



Sailing students who are age 7 to 11 start out by using small, easy-to-handle 8-foot dinghies known as optis, short for optimists, in summer classes with Lake Calhoun Sailing School. Photos courtesy of Lake Calhoun Sailing School

Set Sail for Summer

Lake Calhoun Sailing School lets kids explore the open water right in the middle of Minneapolis

BY LIANNA MATT

Sailing instructor Madison Hobbs had a clear view of all her beginning sailors, working in teams of three to balance and maneuver their 8-foot training vessels, powered only by the steady winds coming off Lake Calhoun.

In one boat, kids chatted excitedly, working to angle their sail just right, trying not to tip over.

In another, two boys excitedly and repeatedly yelled, “Look at our seaweed collection!”

Hobbs — keeping an eye on the rest of her would-be rookie regatta racers — grinned at the boys, who were proudly holding up lake plants with their bare hands.

Hobbs continued resetting buoys the students had inadvertently knocked over when they drifted off course or failed in their early attempts at turning.

Not far off sat 8-year-old Ryan, keeping a strong grip on both sides of his sailboat and watching, wide-eyed, as his mates attempted to control their dinghy, which began to shoot across the water in straight line, its sails suddenly full of wind. ▶

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Students age 12 to 18 learn to sail using 420 boats at Lake Calhoun Sailing School. Larger than the optis used for younger kids, 420 boats mimic features of sailboats many times larger.



It was Ryan's third day of sailing lessons at the Lake Calhoun Sailing School in Minneapolis, so he was still gaining the confidence needed to become a fearless sailor.

Later in the boathouse, Ryan's apprehension had disappeared as he excitedly told his fellow sailors just how fast he'd gone, like a storybook hero, regaling his comrades with tales of adventure.

Although sailing has a reputation for being a hobby reserved for wealthy yacht owners or eccentric sailboat enthusiasts, that's not the case.

Anyone can learn sailing with Lake Calhoun Sailing School, one of the largest sailing schools in the Midwest. (Although the classes cost less with a sailing school membership, membership isn't required.)

A full-day, two-week beginning sailing course for ages 7 to 11 costs \$480, for example, which is equal to or less than the cost of two weeks at many specialty day camps in the Twin Cities.

Getting started

One of the keys to learning sailing is to start with a small boat.

At Lake Calhoun Sailing School, the beginner craft of choice is an easy-handling 8-foot sailboat known as an "opti" — short for "optimist." These small sailing dinghies can be used to train ages 7 to 15 and can hold up to three kids for lessons.

The school's Beginning Optimist class serves as an introduction to sailing course, with a structured curriculum that starts with demonstrations on land followed by near-shore boating with instructors in motorized safety boats close by.

Students — who must be able to swim and tread water in life jackets to sign up — go out on the water on their first day of class.

During the first week, kids work on boat-handling skills, safety, sailing upwind and downwind and basic sailing maneuvers.

As they build confidence, students —

depending on wind conditions — gradually move farther from shore where they practice their skills and participate in drills and games.

Students also learn about rigging, knot tying and water safety. They get to paddle the boats around without sails and also learn how to right a boat when it tips over.

Higher-level courses allow students to move into racing, including rules, strategies and tactics.

All Lake Calhoun Sailing School classes are held Mondays through Thursdays. On Fridays throughout the summer, sailing students at all levels are encouraged to participate in the popular Twin Cities Youth Sailing regatta series, with coaching provided by the sailing school.

Other sailing clubs involved in the series include the Lake Minnetonka Sailing School, Wayzata Community Sailing Center, Lake Harriet Yacht Club, Saint Croix Sailing School and White Bear Sailing School.

'It's like driving a car'

Harnessing the wind can be incredibly fun, but it isn't necessarily intuitive at first.

Turning involves not a steering wheel, but instead a smooth shift of the sail's boom from one side of the boat to the other.

And that involves remembering to duck, said 10-year-old Corinne, a second-year student at the sailing school, who took the Beginning Optimist class last summer.

When she first started out, that part of the process was a challenge.

Today her calm demeanor around the opti makes it seem doubtful that she could be caught off guard by anything. ►

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Set Sail for Summer

“It’s like driving a car across the water,” Corinne said of the smooth feel of the boat in motion.

However, sometimes that car might seem like it’s going a little too fast or the ride might feel a little too rough.

One group in Corinne’s class had a bit of trouble when their opti got off balance and took on some water.

“We’re going to sink!” the two students exclaimed as they tried to splash water out of their boat. With the help of their instructor — and the laws of physics — they didn’t sink, and soon, their boat was cruising once again, the students quickly forgetting the trouble they’d had.

Hobbs, like most instructors here, learned how to sail through Lake Calhoun Sailing School, so she understood what the kids were feeling.

“Learning it — sometimes it was scary,” Hobbs recalled. “That’s the point: You think you can’t do it. But the instructors are watching you, and they’ve got you.”

Even though the biggest threat is usually nothing more than getting wet, there’s just something inherently

nerve-racking about falling unintentionally into a lake, even if you’re wearing a lifejacket, which all students are required to do.

Kids who sail learn to manage their emotions in an environment that feels perilous, but is actually quite safe, Hobbs said.

Safety is the No. 1 one priority for the school, and the instructors are well-versed in best practices and protocols.

Because of the mix of experience levels among the kids, instructors always group students so that each opti has at least one relatively experienced sailor. The students, although they get to control the optis, are always under constant supervision, including extra-close monitoring on windier days.

A lifelong love

Members of the Calhoun Yacht Club established the Lake Calhoun Sailing School in 1989 so their kids would have a formal place to learn sailing.

Today the school now boasts a fleet of almost 50 optis, dozens of other sailing



Lake Calhoun Sailing School instructors closely monitor students by following them around in motorized safety boats.

boats, a racing program and more than 800 students per year.

School director Ted Salzman said the school is working to change the perception that sailing is expensive or unattainable for average folks by offering scholarships and working to strengthen community ties.

Learning sailing has been life-changing for many of the school’s instructors, and now

LAKE CALHOUN SAILING SCHOOL

This Minneapolis-based sailing school gets kids out on the water on Day 1, gradually moving farther from shore when the kids are ready and conditions are right. Kids are encouraged to develop leadership and teamwork skills as they learn to navigate Lake Calhoun.

Ages allowed: 7–18.

Evening adult and parent/child classes for ages 4–6 also are available, as well as classes for adults and groups.

Dates: Classes typically run on two-week cycles from June 19 through Aug. 24.

Hours: Half-day Beginning Optimist classes run from 9 a.m.–noon and 1–4 p.m. and can be combined with a supervised lunch to create a full day of activities.

Location: 3010 E. Calhoun Pkwy., Minneapolis

Cost: Fees are \$480 for a two-week Beginning Optimist session (eight full-day classes); a half-day option costs \$260. Beginning 420 classes, which are geared toward ages 12 to 18 and use 14-foot boats, cost \$445 for two weeks (eight full-day classes).

Parent-child classes cost \$175 for four two-hour classes.

Info: sailcalhoun.org





they want to pass that passion on to others, Salzman said. (Indeed, some of the students Salzman taught in 2002 have already come back as instructors.)

While many of the instructors cite racing as one of the biggest lures of sailing, Salzman said the joy goes far beyond that.

He likes the peaceful feeling he gets when he and friends or family are on a boat, drifting on a glass lake, with the sunset going down in the Twin Cities.

Sailing provides a different perspective on the nature world, he said. But it also offers a serenity — and a thrill — for those who understand how the water and the wind work to move a sailboat.

“For those that like it, it becomes a part of who they are — who they define themselves as,” Salzman said. “It’s not just something they do.”

Lianna Matt is a Twin Cities journalist who loves traveling and meeting people on the job — even if she is a bit directionally challenged.

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