that area over there (so we) have more to offer people than just a boat yard."

Lake Shawnee is the only public lake that offers anyone the ability to set sail, with the proper equipment.

The yacht club offers instruction about sailing lessons for ages 12 and older at \$25 per person at 5:30 p.m. Wednesdays from June through August. Gorman said the club may also extend lessons into September and October on Sundays depending on interest.

"It's a great family sport," Gorman said. "Get your kids out here and interested in sailing. It's a good alternative if you want to do something besides what the crowds are doing."

Regular memberships start at \$20 for junior (under 21), \$50 for associate (crew or social) and \$100 for active (boat owner or uses club boats/boat share.)



Shawnee County Yacht Club board member Mike Gorman, middle, sails alongside Zoe Bowlus, left, and Hartwin Peelaers in a fractional sloop vessel at Lake Shawnee recently. The two Lawrence residents have sailed before, as Bowlus previously taught sailing lessons for children in Maine.

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