

The Pied Piper of Sailing

When Michael Fortenbaugh arrived in Manhattan 15 years ago and said he was going to start a yacht club, hardly anyone thought he'd succeed. He did, and now he is trying to create "the biggest sailing event ever" in New York Harbor. This time no one is betting against him.

BY BETSY FRAWLEY HAGGERTY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD MELLO

New Yorker Michael Fortenbaugh has a knack for making seemingly impossible things happen. And if his record holds, thousands of sailboats will fill New York Harbor on September 14 in quiet commemoration of the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

This event—called Sail for America—will be three things, says Fortenbaugh, commodore of the Manhattan Yacht Club and organizer of the September 14 sail-in. "It will be a memorial to the people who died, a symbolic rebirth for the City of New York and a tribute to the soaring spirit of America. We want to have the greatest gathering of sailboats ever in the history of New York Harbor. We want to create a vision of hope and beauty for the City of New York and all Americans. And sailboats flying American flags and actively sailing in the waters near the World Trade Center site will create that vision."



An outsized idea and a mammoth undertaking to be sure, but then no one's ever accused Michael Fortenbaugh of thinking small or shirking work. A New Jersey-bred boating enthusiast, he arrived in Manhattan in the mid-1980s shortly

after his graduation from Princeton and started looking for places to sail. When he discovered there were none, he took matters into his own hands. "Here was this beautiful body of water, ideal for sailing, but in those days there was no recreational sailing in New York Harbor," he recalls. "I thought we could change that."

He spent the next year or so developing a business plan, finding backers, securing dock space in Lower Manhattan and creating a unique sailing business—a club that would own boats and sell memberships to sailors who would share use of the boats. "I realized," Fortenbaugh said at the time, "that people didn't want to bring their own boats to the city, so the solution was to give them a way to sail on other peoples' boats." In May 1987 the Manhattan Yacht Club opened with a dozen 24-foot sailboats, a hundred or so members and a chorus of skeptics who said it wouldn't last.



Opposite page: Michael Fortenbaugh, founder and commodore of the Manhattan Yacht Club, stands near the yacht club's docks.

Left: Manhattan Yacht Club sailors head out for an evening of racing on club-owned J/24 sailboats.

Above: Visitors study the memorial wall near the yacht club, which honors victims of the World Trade Center attacks.

"People today have no idea of the mindset in 1987," he says. "If you talked to anyone back then, they said 'No Way! You can't sail in New York Harbor because there is too much current, too much tugboat traffic.'" But Fortenbaugh, who was 24 at the time, didn't listen. Instead, he talked. With a boyish smile, an unwavering passion for his project and the zeal of a charismatic preacher, he called on corporate leaders, the U.S. Coast Guard and anyone else who would make time for him. He extolled the merits of urban boating, sailing in particular, and support grew, as did club membership—to 200, then 300 and well over 400 today. Manhattan Yacht club now owns 27 J/24 sailboats, and Fortenbaugh works full-time as the club's CEO and commodore.

But Fortenbaugh has always seen his mission as greater than just creating a business for himself and a club for his fellow sailors. He wanted to make recreational sailing part of the fabric of New York

Harbor, and he did that by organizing what he calls "big-whistle" events that put city sailing in the news. In its early days the fledgling club sponsored corporate sailing competitions, organized international regattas, opened a sailing school, started a sailing foundation, and created a program that would give financially disadvantaged youngsters a chance to get out on the water. After a while, people got accustomed to seeing pleasure boats in the harbor and began cruising to the city on their own.

"Michael was a pioneer," says Peter Cavrell, who joined the yacht club 14 years ago and now serves as its vice commodore. "He saw this untapped resource and brought the beauty of sail back to a commercial waterway. I give him credit for his vision and stick-to-itiveness."

Success hasn't slowed him down. "Michael is a creative thought a minute," says Lee Gruzen, a New York Harbor activist who serves on many civic com-

mittees with him. "And he has this incredible resilience and resourcefulness. When he hits an obstacle that would make others put their heads under their armpits and leave, Michael just keeps on going."

Not every project he's tackled has worked, even Fortenbaugh admits. "Some of my ideas have been, well, 'out there,'" he acknowledges.

"Right," says John LaGrassa, a club member from the very beginning. "I've been with him on many failures, but what people remember are the successes, and Michael doesn't let setbacks bother him; he just keeps moving forward."

Even so, LaGrassa was skeptical when Fortenbaugh came to him last November bursting with enthusiasm for his latest idea—Sail for America. "I cringed," he remembers. "It was a such a huge undertaking, but I shouldn't have doubted. Michael surrounds himself with loyal people who are willing to work, and he delegates very well.

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He moved this along so quickly that it took on a life of its own almost immediately."

Sail for America is both the biggest event Fortenbaugh has organized, and the most personal. Manhattan Yacht Club makes its home in North Cove, a tiny man-made yacht harbor nestled beneath the skyscrapers of the World Financial Center in Lower Manhattan, just yards from the World Trade Center site. Fortenbaugh, his wife Sharon, and their two sons, seven-year-old Skipper and Sonny, who is 5½, live nearby. So, when last September's attacks began, Fortenbaugh was there. "I heard the explosion and saw the fireball," he says, "and I had to get my family out of there." The Fortenbaughs escaped to New Jersey in their powerboat and spent the next weeks living at a family farmhouse.

When they returned home in late October, the fires were still burning, and a wall near the yacht club had become a makeshift memorial with victims' photos surrounded by written tributes, flowers and teddy bears. "You couldn't walk by that wall as a human being without feeling a great something," Fortenbaugh says. "I watched people coming here for the first time, and I saw their suffering. I wished to have the ability to make it better. I realized that someone had to step forward and talk about beauty and give us hope for the future."

And that hope, Fortenbaugh concluded, would come from a great sailing event in New York Harbor. "I knew we needed to fill New York Harbor with sail, and I knew it had to be around the first anniversary," he says. When he went public with the idea, more than 80 boating and waterfront organizations promptly pledged support, the Coast Guard agreed to work with him on logistics, and—in perhaps his greatest coup—he convinced the organizers of Around Alone, the single-handed, around-the-world sailing race that was scheduled to start in Newport, Rhode Island, on September 15, to move the start to New York Harbor so the racers could be part of Sail for America.

Even nonboaters called to see how they could participate. "I read two lines

about it in a newsletter," says Jennifer Oberstein, who works at the Ritz Carlton New York in Battery Park, "and I tracked Michael down to see if I could help. I know nothing about sailing and I get seasick, but I was in Lower Manhattan on September 11, and I personally can't think of a better way to mark the anniversary than by watching beautiful sailboats. It seems so serene, and so powerful." In fact, Oberstein was so taken with Sail for America, that she convinced the hotel's management to become a major sponsor. "Basically," she says, "I don't know how anyone could say no to Michael. His passion draws everyone in."

And that's what Fortenbaugh is counting on. By mid-July, with two months to go before Sail for America, the list of participating boats had swelled to the high hundreds, and registrations and support were pouring in. But there were still loose ends to be tied.

"I'm not sure exactly how this will end up," Fortenbaugh says, as he pushes to finalize plans. "But I know one thing. This is the right thing to do." ■

Sail for America Schedule

Sail for America will begin in New York Harbor on Saturday, September 14, at 9 a.m. and will conclude with the start of the Around Alone single-handed, around-the-world race at noon on Sunday, September 15.

Saturday's events will include several boat parades involving tall ships, 9/11 rescue boats and participating sailboats. A number of sailboat races will also take place in the waters off Lower Manhattan.

At noon on Sunday, some 20 high-tech racing boats, 40 to 60 feet in length and each sailed by a solo sailor, will begin the first leg of their 28,775-nautical-mile around-the-world race with a sprint across the Atlantic to Torbay, England.

The Coast Guard will establish designated spectator areas for all events as well as special anchorages where visiting boats can stay overnight. There is no charge for participation in Sail for America.

Visit www.sailforamerica.com for an updated schedule of events. For information on the Manhattan Yacht Club, visit www.myc.org, and for the Around Alone race visit www.aroundalone.com.

—B. F. H.