

# Dillon Open Regatta: Competition first

37th annual races  
continue through today

By **BRYCE EVANS**  
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DILLON — Some refer to the Dillon Open Regatta as a three-day sailing party, but make no mistake, when the rudders hit the water and the spinnakers capture the breeze, the competition is fierce.

“Sailing is always a race, whether it’s a regatta or not,” said Silverthorne’s Doug Vaughan, 46, who’s captaining his boat Stella Blew in his first Open. “You’re always trying to catch somebody or they’re trying to catch you.”

And there was plenty of chasing when the 37th running of the Dillon Yacht Club’s annual regatta officially began with single-class races Saturday afternoon. A field of nearly 100 boats from as far away as South Carolina competed in nine different categories, and they will do the same today as the regatta continues.

And with the races come challenges unlike anywhere else in the world.

At 9,017 feet above sea level, the Dillon Open is thought to be among the highest, if not the highest, regattas in the world, and the same mountains that provide some majestic scenery also make sailing in Summit County a tough task.

“It’s unpredictable,” Jonathan DePriest of Denver said of the fickle weather on the reservoir. “You really have to adjust based on conditions.

We’ve experienced everything from totally calm, sunny conditions on to horizontal sleet. It can be challenging.”

“This lake can be very treacherous,” Dave Helmer said. “I’ve been around long enough to see just about everything.”

Helmer, a former commodore of the Dillon Yacht Club and longtime local, has competed in each and every Dillon Open. Having won more than his fair share of sailing competitions on the reservoir, Helmer said the mountain weather and conditions make for a fair race, as opposed to most regattas held on more predictable waters.

“The guys that are local people in coastal (races) always come out on top because they know all the variations,” he said. “Up here, you can’t do it, because you don’t know what conditions you’ll have any given day.”

That makes for some exciting racing, Helmer said.

When posed with the question, all competitors polled said the Dillon Open truly comes down to a test of skill, rather than local knowledge. As Helmer put it, the crew that works together the best and can adjust to the conditions on the fly will be the most successful.

“Everyone has to know their job, because if anything out of the ordinary happens — or even if it’s ordinary — everyone has to be able to adjust the sails and keep the boat going fast toward the mark,” he said.

The races generally consist

of a four-mark course, with different numbered buoys set up throughout the reservoir to

direct sailors along the way.

The hard part when doing such races in Summit County is that the race must begin against the wind. With no prevailing winds in the area, the course usually isn’t confirmed until five minutes before the race actually starts.

Competitors have maps that outline which markers are where, and once given the number of markers the course will follow, they adjust accordingly.

For DYC vice commodore Tim Pleune, who’s in charge of running the regatta, deciding the course is never an easy task.

“It goes from too little wind to race to too much to race just like that,” he said, snapping fingers.

That’s one of the many reasons the Dillon Open has grown into the largest regatta in the state and one of the largest in the western United States. The size of the event has helped to further the DYC’s cause of raising money for its junior sailing program. And major sponsors like Audi, Northwestern Mutual of Denver, West Marine and Gosling’s Rum have helped to lower the cost of putting on the regatta, thus allowing more proceeds to reach the junior program.

In its most basic form, though, the Dillon Open is still about competition, all about racing.

“That’s what makes (sailing) fun,” DePriest said. “It’s what

keeps the sport in it.”

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Sailboats in the J class compete in the Dillon Open Regatta on Dillon Reservoir Saturday afternoon. The Open is the Dillon Yacht Club's premiere regatta of the season.