



## Oh Buoy!

By Dale Miller

All you need for iceboating is clear, clean ice and some breeze.



# Hard Water Sailing

Iceboating enthusiasts get their wind-powered kicks in the depth of winter.

**Most wintertime lake** activities tend to be sedate; ice fishing, ice skating, curling up by the fire inside—all great activities, but not much to get the blood pumping. But, there is a group of thrill-seekers that thrive in the winter, who wait patiently for cold temperatures to set in and the lakes to freeze over. They call themselves hard water sailors, or iceboaters, and they get their kicks at highway speeds, six inches above the ice.

Iceboats escape easy description, so picture something like a sail-equipped bobsled shooting across a frozen lake. There are several different styles but all have a few basics: a mast and sail, a body large enough for the driver to lay down in, a steering skate on the front and a plank crossways on the back with a skate on either side. Some boats have high-tech construction, carbon fibre bodies and fully enclosed canopies, but most iceboats are a much more humble variety, lovingly handcrafted in hobbyists' garages, and made of plywood, home-fabricated hardware and hand-me-down parts. Don't be fooled though; these home-jobbies will still go 100 kilometres an hour.

The same physics apply to an iceboat moving on ice as a sailboat in water. An iceboat moves



Lying down with feet facing forward, sailors control the iceboat with the main sheet and tiller. Note the skate in the background.

when the force of the wind is caught by the sails and transferred down through the planks to the skates, which bite into the ice to stop sideways motion and propel the boat forward. The boat is steered by a tiller between the sailor's legs connected with rods or cables to the steering skate at the front.

To start, the sailor pushes the boat off with a few quick kicks and lays down in the cockpit with his feet forward, head propped up and chin to his chest. The sheet that controls the sail is the boat's accelerator, and a few pulls will bring the boat from a rumbling 20 km/h to a teeth-chattering 80 km/h in seconds. Bearing away

from the wind sends ice chips flying in a burst of acceleration, but once it's up to speed, there's little need to re-adjust the sail. Iceboats go so much faster than the wind that the apparent or felt wind is always from the front, no matter the real wind direction.

Having an iceboat is only half of the equation—you also need somewhere to sail it. Unfortunately for enthusiasts in our part of the world, very specific requirements need to be met before the skates can hit the ice. First, the ice needs to be relatively clear and clean, with little or no snow sitting on top. It's possible to sail with 1–2 inches of soft packed snow,

but anything harder and the skates can't push through. Second, the lake needs to be sufficiently windy and cold enough that any snowfall gets blown away before it has a chance to solidify on the ice. Lastly, the ice needs to be at least 6 inches thick and free of any large cracks that could catch a skate and damage the boat. Some boaters run the risk of sailing on ice in the early or late season, but there have been accidents in the past where boaters have fallen through.

Even if you have ideal conditions for just a few weekends out of the year, it's worth it.

Ice sailing clubs exist throughout the northern United States and Europe, and every year there are organized regattas and events. For us further north, Ghost Lake near Calgary, Alberta is home to the only ice sailing club in Western Canada. Sitting in a valley in the Rocky Mountain foothills, Ghost is renowned for its thick ice and strong Chinook winds that sweep away snowfall, scour the lake surface and blow over 20 knots on a regular basis. On any given winter weekend expect to see a dozen or so iceboats zigzagging across the lake, and club members are always willing to take interested sailors out for a spin.

There currently aren't any commercial manufacturers for iceboats, so prospective iceboaters will need to make one or buy used. An International DN model, one of the more popular iceboats, takes 50-60 hours to build with plans available on the Internet and costs under \$4,000. A used DN will cost half that, but you might have to hunt for it.

Once you've got the iceboat, you can sail on any lake as long as you have the right conditions. If you, a friend or family member wants to learn more, get involved or needs help finding an iceboat, contact Ghost Lake Iceboat Club commodore Stefan Dalberg at [sdalberg@gmail.com](mailto:sdalberg@gmail.com).

## LINKS

[www.ghostlakeiceboats.ca](http://www.ghostlakeiceboats.ca)

Western Canada's only iceboating club

[www.iceboat.org](http://www.iceboat.org)

A great iceboating resource

[www.wlyc.org](http://www.wlyc.org)

Step-by-step instructions on building your own DN iceboat

[www.sarnshardware.com](http://www.sarnshardware.com)

High quality iceboat hardware

[www.speedspecialists.com](http://www.speedspecialists.com)

Stefan Dalberg's iceboating, sailing and motorsports site

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