

Sailing on Ice



Annie Tuthill, age 18 at the time, is lifted by the wind as she sails along the east shore of Lake Sunapee.

Winter turns Lake Sunapee into an ice sailor's mecca.

BY *Barbra Alan*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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and Paul Howe*

A clear day with cold temperatures; a large, thick sheet of ice; and a strong, steady wind. These are the ingredients for the perfect ice sailing day.

“Ice sailing?” you may be thinking. “What’s that?”

Ice sailing is a sport where you leverage wind power to propel yourself across ice and snow. Simply put, it’s gliding on ice. Some ice sailors favor sails attached to sleds or boats, others use large kites while wearing skis, skates or snowboards on their feet.

Practical beginnings

While ice sailing has yet to have the kind of following that skiing and snowboarding boasts, it’s not a new activity by any means. Some argue that as long as there have been snow, ice and people, there has been ice sailing, however rudimentary the tools and technique. We do know that it has been around since at least the 17th century when Dutch >>>>

Charlie Meding of Wilmot, N.H., uses a Concept Air kite to glide across the snow-covered lake.

sailors experimented with ice sailing for transporting goods across frozen bodies of water during the winter. By placing metal runners on the bottom of their traditional boat hulls, the sailors found they could travel across ice and maintain their livelihoods over the long, hard winters.

In the centuries since, ice sailing has evolved from its practical beginnings to become an exhilarating winter sport. In the mid-19th century, ice sailing found its way to the United

States, where adventurous adrenaline junkies of old raced each other along the Hudson River. In the

1980s, the sport increased its global profile with the debut of the Ice and Snow Sailing World Championships (ISSWC) in Helsinki, Finland, in 1980, and the formation of the World Ice and Snow Sailing

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Association (WISSA) in Worthsee, Germany, in 1987. Originally, WISSA focused solely on windsurfing on ice and snow with various sleds powered by windsurfing rigs. But eventually, the organization embraced other



Father-and-daughter team Will and Annie Tuthill train on Lake Sunapee for the WISSA Ice & Snow Sailing World Championships.

forms of ice sailing. In 1991's Ice and Snow Sailing World Championships in Estonia saw the first hand-held sail, and 1993's championships in Poland marked the debut for kites.

Today, WISSA creates an international racing venue for three classes of ice sailing: Open Class, which includes any sled powered by a windsurfing rig; Hand Held, which includes any hand-held sail such as a kite wing or skate sail; and Kite Class, which includes all sails

tethered with lines.

Sailing on Sunapee

With ice sailors gliding across frozen ponds, lakes, rivers and bays throughout Northern Europe, Russia and North America, ice sailing is truly an international sport. And in the Kearsarge/Lake Sunapee region, it's also a local sport. That's right: From early January through late March (depending on how cold the winter is), an ever-growing number of people are flocking to Lake Sunapee each year to

ice sail, and to watch ice sailors in action. In fact, Lake Sunapee is considered "home ice" for the New England contingent of the ISSWC's Team USA and has become a valuable training ground for novice and experienced sailors all over New England. It's even being considered as the site of a future world championship.

What makes Lake Sunapee a destination for ice sailors? According to William Tuthill, a lifelong ice sailor and the president of >>>>



Photo by Kimberly Tuthill



Photo by Paul Howe

(Top) It's not unusual for Will Tuthill to sail at a speed of 50 miles per hour. (Bottom) Participants try out wings during a demo on Lake Sunapee.



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WISSA, it's location, location, location. "Lake Sunapee is 90 minutes from the largest city in New England, and it's situated at 1,100 feet above sea level, which means it freezes earlier than many lakes — even ones much farther north — and it stays frozen longer," he says, noting that ice sailors from all over New England, as well as New York and New Jersey, come to Lake Sunapee. "Plus, there is plenty of room for sailing, and the scenery is beautiful."

And just how fast can Meding go? "My all-time high was 64.9 miles per hour," he says. That's 64.9 miles an hour — no motor, no wheels; just a kite, skis and wind.

Charlie Meding, a native of the Sunapee area who has been ice sailing for two decades, says, "Lake Sunapee is perfect for ice sailing because it runs north to south. Most of the wind comes from the west, so we have nice long rides up and down the lake."

Love of the sport

If anyone could be said to have been born to ice sail, it's William Tuthill. He was born and raised on Quantuck Bay, Eastern Long Island, where his family settled back in 1620. Winter sports were a way of life. "I was put in an ice boat before I was able to walk," Tuthill says. "When windsurfing became popular, I started sailing on snow with a ski sled and a windsurfing rig. That morphed into participating in international competitions, which then morphed into me becoming president of WISSA."

Tuthill shares his love of and enthusiasm for ice sailing with his family, particularly his daughter Annie, who regularly competes, and places, in WISSA championships. She started competing at the ripe

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old age of 15, earned third place in the women's division at the 2011 world championships held in Oravi, Finland, and earned second place at the 2012 world championships in St. Ignace, Michigan.

Tuthill says they take every opportunity they can to practice and train, not just for competitions but for the sheer love of the sport and the outdoors. "We sail as much as possible," he says. "It would be a dream to follow winter around the world, practicing, competing, meeting new people, and sailing cool places like the New Zealand Highlands, Greenland and Antarctica, but that isn't reality for us, so we sail when and where we can — including land. Golf courses, parks, snow-covered beaches, it's all fair game."

Meding wasn't necessarily born to kite sail, but he picked it up fast and never looked back. He grew up in the Sunapee area and returned after attending college in Vermont. A downhill skier since age 3, he has worked in the ski industry for the past 18 years and currently manages Bob Skinner's Ski & Sport in Newbury, N.H. Meding discovered kite sailing back in 1994, when he met a local man who started a business making an early version of traction kites called parawings. "He brought me out on Otter Pond one January day and taught me how to sail," recalls Meding. "After a few tries, I picked it right up. Soon after, I bought one from him and started learning on my own."

Within a year, Meding felt ready to compete, and even placed at 1995's World Ice and Snow Sailing Championships, in Madison, Wisconsin. "I think I came in third, but there were only six or so kites back then!" he says.

In the years since, he's been up against more and more kite sailors at two other championships in Canada and at Kitestorm, an event that has



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drawn kite sailors, skiers, snowboarders and skaters to Vermont since 2004. While he acknowledges the intense level of competition among the sailors, Meding is quick to point out there's much more to these events than winning or placing. "These events are mostly about getting together and sailing," he says. "I have never worried about where I place. My biggest concern is how fast I can go."

And just how fast can Meding

go? "My all-time high was 64.9 miles per hour," he says. That's 64.9 miles an hour — no motor, no wheels; just a kite, skis and wind. "I love the ability to harness the wind for movement."

Control your feet

Tuthill is quick to point out that ice sailing doesn't always have to be competitive. "Ice sailing can be about cruising and relaxation. It's just as much a family activity as it is a competitive activity," he says.

Meding agrees. "There is something incredibly peaceful about it," he says.

As an internationally recognized competitive kite sailor, Meding says that one of the keys to success for any kite sailor is control over his or her feet. "If you can unconsciously control the skis, skates or snowboard, flying the kite becomes easy," he says. "Strength and agility come later as you progress."

Stamina is also critical, says



Expert Charlie Meding uses a kite. Kites take a long time to learn; wings, on the other and, are easier to master.

Tuthill. “We lay more miles under our skis than most skiers do in a season, because we don’t have to wait in line or ride a lift,” he says. “We are out there carving off the gusts, riding rivers of wind, and skiing all day long. Fifty-mile days are not uncommon.”

“I shoot for 1,000 miles a season, but I usually get in between 700 to 800 miles,” says Meding.

Meding and Tuthill are excited to see ice sailing gaining popularity,

and hope to see that continue. “Bring your friends, bring a picnic, and make a day of it,” says Tuthill. “Hanging out at the beach in the winter is just as much fun as it is in the summer, especially if you’re sailing on your skis or ice skates.”

And if you want to watch some of the best ice sailors in the world in action, including Charlie Meding and William and Annie Tuthill, look no further than Lake Sunapee on a clear, cold and windy winter’s day. **KM**

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Kimberly Tuthill has photographed her family ice sailing for almost 34 years. That is a lot of time out on cold, windy lakes! Tuthill earned her BFA degree in photography from Cornell University.



Photo by Kimberly Tuthill



Photo by Kimberly Tuthill

(Top) Black ice on Sunapee is rare, but Meding takes advantage of it. (Bottom) Charlie Meding is lifted by his kite. (The moon sails overhead.)