

Pooling Sailboat Skills

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A small sailboat with two young sailors glides across the pool and makes a graceful “come about” before heading back toward shallow water.



Sailing, sailing over the open ... pool?

Don't be shocked to find sailboats in a swimming pool—it's part of a summer class offered by the Port Aransas Parks & Recreation Department in Texas.

Picking Up Steam

The program started in 2000 as a summer boat-building activity, using plans purchased for a nutshell pram. After department officials had already purchased the supplies, there was not sufficient enrollment, so the volunteer who was going to teach the class decided to build one of the boats on his own time.

The boat construction project became part of the high school technical-trades program when the volunteer accepted the position of shop teacher that fall. The parks and recreation department purchased additional supplies, and students built two more nutshell prams as part of the woodworking curriculum—measuring, cutting, gluing, caulking and painting—all while having fun doing something different.

During the year, word of the school boat project spread, and several seasoned sailors expressed an interest in also building a boat. The two generations met on Saturday mornings to build the fourth boat in the parks and recreation's fleet.

When the project was completed, 'Azul, Beech, Coco and Dough (all appropriately named "nut"shell prams) were launched at the city marina with school officials, city council members, students and city staff enjoying a ride.

Now We're Sailing

The parks department set up classes for youngsters 10 years and older in the community swimming pool—a Z-shaped facility with a zero-depth entry perfect for launching boats, six lap lanes and a diving well suitable for making the turn back to shore.

Students learn basic parts of the sailboat, set up and take down rigging several times, and then head into the pool for hands-on instruction. Shallow water allows staff to assist the novice sailors by holding the painter (the line attached to the front end) to avoid most collisions.

By the third class, most students are proficient enough to sail on their own, using sail and tiller to pick up speed, and visitors can see three small boats tacking back and forth across the pool. Shouts of "We're sailing" greet parents and grandparents sitting along the pool deck, many with video cameras at the ready.

Open Water

The parks department has expanded the program with an advanced class held in the city marina under the direction of the harbormaster. Advanced students outfit the same nutshell prams and sail in the protected—but more open—waters in the harbor, steering clear of fishing boats and vessels moored in the harbor waters.

Each ride is longer, and the thrill is huge as students learn to read flags for wind direction and adjust their boats accordingly. Staff uses a chase boat, just in case of a lull in the wind, but these sailors take full advantage of the open water and the speed of the small nutshell prams to maneuver up and down the channel.

The city has received a generous donation of a 31-foot sloop that will be added to the fleet in summer 2011. This larger vessel will allow the parks department to introduce sailing in the Gulf of Mexico for youngsters who have demonstrated a keen interest in the sport, with some having started in the shallow-water pool sailing class.

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