

Sailboat enthusiast to share do's, don'ts of navigating Pittsburgh's rivers



John Norton, a Downtown resident, unfurls the sail on his sailboat at the Newport Marina on the North Shore on Saturday June 22, 2013.

By **Rachel Weaver**

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For sailor John Norton, there's nothing like the moment a breeze presses against the sails propelling his vessel forward and the boat begins to glide.

"It's a completely different experience," says Norton, 60, of Downtown.

"In a power boat, you point the boat in one direction, and off you go. In a kayak, you're using brute force.

"A sailboat is like a living being. You have to convince it to go where you want it to go."

In an attempt to generate more enthusiasm for his hobby, Norton will talk about the do's and don'ts of navigating Pittsburgh's rivers at a Bruno Works Community Creative School event June 28.

Norton, director of the Center for Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh, started sailing 40 years ago with a friend in his native Sydney, Australia. He moved to Pittsburgh in 1983, but it was his move Downtown in 2005 that made him realize what an amazing amenity the rivers are.

"I'd go running up and down the river trails and think, 'There's no reason you couldn't sail,' " he says.

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Norton decided to give it a try and soon discovered he had much to learn.

“I didn't know what I was doing,” he says, looking out over the Ohio and pointing to the ripples in the water. “I didn't know about reading the currents or how that motion we're seeing translates into an impediment to sailing.”

Now he can tell whether the day's right for sailing simply by reading the wind, pointing to its source and determining the effect it will have on the water.

He keeps his 12-foot Hobie Bravo sailboat at the Newport Marina, just a short ride down river from the Rivers Casino on the Ohio. His is the only sailboat there. It can accommodate one rider comfortably. “Two, if you're really good friends,” Norton says with a laugh.

Most days on the river, it's just Norton in his tiny sailboat, with bigger power boats and barges his only company. He gets out about 10 times a year, taking trips to the Point, then over to the Convention Center or the Smithfield Street Bridge.

But it's not always peace and quiet. Sailboats can capsize fairly easily — Norton has done that a few times — and barges can create a few challenges. Norton recommends always bringing a paddle along, just in case the wind dies. But with proper knowledge and awareness, those problems can typically be easily avoided, he says. “I always say, ‘It's as safe as any other thing you can do.’ ”

Norton keeps a blog about his experiences on the rivers, www.pitt.edu/~jdnorton/sail. In one entry, “Why We Sail,” he captures the instant the wind begins to propel his boat:

“It is a magical feeling. The breeze has filled our little boat with life. We are carried by a force we cannot see but feel in the slight list of the hull, the tension in the sheets that hold the sails and the gentle pull on the rudder as it tries to re-center.

“Now the real sailing begins.”

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