What's So Great About Sailing the Gorge?

Bill Symes & Jonathan McKee

Seattle native Jonathan McKee was one of the early pioneers of dinghy sailing in the Gorge. His accomplishments include two Olympic medals (Flying Dutchman gold in 1984, and 49er bronze in 2000), seven world championships in various classes, and two Americas Cup challenges. CGRA's Bill Symes caught up with Jonathan to find out why he likes sailing in the Gorge.

What makes the Gorge a special place to sail?

It is really one of the legendary venues of the world. But it's not really in the classic model because the local sailing community created it from scratch. It's a pretty unique situation; it still has that home-grown feel to it, sort of a low key aspect which is different from sailing in San Francisco or someplace like that. It's all about having a good time and enjoying the beautiful place that it is. But at the same time, there is consistently a very high level of race management. So even though the vibe is pretty relaxed, that doesn't mean we don't have really great racing. The focus is on the sailing. And, of course, getting better at sailing in stronger winds! That's one thing the Gorge is uniquely suited for.

How does this compare to other heavy air venues?

It's a low risk way to get better at strong wind sailing. A lot of the windy places are either not windy all the time or so windy that they're really intimidating. There are factors that make them more difficult and stressful: the water's really cold, or it's a long way from shore. There are unique things about sailing in the Gorge that make it so much nicer and more pleasant.

One of them is fresh water. When you get splashed or you capsize and spend some time in it–as I have done many times!–it's just not that bad. So the fresh water is really awesome. And I think having the current going upwind, as it predominately is with the west winds, is another great factor, because usually the problem in heavy air places is that it takes so long to go upwind for such a short time downwind, which is, you know, the fun part.

Downwinds in the Gorge are longer compared with a normal venue with no current, so it balances a little bit better, both from a training and racing perspective. Another thing is that you're always pretty close to shore, so it just feels safer. You're not out in the middle of the ocean somewhere and feeling like if something goes wrong you're going to be in big trouble. And related to that is how close it is from launching to the sailing course. There's no long sail out to the

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course; it's just right there. It's extremely efficient from a time standpoint. When we used to train down here, a lot of times we would do a double session where we would sail in the morning for a couple of hours, come in relax, have a nice lunch and just chill out for a while, and then go out again in the afternoon for another good session. It's a really a fun and efficient way to get a lot of good sailing in.

There's this myth that it's always blowing 30 knots, which is really not true. We've been sailing here since the early 90's, and depending on the time of year, we've seen a lot of moderate days and even some light air days. So, you can spend a lot of time sailing in the 10-15 range, and quite a bit in the 15-18 range – great sailing conditions, tactical, but not extreme. OK, you do get your windy days and some days, or parts of some days, can be marginal. But it's not like that all the time. Usually, over the course of a regatta, you can expect to have a lot of good breeze, but also some moderate conditions, especially if you're willing to sail in the morning or later in the day. You can pick your wind speed, so that's a cool thing.

What advice would you give to visiting racers looking for local knowledge tips?

I think the tactics are pretty interesting. To be successful at the Gorge regattas you have to be fast, you have to be good in the breeze, you have to be good downwind because there's relatively more downwind, but you also have to be tactically strong. There's this sort of play between the current and the wind, where the wind might favor the left but the current's better on the right. So you have to play those two factors against each other, which is a pretty interesting game. And there also are normal oscillating shifts and a certain amount of geographical shifts too. So it's an interesting place, and you can't just go the same way every race. You really have to be heads-up and think about the wind direction, see the wind, think about the current, all those things. It's not straightforward but it's also not random. There's enough predictability about it to make it fun rather than frustrating.

How do you decide whether to focus on wind or current?

It depends a little bit on the type of boat that you're sailing. In faster boats, like skiffs, you're probably more focused on playing the shifts and, in lighter wind, the wind speed, and less the current. In slower boats, like Lasers, the current becomes a bigger factor, because if there's a current differential of one knot from one side of the river to the other, it takes a pretty good shift to make up for that. In the faster boats like skiffs, if you play the shifts well you'll usually be fine even if you're not exactly in the right place for current. But if it's 50-50 you might take the current edge.

Jonathan McKee

The typical situation is that there's a little stronger current on the Washington (north) side of the river and a little less current on the Oregon (south) side of the river. But there also is a little tendency to have a left shift off of the Oregon shore, so you have races where those two factors are balancing each other out. When there's a little bit of south in the breeze, you will come off the line going towards the Oregon shore and you will

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tend to get a header and can play those left shifts up the Oregon shore. And even though you're out of the best current it still is often the faster track to the weather mark. If the wind's got a little more north to it, then often the right is a little stronger and you'll find a right shift coming into the weather mark, and you're in better current as well.

Any personal anecdotes about sailing in the Gorge?

The Gorge was where I really learned how to sail skiffs in strong winds. Charlie and I spent a lot of time there in our early years and having that venue was a big factor in developing our heavy air skills. There's no other place quite like it, where you can just have that daily repetition of good sailing that allows you to cement those skills. And, it's also just a great place to hang out. We used to just go down, and camp out, and live for cheap and go sailing and have a great time, become better sailors and really enjoy ourselves. Cascade Locks is a really laid back town and the people are super nice and very competent. It just has a really nice vibe.

How would you like to see it develop in the future?

That's a good question. There could always be more facilities shoreside, but you don't really need them. It's not going to make the sailing any different; the sailing is what it is. I feel like part of its charm is the low-key, non-yacht club aspect to it. If you made it more like other places, I'm not sure that would be better. And it's improved a lot from when we first went there. It used to be this little gravel parking lot and little beach, and now there's a lot more there, enough that you can run great regattas and it's still only 20 minutes to the West Marine. You know, it's all there.

Is it big enough to be a championship venue?

Yes, I think it is. We just had the Tasar Worlds there with 60 boats and that was totally no problem. There have been a lot of other big regattas. The river is big enough to accommodate a lot of boats.

Some have commented that this venue favors local knowledge. True?

I don't think there is that much local knowledge. Whatever I know I just told you. There are no tricks; it's all there and quite obvious. In fact, it has a lot less local knowledge than places that have tricky wind or current things. I think it's actually more straightforward, and way more open, than a place like San Francisco or even Seattle. Any good sailor can go there and be successful.

Anything you'd like to add?

I really appreciate what you guys are doing and the way that you've kept it going. I know it takes a lot of work and a lot of volunteers and a lot of dedication but you guys do a great job. I think it's awesome what you guys have done there at CGRA. Thank you!

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