



Flying spinnakers in tight downwind racing

The 50th Mobjack Nationals

by
Tom Roberts
Photos by Patrick Williams

They came from as far as Jefferson City, Tennessee; Essex, Maryland and Washington, D. C.; but mostly, they came from the central region and tide-water areas of Virginia. They came towing their Mobjack sailboats on the major highways and finally wound their way down Ware Neck, a peninsula of rural land between the North and Ware rivers jutting into Chesapeake Bay. Following directions, they came out of the woods and passed through tall cornfields, still not able to see

the water they knew was nearby. Finally the sign for the Ware River Yacht Club peeked out from the corn rows, and they saw a grassy field down the straight driveway. Only when they got to the field and looked south, did they see the clubhouse nestled under the shade trees and, beyond, the Ware River and Mobjack Bay.

The Mobjack

A little over 50 years ago, Roger Moorman, a Gloucester, Virginia, gunsmith

and sailor, pioneered the use of fiberglass to make sailboats that were easier and less expensive to build, and more durable and safer to sail than the cold-formed wood boats of the time. “The wooden boats were more like furniture,” he said, “and if you didn’t keep them like that, the wood worms would ruin them in a single year.” Moorman improved on the design of the 17-foot Thistle by adding seats in place of the two-inch-wide rail, a floor that let water drain out of the boat and opened it from



Sails trimmed, Ron Lloyd at the tiller and Todd Hart out on the trapeze heading upwind

bow to transom. He flared the bow to keep the boat dry and made masts and booms out of aluminum. The International Mobjack Association describes Moorman's conception as follows:

- The Mobjack is fast, comfortable, self bailing, light, nearly maintenance-free.
- There are three sails, main, jib (180 sq. ft.) and a spinnaker (200 sq.ft.).
- It has a trapeze when racing (or fooling around).
- The rudder and centerboard kick up.
- The deck is above water with 400 lbs. on board.
- The boat is self-bailing.
- The sides are comfortable.
- It's open from bow to stern so there's plenty of room.
- The flared bow keeps the boat dry so it doesn't need a deck up front.

Moorman's small-town company and its successors have built 537 Mobjacks. Two early Mobjacks, #18 and #49, were represented in the 50th regatta, as were two of the latest. Most of the Mobjack boats ply the estuaries of the Chesapeake Bay, but there are Mobjack groups in Long Island's Great South Bay, Delaware Bay at Lewes and lakes in New York and Wisconsin. There are also a few farther west in Texas, Oklahoma and California.

The Regatta

The 50th Mobjack Nationals Championship Regatta brought Mobjackers together on Aug. 21-23. As skippers and crews trickled in, some paired up for the first time while others had been sailing together for years. Several were family teams, most were old friends, but newcomers were welcomed too. Three

boats had three generations participating in the 50th. In this running, the oldest skipper was 68 and the youngest was 22-year-old Meg Roberts, who was competing in her 10th Mobjack Nationals as a skipper and is also co-president of the organization.

Racing is what the Mobjackers came for. Winds were strong the first day but lighter the second and third. There were three different regattas. The first day was all about getting your sea legs back, becoming familiar with venue and sizing up the competition. Strong winds with puffs exposed mistakes and demanded the crews sail more conservatively. It resulted in flailing sails and more capsizes than usual. Fortunately, in the Mobjack, capsizing isn't a disaster: boats are quickly righted and back in the race.

On the second day, the racing got tighter with sailors picking out whom they

needed to beat to get ahead. By the third day everyone knew who their competitors were in order to move up in the standings or avoid the anchor award, so competition was tight across the board. Even those trailing far back were racing with purpose, matching skills with the crew in the boat right next to them.

During all three days, racers had to make subtle (and sometimes, not-so-subtle) shifts in tactics. Lighter winds had the speedy boats sailing well and brought even closer competition. Starts seemed chaotic, with several boats starting too early and a couple of general recalls. After clearing the start, the boats scattered left and right, tacking upwind, each boat betting that its chosen side would be favored by the wind. Even though the boats seemed miles apart at times, they would pass within inches of boats on opposite tacks. Cries of “Starboard!” were answered by “Hold your course.” Repeated crossings allowed the boats to measure their progress against each other and mark roundings were crowded. The few altercations due to right of way infringements (there were no collisions) were resolved on the water with the boat at fault doing penalty turns.

After each race the crews refreshed themselves on the shaded porch or in the cool of the clubhouse and rehashed the day. There were stories of close encounters, how one got ahead or slipped behind, how one avoided disaster and how another dealt with a setback. Seasoned skippers shared their observations so that newcomers could get pointers. Those suffering breakdowns scrambled to do the necessary repairs so they would be ready to sail again the next day. Tools, spare parts and advice were willingly shared.

Dinners were community affairs with everyone pitching in. The sailors were joined by friends and family to round out the party. There were stories of regattas past and remembrances of people known by all. The group was honored to have Roger Moorman present. At 87, he moves a little



Jerry Desvernine concentrates on steering upwind while Josh Guenther hikes out on the trapeze and looks for the next wind shift.

slower, but was very grateful for the appreciation given to him by those celebrating 50 years of racing the fine boats he designed.

The last race on Sunday featured a long spinnaker run back to the dock, a parade of the colorful sails. Awards were given out. In addition to the Champion and top five places, there were the Longest

Haul, Fleet, Top Junior, Top Novice Skipper, Top Husband–Wife Team, Top Family, Top Female Skipper, Senior National Champion, Sportsmanship and the Anchor awards. In addition to the permanent trophies, all winners were awarded original prints titled *50 Years of Mobjacks* signed by the artist, Meg Roberts, and



Author (L) and Meg Roberts (C) present Case Whittemore with the Senior National Champion Award and a print of *50 Years of Mobjacks*. (Photo by Alex Goss)

inscribed with their awards.

The champion was Mark Arnold of Chesapeake, sailing with Matt Frank. It was the fifth time they have been champions at this regatta. The defending champ, Len Guenther of Alexandria, sailing with daughter Heidi was second. His son, Josh,

was crewing on the fifth-place boat with Jerry Desvernine of Glen Allen. Case Whittemore of Williamsburg and Ken Read of Richmond were third and also claimed the Senior National Champion award. Jim Rice and good friend Pete Wallio of Newport News were fourth. Tom and Sam

Roberts of Alexandria won the Family Award, which meant Tom has won the award with every member of his family: his wife, older son, daughter and now younger son Sam. It was a fitting conclusion.

After expressing their gratitude to the race committee and Ware River Yacht Club for hosting the event, the Mobjackers squared away their gear and said “so long” until the next time they will hoist their sails somewhere on the Chesapeake Bay.

A lifelong sailor and racer, Tom Roberts has been crewing for his daughter Meg on their Mobjack for 10 years. He has served on the boards of the Chesapeake Bay Yacht Racing Association, the International Mobjack Association and Fishing Bay Yacht Club. A graduate of Georgia Tech, he works as an environmental engineer for Smurfit-Stone Container in West Point, Virginia.



The fleet approaching the windward mark