

New boat fulfills disabled man's sailing dream

Vessel equipped with ventilator allows quadriplegic to breathe at sea

ANNE TEMPELMAN-KLUIT

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VANCOUVER -- The Jericho Sailing Centre is welcoming a new member this damp spring day, with a small group of smiling people gathered to do the honours.

Most new members don't get the kind of welcome Dan Leblanc is getting -- but then, most new members don't get the kind of boat that awaits the 28-year-old.

The sleek white sailboat sitting on a trailer close to the English Bay beach is a Martin 16, a specially equipped type of sailboat designed in Vancouver for disabled sailors. A host of people have spent months further adapting this particular boat with a ventilator -- essential for Mr. Leblanc to be able to breathe comfortably while out on the water, because he is quadriplegic and is unable to breathe on his own.

Mr. Leblanc, a former carpenter, was injured in a dirt-bike accident in Yukon two years ago. He spent a year in rehabilitation at Vancouver's G. F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre, and there worked with Mary Clark, a recreation therapist.

"When Dan said he wanted to sail again -- he used to surf and sail before his accident -- we were determined to get him in a boat," says Ms. Clark. "It is so



Dan Leblanc tries out the Martin 16, a specially equipped boat designed in Vancouver for disabled sailors, as Dave Graham, who spearheaded its innovative design, offers advice.

important for people with disabilities to form an identity outside of being 'the person in the wheelchair.' "

Once Mr. Leblanc expressed an interest in sailing, she says, she literally called around the world to try to find a boat he could sail. When she couldn't find any with a ventilator, Ms. Clark turned to the Sam Sullivan Disability Foundation, founded in 1988 by Vancouver's mayor who is quadriplegic.

"At the time, there were few opportunities for quadriplegics," Mr. Sullivan recalled in an interview, adding: "It is important for quads to see that there are still experiences in life to make it worth living."

The Disability Foundation is an umbrella for several organizations, including the Disabled Sailing Association of B.C. and the Tetra Society of North America, a national non-profit society that has about 45 local volunteer technicians and engineers.

"We help people who need something to help them do something, like take the top off a jar or adapt a wheelchair -- or a boat," explains Tetra volunteer Dave Graham, a retired mechanical engineer.

Mr. Graham, 61, spearheaded the design and creation of the nautical ventilator, although he's quick to say it was a team effort. "My brother-in-law helped. Some of the work was done in the shop at G. F. Strong. Many people contributed. We built a box that breathes for Dan."

And this day, everyone is about to find out how this ocean-going box will work.

Mr. Leblanc is tucked into a blue-and-gold sling that is attached to an electric hoist. Willing hands guide his body into the middle of the boat, into a heavily padded seat with arm supports. The ventilator in the aluminum box behind him is adjusted and performs perfectly. There's a smattering of applause.

"This feels really good," says a smiling Mr. Leblanc, who shares an apartment with his girlfriend and has a fulltime attendant. Ms. Clark noted that the ventilator-equipped boat will also be available for use by others.

The Disabled Sailing Association, Vancouver's only club for disabled sailors, has about 350 members, ranging in age from 7 to 70. The group stores eight Martin 16s at Jericho, in Point Grey. Local charities and a radio station donated the vessels, designed by local boat designer Don Martin with input from disabled sailors.

In all, there are about 150 Martin 16s in the world, 50 of them in Canada. A fully equipped boat costs about \$25,000 to \$30,000. A shoebox-sized, "sip and puff" battery-operated computer controls the rudder and sails for those unable to manipulate a joystick to steer.

"The computer is controlled by something that looks like a straw," says Mr. Graham. "When the sailor holds it in his mouth and blows or sucks on it, it steers the boat. If they bite on it just a little bit, it adjusts the sails."

This ingenious control system, which costs \$5,000, was the brainchild of Mr. Sullivan. "High-level quads would come and just sit and watch all the other people sailing," says the 46-year-old mayor. "Our goal was to get these people out as well. It's important for quads to get outside of their wheelchair, and sitting in a boat is an equalizer to able-bodied people who also have to sit in a boat."

"You literally cannot sink or capsize this boat," enthuses Mr. Graham, who has volunteered once a week for five years to accompany disabled sailors on the water until they feel comfortable sailing alone. "It has an extra long keel with a 300-pound lead bulb on the bottom. It's doubled-hulled with floatation inside and it can be up to the gunnels with water and still not sink. And it's still a fast boat."

Even so, sailors wear a loose-fitting wetsuit, nicknamed a "Sam suit," as well as a life vest. A support boat, with an engine, is never far away.

On June 1, when the DSA opens its three-month season, sailors will be training for the Mobility Cup 2006 in September, Canada's foremost regatta for sailors with a disability. The regatta was started in Vancouver 15 years ago by Mr. Sullivan. More than 20 boats are expected to race, and several of the sailors have gone on to glory in the Paralympics. The Mobility Cup will be hosted by the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club, where the docks are more suited to a mass launch.

Jericho Sailing Centre, which has about 3,000 members, has no docks. Boats are launched off trailers from a ramp, one of the reasons why only naturally powered boats under 20 feet long are allowed. Sailboarders, paddlers and rowers store and launch their craft from here. "No oil slicks and no noise," says Christine Lambert, Jericho's administrator.

The non-profit Sailing Centre's administrative building, a 70-year-old hangar that was part of a seaplane base, is leased from the Vancouver Park Board. Almost complete is a \$500,000 renovation, which includes disabled washrooms on the main floor and a new freight elevator. "Our disabled sailors kept getting stuck in the old one," explains Ms. Lambert.

About 1,600 boats and other small craft are stored in the compound, which is also home to two resident cats, Hobie and Pacific.

On this morning, Hobie strolls over the Martin's glossy bow, and sniffs Mr. Leblanc's legs. The soon-to-be sailor smiles.

"I've been looking forward to this for almost a year," he says haltingly, between breaths. "This is going to be a good summer for me."

Mr. Graham beams. "And I can't wait to get him out on the water."



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