Laura Hals

Photographs by Jack Reynolds

SAND, SEA, STORM: Surf City recently hosted its annual Epic Lifeguard Tournament, wrapping up the contest just as a thunderstorm approached. Participants competed in events such as the Paddle Relay, (Bottom, left) which Ross Reynolds, (Top, left) helped Surf City to win. During the Medley Relay, (Below, left) boats from Beach Haven and Island Beach State Park nearly collided while trying to catch a wave to shore. Long Beach Township lifeguards Jared Angelozzi, Colin Brearly and Jay Sawczak, (Left) push their boat into the Run-Row. Surf City guards Darren Podolak, Mike Vile, Ross Reynolds, Rip Wagner, Alan Bakes and Mark Dileo (Above) relish their victory.

Despite Weather, Lifeguards Race
Surf City Beach Patrol Claims 'Epic' Triumph

With the threat of thunderstorms in the distance, lifeguards from seven towns, both on and off Long Beach Island, chanced the weather to participate in the Surf City Beach Patrol's fourth annual Epic Lifeguard Tournament, held last Thursday on Fifth Street in Surf City. Spectators were able to see all of the scheduled events except an exhibition women's Iron Medley cancelled due to worsening weather conditions, and in the end, it was the host town that came out on top.

As the tournament commenced, onlookers watched both sky and ocean, alternately wondering if rain was on the way and cheering on the event participants. The wind kept the air cool as the lifeguards removed sweatshirts and sweatpants, preparing to enter the two-foot, mid-60s-degree surf.

From his post on a lifeguard chair, an announcer called the tournament "one of the most grueling events along the Jersey Shore," and listed the five different races: the Surf Dash, the Epic Run Swim, the Paddle Relay, the Iron Man Medley and the Run-Row.

Trucks, boats and lifeguards from the seven competing municipalities – Barnegat Light, Beach Haven, Island Beach, Long Beach Township, Ortley Beach, Surf City and Upper Township – were lined up along the beach, with spectators scattered in between.

Jackie Brown, a high school student from Plymouth, Minn., who spends summers in Ship Bottom, remarked, "I'm hoping no thunderstorms strike."

She added, "It's very exciting to watch the races," and decided to stay on the beach despite the overcast skies and occasional drops of rain.

Her father, Jeff Brown, who in his younger days was a Ship Bottom lifeguard, said he had heard that the Epic Tournament was originally scheduled for weeks earlier, but was cancelled and rescheduled due to the cold ocean temperatures.

He joked, "Back in the day, there was no such thing as cold water," and his children made faces and laughed.

As the tournament raced on, Long Beach Township lifeguard Jay Sawczak talked between events about how "this is the funnest comp of the year, thanks to Mark Dileo and Ross Reynolds designing the events to be competitive."

Later, Sawczak further clarified that "the events are run around the same marks rather than each team having a separate mark and lane," which ensures that certain teams are not advantaged based on where they are located along the shoreline.

Music poured from speakers on the back of a pickup truck parked near the event scoreboard, where Surf City resident Robert Luft Jr. checked out the event names and the participating towns and remarked, "I'm all about the Surf City team."

He added, "I think they're pretty strong this

Lifeguard

year. They're pretty aggressive."

Amanda Kimmish, a Surf City lifeguard, agreed, and explained how the squad trains in part by running on both the Boulevard and the beach, adding that the Epic competitors are chosen through "race-offs," which consist of "run-offs, swim-offs and row-offs."

She pointed out that the ocean was only about 58 degrees when the tournament was initially supposed to take place, and after the rescheduling, Surf City Beach Patrol Capt. Mark Dileo was determined to hold the races; rain would not deter the competitors, although thunderstorms would, Kimmish noted.

Though the weather worsened as the tournament continued, all the main events were held, with only the exhibition women's medley called off due to lightening and thunder.

Surf City Beach Patrol Lt. Collette Pretre, director of the tournament, detailed the official results of the Epic Tournament: Surf City took the overall first-place honors with a total of 36 points, which included first-place finishes in the Epic Run Swim, the Paddle Relay and the Medley Relay.

In second place, putting up a fight and finishing strong, was Long Beach Township with 29 points. The township started the tournament with a fourth-place finish in the Surf Dash, but then notched three second places in a row, and ended with a first-place showing in the last event, the Run-Row.

Ortley Beach placed third, with 14 points; in fourth place was Island Beach State Park with 13 points; Barnegat Light ended up with 10 points, to finish fifth; 7 points and sixth place belonged to Upper Township; and Beach Haven collected 6 points to finish in seventh place.

Next year's Epic Tournament is already scheduled for Tuesday, July 8 at 6 p.m., also on Fifth Street in Surf City. The rain date is Thursday, July 24, 2008.

For additional information, contact Pretre at CollettePretre@gmail.com.

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