

THE SANDPAPER

THE NEWSMAGAZINE OF SOUTHERN OCEAN COUNTY

FREE
August 15, 2007
VOL. 33, NO. 32

thesandpaper.net

August 15, 2007
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Small Squad Wins First Title Since 1980

Surf City Patrol Conquers All In Island Races



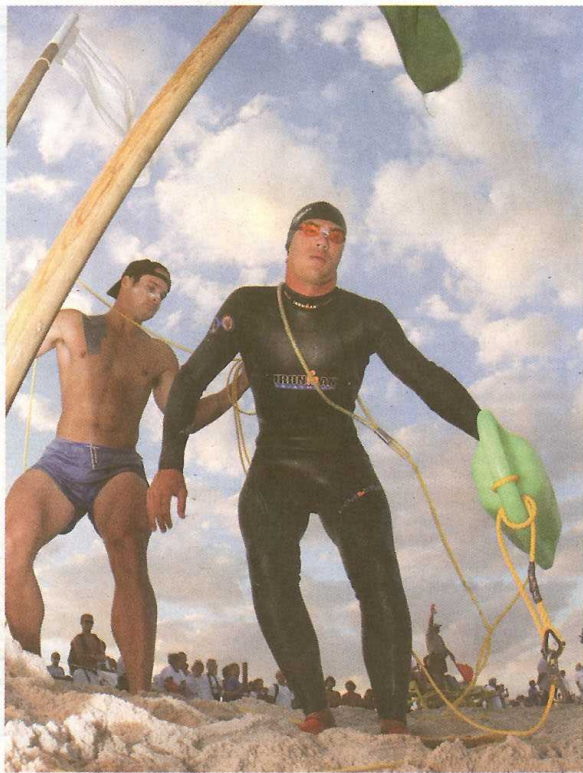
Jack Reynolds

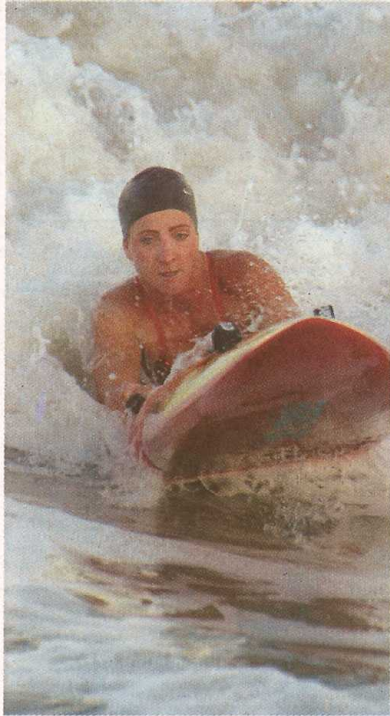
By JULIET KASZAS-HOCH

Last Friday, 20- to 30-mph northeast winds swept over the Island, roiling the ocean, building the waves, hinting at autumn and leading to the postponement, due to rough surf, of the 46th Annual Long Beach Island Beach Patrol Association Lifeguard Tournament. The two-day event, originally scheduled for Friday and Saturday, shifted to Saturday and Sunday, the former of which showcased four- to seven-foot waves and caused tournament organizers to allow only three events. On Sunday, the competition continued, with 13 events squeezed in between 5:30 p.m. and dusk, off the narrow 68th Street beach in Brant Beach.

As night approached on Sunday, cloaking competitors and spectators in darkness, it was the patrol from Surf City that stood atop the podium to hoist its first-place trophy and shout in celebration of the win. After

years of oft-dominant teams from Barnegat Light or Long Beach Township claiming the top honor, Surf City's triumph was particularly sweet, as showcased by the roar of the squad.





Laura Hals

SIGHTS SET ON VICTORY: Surf City's Jenn Welch (above) catches a nice wave and steers toward shore in the Women's Paddle. As the sky darkens, Paul Dungee (top) of Surf City competes in the Surf Dash Relay.

Surf City patrol Capt. Mark Dileo noted that "the last time Surf City won the tournament was 1980," adding, "Actually, 1979 and 1980 were the only years prior to this year that Surf City won."

Dileo continued, "Surf City is one of the smaller patrols on the Island," but "we've been building momentum for the last few years. This year our gals and guys have been working hard toward this season-culminating event."

Surf City's climb towards victory began on a cool Saturday evening, the lifeguards' initial stab at the tourney. As surfers paddled out on either side of the jetty-marked competition site, taking advantage of the first significant swell in many days, tournament spectators crammed onto the small stretch of sand on 68th Street, behind an orange fence to separate the lifeguards from the crowd. The competition commenced just after 6 p.m., but not before the judges and race team captains evaluated the iffy conditions and discussed event order and re-scheduling.

Don Myers, Long Beach Township beach supervisor, announced, "We're concerned about the safety of the competitors," thus hatching a new line-up and deciding on considerable event deferment for the teams from Barnegat Light, Harvey Cedars, Surf City, Ship Bottom, Long Beach Township and Beach Haven.

"We can't control Mother Nature," Myers said, adding that the safest move was to postpone many of the events until the following day, and hope for calmer conditions.

Veteran Head Judge Jeff Davis noted, "We're bumping all the rowing events" to Sunday, which left only the Paddleboard Relay, Buoy Rescue and Women's Paddleboard competitors to face the sizable shorebreak and tough current on Saturday.

Before the start of the night's first event, the 4 x 1,000-foot Men's Paddleboard Relay, Myers took a moment to address the crowd regarding the lifeguards' difficult day guarding the unruly surf: "We commend them for a job

well done during working hours.”

As Davis sounded the horn, the Paddle Relay began, and the first of four guards from each patrol started their paddle out and around their designated buoy, followed by the remaining three members of each team.

At the race's end, Mike Dancha, Travis Lepley, Dan Payne and Andrew Croft were presented with gold medals, earning eight points for the Long Beach Township squad for their winning time of 11 minutes, 17 seconds. Ship Bottom's Dennis Harrington, Sam Candio, Matthew Aniski and Keith Stokes captured second, earning their team six points, while third place, and four points, went to Steve Welc, Kyle Gronostajski, Matt Holloway and Ross Reynolds of Surf City.

Each event's fourth-place team earns three points, the fifth-place team gets two points, and the sixth-place team receives one point.

During the Paddle Relay, Surf City Lt. Collette Pretre, in her 11th year as a Surf City guard, rooted for her team along with her mother, Karen DeAngelis, and other members of her Chicago-based family.

Pretre, who noted that she would compete in Sunday's Mixed Doubles Row, noted that her sister, Alyssa DeAngelis, was also set to race on Sunday, in the Women's Row.

According to Pretre, Surf City participates in a number of tournaments throughout New Jersey during the summer, explaining, "Going off-island gives us a good idea of how we rank against other teams."

She added later, as the Buoy Rescue was about to begin, "You have to give these guys a lot of credit" for going out in the rough surf.

After this year's Buoy Rescue, there was "much dissention among the judges," noted Myers, who explained the delay in the competition as "a big negotiation" about the results.

Myers soon announced that Surf City was disqualified for letting go of their lifesaving "can" during the swim back to shore; the squad's disappointment was palpable.

With Surf City out of the running for medals, first place went to Brad Reeser and James Polito of Barnegat Light, second to Long Beach Township's Gordon Peeler and Chris Stutz, and third to Chris Esibill and Ana Barry of Beach Haven.

Before Saturday's last event, the Women's

Paddleboard, township summer resident Bob Gerkens, father of Paddle competitor Lindsey Gerkens of Ship Bottom, explained that he found the paddleboard and surfboat events the most exciting, "especially when you have surf like this," while Lindsey's aunt, Norma Hunter, said she and her husband, Bockett, "like the ones Lindsey's in!"

Gerkens was confident his daughter would perform well in the Paddle, stating, "I'm not concerned about Lindsey in this event, because basically she's a fish."

Looking forward to Lindsey's Sunday night Mixed Doubles Row, Gerkens continued, "As a dad, you worry more about the boats, because they're so big and heavy."

The Women's Paddleboard event soon commenced, as Norma Hunter remarked, "This is going to be a tough one."

Lindsey Gerkens held the lead from the start of the race, but as the women began to paddle back to shore, Surf City's Jenn Welc caught a wave and passed Gerkens slightly. Both women hit the sand nearly simultaneously, leading to a foot race to the end mark. The judges determined that Gerkens came in first, followed by Welc in second, while Liz Royston of Long Beach Township earned third.

After the Women's Paddle medals were awarded, Saturday's share of the competition ended.

On Sunday, the tournament continued, beginning at 5:30 p.m. Ample surf remained, but the ocean had calmed significantly from the day before.

The Mile Doubles Row kicked off the night's events, with the Men's 1,500 foot Paddleboard race beginning after the rowers

rounded all the buoys.

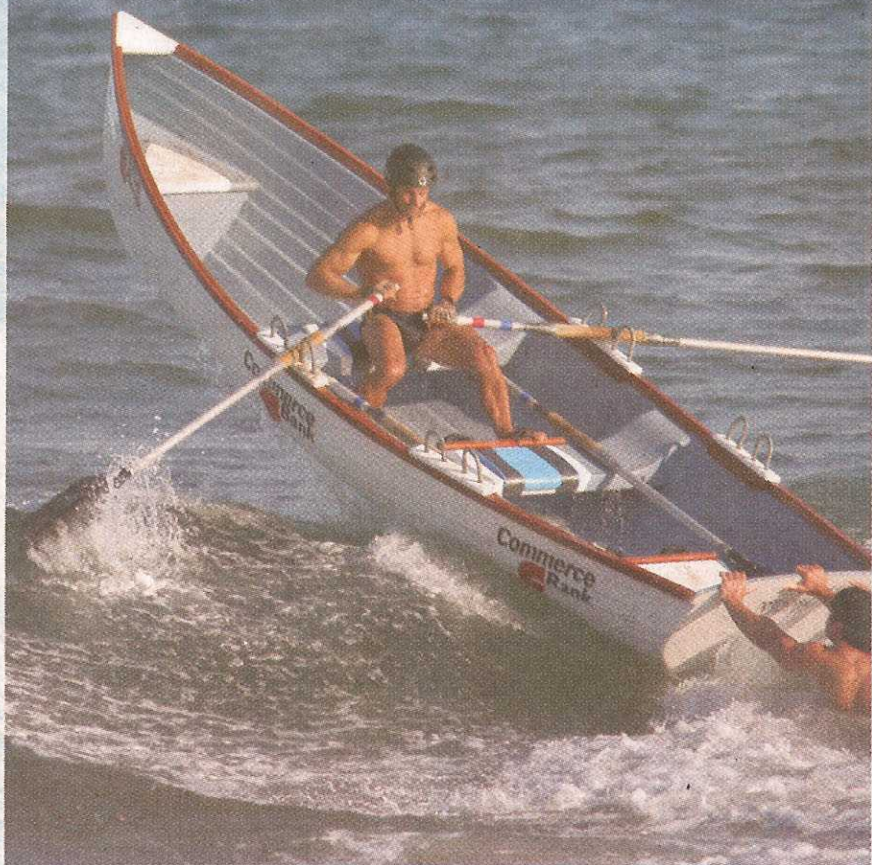
Finishing well before the Mile Row, the Men's Paddle ended with Surf City's Ross Reynolds in first, with a time of three minutes, one second; Travis Grant of Long Beach Township took second and Jonny Skolnick of Ship Bottom ended up in third.

What Myers deemed "not an easy row" continued as the men fought the south wind during a portion of the Mile Row event.

Barnegat Light held the lead for much of the Row, followed by Long Beach Township. Near the end of the race, however, Ship Bottom came on strong, took over the lead, and never looked back: at the race's end, Ship Bottom's Brian Bigos and Brennan Coughlin had captured first, with a time of 12 minutes, five seconds.

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Photographs by Jack Reynolds

ONWARD TOWARD TRIUMPH: Doug Adams, Brad Reeser and Nate Castiello (above) of Barnegat Light take first in the Line Pull for the fourth year in a row. Surf City patrol Capt. Mark Dileo (right) is launched into the Surfboat Rescue; he and teammate Jeff Hahn earned gold with a time of four minutes, 50 seconds. After the Surf City team was presented with the LBI BPA trophy, Dileo's teammates presented him with a victory dunking in the shorebreak (below).

LBi Beach Patrol Assn. Lifeguard Tournament

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Long Beach Township's Josh Bligh and Josh Wall hung on to second place, followed by Brady Stauffer and Nate Castiello of Barnegat Light in third.

After Mile Row teammates Josh Wall and Josh Bligh accepted their second-place medals, Wall identified Bligh as "a ringer," claiming he did all the work for their second-place win.

Bligh laughed at the notion, and then remarked that although "the mile is not that bad" in rough conditions, in regards to whether he was glad to row on Sunday as opposed to Saturday, he exclaimed, "Hell yeah!"

He explained that he has rowed in nasty surf during "outside competitions," and that "people usually get hurt."

"You need a lot of experience and a lot of upper body strength" to row in rough water, Bligh noted, so while he believed he and Wall would have been fine competing on Saturday, he felt it was a good decision to hold all the row events on Sunday in an attempt to prevent injuries.

With that said, the postponed Women's Doubles Row began, with the competitors facing a much tamer ocean than the night before. Beach Haven was "unable to field a team for this event" due to scheduling, Myers announced, so only five teams launched their boats over the shorebreak.

In the end, Jenn Welc and Alyssa DeAngelis earned gold for Surf City, with Shannon Dries and Brittany Royer winning silver for the township, and Emily Merchant and Bethany Schmidt claiming the bronze for Harvey Cedars.

Another postponed event, the Surfboat Rescue, began after the women received their medals for the row.

Will Sweeney, a 15-year-old year-round Harvey Cedars resident, and lifeguard-in-training for the town, declared, "I'm for HCBP!" Sweeney noted that, as a surfer, he most likes the paddleboard race.

Though partial to the paddle events, Sweeney loyally followed his team along the beach and intently watched each race. As the Surfboat Rescue began, he pointed out Harvey Cedars rower Mike Weiler, who he deemed "insane" and "nasty" at rowing, both high compliments from a teenage boy.

The end of the Surfboat Rescue proved chaotic, and though it appeared that Ship Bottom came in first, it was actually Surf City's swimmer who first crossed the finish, thus Surf City's

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Jeff Hahn and Mark Dileo were presented with the gold. Ship Bottom's Denis Vetstein and Todd Barbutto took second, followed in third place by Barnegat Light's Don Adams and Cory Pelow, last year's gold medal pair.

The last postponed event from the night before, the grueling Iron Man, showcased the skills of a single man from each team, except for Harvey Cedars, whose Iron Man competitor was not able to attend Sunday night's competition.

The participating patrolmen ran 1,000 feet, then swam 1,000 feet, paddled 1,000 feet, and ended the race with a 1,000-foot row. Ship Bottom's Billy Webster led for most of the race, and took first with a time of 11 minutes, 44 seconds. Nate Humberston of Barnegat Light, last year's Iron Man, took second, and Darren

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Conway then left to compete, and soon both the 1,000-foot Open Swim and the 1,000-foot Women's Swim commenced. In the Open Swim, Alan Bakes took first for Surf City, with a time of four minutes, 24 seconds. James Lovelless of Barnegat Light took second, and Long Beach Township's Madeleine Heilman, the lone woman in the event, took third.

Surf City also captured first in the Women's Swim, with Ashley Morris coming out on top with a time of four minutes, 56 seconds. Meghan Brown earned silver for Barnegat Light, and Tracey Hemmerle of Ship Bottom walked away with the bronze.

The Paddle Rescue followed the dual swim events, and as the event ended, Myers announced Barnegat Light's Seth Livsey and Mike

Podolak of Surf City captured third.

The competition then moved on to the 1,000-foot Doubles Row, featuring two male guards from each squad. The race remained close for the duration, but Barnegat Light's Matt Opremcak and Ben Snieckus took the gold, followed by Ted Johnson and Mike Coler of Beach Haven and Mark Dileo and Rip Wagner of Surf City.

As the men's row ended, Colleen Conway of Long Beach Township prepared to compete in the 1,000-foot Women's Swim, to run concurrently with the 1,000-foot Open Swim. Asked about the difference in conditions between Saturday and Sunday evening, Conway commented, "I would have liked to have it in the hurricane surf," preferring the "craziness" of the ocean the previous day to "flat, pool-like" conditions.

"It's more fun in the waves," said Conway, adding, "It mixes up the race."

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Pantzer in first, the township's Pat Doyle and Brian Ring in second, and J.P. Botti and Jared Temple of Beach Haven in third.

After accepting his medal, Temple joined the crowd of lifeguards to cheer on his team in the remaining events. He noted the more disciplined ocean conditions in comparison to the night before, when he and three of his teammates competed in the Paddle Relay, and everyone "got creamed on the way out" in the rough surf.

Myers then announced the current overall standings: Surf City stood in first with 62 points, followed by Barnegat Light with 60 and Ship Bottom with 56. Although his Beach Haven patrol had not racked up a significant number of points, Temple noted, "There's always a chance" that the squad could come from behind.

The patrols finished preparations for the 1,000-foot Line Race, and the horn sounded to start the event.

With a time of three minutes, 52 seconds, Barnegat Light captured first for the fourth year in a row, this time on the strength of Doug Adams, Nate Castiello and Brad Reeser. Andrew Stutz, Chris Rosser and Dave McDermott won second for the township, and Surf City's Rob Myers, Dave Bonnani and Chris Bigos took third.

In the next event, the Singles Row, Steve Welc of Surf City took first with a time of two minutes, 19 seconds, followed in second by the township's Tom Duralek, last year's gold medal winner. Don Adams of Barnegat Light earned third.

The Mixed Doubles Row - one male and one female in each surfboat - ended with Surf City's Rip Wagner and Collette Pretre in first, adding eight to their team's overall points. Billy Webster and Lindsey Gerkens came in second for their Ship Bottom squad, and the township's Ann Hodulik and Jared Angelozzi took third.

With darkness threatening to settle in for the

night, the last event of the tournament, the Surf Dash Relay, found Barnegat Light's James Polito, James Lovelless and Brady Stauffer on the podium to collect their gold medals. Surf City's Darren Podolak, Paul Dungee and Jeff Hahn captured second, and Luke Baran, Kevin Tallon and Sean Kelly of the township came in third.

The overall results were tallied, with the Surf City patrol triumphantly taking the title with 88 points. Last year's winner, Barnegat Light, earned second, with 82 points, followed by Long Beach Township with 74 points.

Ship Bottom's 70 points earned them fourth place overall, Beach Haven took fifth with 39 points, and Harvey Cedars followed with 27.

Despite their fourth-place finish, Ship Bottom supporter Pam Hartsell said she was proud of the team, which has "so much heart, and so much class."

"Ship Bottom has fun," Hartsell commented, noting, "year after year, they have progressed in points and placement."

Surf City, too, was certainly having fun. With the announcements from the judge's stand drowned out by excited shouts, the Surf City team crowded onto the podium and cheered into the ever-darkening night, cameras flashing and congratulatory filling the air.

Throughout the entire two-day tournament, Surf City's Lt. Pretre said, "We were really devoted and really focused."

"We really feel that it was a total team effort," Pretre remarked.

Capt. Dileo, proud of his tough patrol, said, "This was definitely the strongest squad I have had the honor of being a part of in my 24 years working in Surf City."

He added, "I have to admit, it was nice to break the stranglehold Barnegat Light and Long Beach Township have had on the tourney title since 1989." ♦

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