

Annapolis to Newport, Via Sydney

By BARBARA LLOYD
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NEWPORT, R.I. -- With a new sailing season in the Northeast comes the Annapolis to Newport Race, the first major offshore regatta of the year. With it comes a lingering ill wind from the Sydney-to-Hobart Race, an Australian regatta in which six yachtsmen died last December. But a fresh breeze of caution is filling sails in the aftermath.

After a major disaster, safety rules are being strictly enforced.

As many as 60 sailboats -- from 33 to 70 feet -- are expected to set out next Saturday from Annapolis, Md., for a 473-mile offshore passage to Newport in the 26th running of the race, one in which mostly cruising sailors participate.

While safety rules are not significantly different from recent years, they are being strictly enforced this year. "I'm a stickler for the letter of the law for those kinds of things," Gaither Scott of Annapolis, the race's chairman, said. "I don't let anybody through if there's a doubt."

Scott said that people who plan to race offshore these days can't help heeding what they read about the 115 sailboats caught in the storm off Sydney, Australia, last December. It was one of the worst boat-racing incidents in history. Six yachtsmen died, and 55 crew members were saved by helicopter or rescue craft. Five sailboats sank.

Just last week, a review committee organized by the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia, the Sydney race's sponsor, released a report about the catastrophe. It indicated that numerous precautionary steps in the future might prevent a similar calamity, but that skippers and crews were unable to pinpoint reasons for the disaster. They "certainly see no basis to apportion blame to any particular group," the report said.

The review committee pointed out that "exceptional" waves, some twice as large as the prevailing seas, pounded the race boats from different directions. At the time, reports of 90-mile-an-hour winds and higher gusts were common.

The report alluded, however, to lapses in safety equipment, and in search-and-rescue techniques. It suggested that new boats should have to make a 200-mile qualifying passage to prepare for the race.

The committee also recommended that at least 30 percent of each boat's crew should be required to attend prerace weather and safety seminars. And it suggested that a weather forecaster at the race control center be able to issue meteorological data in layman's language.

Scott said that he was not surprised by the committee's refusal to lay blame for the Australian debacle. "People want you to come up with a finite answer, and you can't," he said. "There's no pattern to something like that. It's hard to come up with answers."

The race from Annapolis to Newport has had its trying times too, Scott said. In 1967, one-third of the fleet failed to finish because of a storm. The wind blew at 40 knots out of the northeast for three days. The storm pattern caused steep seas, and forced the fleet into an unrelenting beat to windward. No one had to be rescued, but six sailboats lost their masts overboard.

"In those days, the boats were built heavier than they are today," Scott said. As for the boats in Sydney, he said, "That doesn't necessarily mean they weren't as strong, but they were lighter."

And in 1967, he added, "people didn't go out looking for the hottest crew -- guys who would be pushing their brains out. They would get their friends together instead."

>The Annapolis to Newport Race also comes with the luxury of nearby landfalls. Some of the boats that got into trouble off Sydney had tried to turn back and found themselves bucking huge seas. Others kept going into the Bass Strait, an unruly stretch of open water between Sydney and the island of Tasmania.

In the passage to Newport, any number of safe harbors dot the coastline. In the 1967 storm, many of the competitors sought shelter in Delaware Bay.

"Many of them were just too tired and sick to go on," Scott said.