

South Jersey's lifeguard racing circuit: A summer shore tradition with a rich history

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Margate's Ashton Funk (front) and Chuck Gowdy win the doubles row, Friday, Aug. 5, at the Margate Memorial Lifeguard Race

WILDWOOD CREST — Wildwood Crest Beach Patrol chief Bud Johnson arrived at the Rambler Road headquarters at 6:30 a.m. one day this week.

He was not the first one there.

Longtime doubles rowing partners Max Bilkins and Bick Murphy were already in their white Van Dyne boat with the orange and blue lettering, their oars carving a path through the ocean while sweat rolled down their backs.

“They wanted to row from here to Cape May Point today before they go to work at 9 a.m.,” Johnson said. “Actually, it’s Bick’s day off today, but they still wanted to make sure they got their training in.”

The 52-year-old Murphy, an aquatics professor at Emory University in Atlanta, won the Cape May Superathlon — a sprint triathlon featuring running, row and swimming — a record eight times. He also teamed with the 59-year-old Bilkins, a retired high school athletic director from Philadelphia, for six victories in the Bud Tarbotton Memorial North Wildwood Beach Patrol Around the Island Row.

“We’ve had a good run, but age is catching up with us a little bit,” Bilkins said with a laugh. “It’s tough to keep up with the younger crews in those short races, so we focus more on the longer ones. I’m just happy to still be competing. I’ve got three daughters and five grandchildren.”

Bilkins and Murphy are among the legendary competitors on the South Jersey lifeguard racing circuit, a series of competitions that has become every bit as synonymous with summers at the shore as hearing “Wa-wa-wa-watch the tram car please” on the Wildwood Boardwalk.

In 2003, when Sports Illustrated chose to profile one sport per state in its 50th anniversary issue, lifeguard racing was the pick for New Jersey. Two years later, ESPN covered the South Jersey Championships in Ocean City as part of its “50 States in 50 Days” tour.

This year, there are 18 team-oriented events, plus other endurance rows and swims. The highlights are the “Big Three” — the Dutch Hoffman Memorials (July 29), Margate World War II Memorials (Aug. 5) and the South Jersey Championships (Aug. 12). All three have been held for more than 40 years, with the Margate Memorials going back 66 years.

Also, this summer the United States Lifesaving Association (USLA) National Championships will be held in Cape May from Aug. 4-6.

“It’s amazing how much its grown over the years,” Ventnor Beach Patrol Capt. Bill Howarth, Jr. said. “It seems like now there are two or three races every week instead of two or three every summer.”

No matter how many events are added to the schedule, the races are always about trying to keep lifeguards in shape so they can make rescues.

“The races are great, but you have to have that subliminal thinking of keeping people ready to do their jobs,” said Lou Paludi, who served as chief of the Ventnor Beach Patrol from 1967-87. “I always told them that lifeguarding is one of the only jobs where 70 isn’t a passing grade. Either you rescue people or it could be fatal. It’s an awesome responsibility.”

Like football in the summer

Thousands of spectators flock to the beaches for various races, even specialized events that feature only a select number of patrols.

“When I first became a lifeguard, even the city competitions drew huge crowds,” said Mike Toy, who was a member of the Atlantic City Beach Patrol for 29 years (1974-2002). “A major chunk of the lifeguards back then were local residents and their friends and family would all show up to watch them compete. It was like watching a high school football game in the summertime.”

Like high school football, rumors of recruiting have occasionally cropped up in the lifeguard racing circuit.

When beach runs were in vogue, every patrol seemed to have a college distance runner on their team. There have been more than a few collegiate swimmers among the South Jersey champions in that event, including Avalon’s Tim McKee (1973), Atlantic City’s James Kegley (1986), Avalon’s Chris Craft (1989) and Atlantic City’s Charlie Fry (1991).

McKee won the silver medal in the 400-meter individual medley in the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich. Kegley was a 10-time competitor — and three-time runnerup — in the now-defunct Around the Island Swim.

“James Kegley was the best swimmer I’ve ever seen,” Ventnor lieutenant Billy Howarth, Jr. said. “He always wore an orange cap and you’d see him at the back at the start because he would always just wade through the breakers. Then he’d start swimming and you’d see this orange cap just moving past everybody.”

Some events have been known to tailor their races to fit the talent. There was about a 10-year stretch when the Margate Memorials had a no-rookie rule to prevent teams from bringing in ringers. Margate did away with the rule the year Tom Swift — who won six South Jersey swimming titles between 1990 and 1996 — joined its patrol as a 14-year-old rookie.

Toy, who won the South Jersey swimming championship for Atlantic City in 1979-80, used a hometown advantage to earn the first of those titles. He remembered that the surf was really round with close to 20-mph winds. Because Atlantic City was the defending champion and the host of the event, they were allowed to set the swim distances.

“I had been swimming in open water since I was 7 years old and was used to swimming in rough conditions, so we made it a longer race,” Toy recounted with a chuckle. “I’ll never forget turning the flag (at the halfway point). There were whitecaps blasting around us, but I knew the course. There were a couple of guys around me at first, but they wound up swimming halfway to Ocean City.

“That’s part of the charm of lifeguard races. You can get an edge, whether it’s making up rules or competing in a race. I know it doesn’t sound fair, but as a local person, I kind of liked having that edge.”

A family tradition

Locals have traditionally dominated the races. Most patrols either feature names synonymous with lifeguard racing or competitors who have been rowing or swimming for decades.

Six-time South Jersey rowing champion Ashton Funk, of the Margate Beach Patrol, and brothers Andrew and David, who row for Ventnor and have six and seven South Jersey rowing titles, respectively, were taught the sport by their father, Dennis Funk, who teamed with George Miller to win three straight South Jersey doubles titles in 1973-75.

Current Ventnor standouts Paige and Mackenzie Howarth are the latest in a long line of family standouts. Bill Howarth Sr. won the South Jersey doubles title in 1945 and the Margate Memorials singles race in 1958. Bill Howarth Jr. won a Margate doubles crown in 1980, three hours before his daughter Nancy was born.

Others grew up on the beaches. Sen. James Whelan, who won back-to-back South Jersey swimming titles in 1970-71, is an Atlantic City native. Current Ventnor rower Mike Tripician grew up across the street from beach patrol headquarters.

Those who did not grow up on beaches had to learn how to navigate through the currents and waves before they could enjoy success.

“The ocean creates a whole different set of playing conditions,” Avalon rower Craig Whitehead said. “I started with Avalon as an 18-year-old in 1989 and it took me three years of constant rowing to learn how to move and balance the boat, how to become good at starts and turns.”

The lessons ultimately paid off. Whitehead teamed with Mike Cras to win three straight South Jersey doubles races in 1991-93 and came oh-so-close to becoming the first tandem to win four in a row.

In 1994, Whitehead and Cras turned the flag in first place and were in the kind of rhythm that usually produces championships. Less than 50 yards before the finish, however, Ocean City’s Bob Garbutt, Jr. and Ron Kirk caught a wave and rode it to victory.

“That was the one year when we were actually the favorites coming into the race,” Whitehead said. “You just never know what’s going to happen.”

A sense of pride

Winning a lifeguard race gives a patrol a sense of pride, as well as bragging rights over their competitors. Although everyone would love to win the South Jerseys, certain patrols try to peak for other races.

North Wildwood hosted the 43rd Beschen-Callahan races this summer. They were named after Jim Beschen and Mike Callahan, former North Wildwood lifeguards who were killed in the Vietnam War. Avalon places a lot of pride in the Kerr Memorials. The 27-year-old race is named in honor of former Avalon rower Dave Kerr, who teamed with Dan O’Malley to win the South Jersey doubles title in 1980. A year later, Kerr died of cancer at age 28.

“The Kerr’s definitely are the big race for us because of David,” Avalon chief Murray Wolf said. “Not only was he a great rower, he was a great guy. There wasn’t anybody on the beach patrol who didn’t like him. We certainly don’t like to lose that race in our hometown.”

The best lifeguards never lose that sense of pride and togetherness.

Bilkins joined the Wildwood Crest Beach Patrol in 1970. Ten years later, he won his first and only South Jersey title in the singles row.

“The first time I entered the South Jerseys was in 1972,” he said. “I entered the doubles with Tom Freeman. We were so inexperienced, we didn’t even have our own boat. We had to borrow one from Ocean City. Needless to say, we finished dead last.”

Forty-one years later, he will be back at the South Jerseys with Murphy. The odds of them winning are slim. Craig Whitehead and partner Shane McGrath have yet to be beaten in a beach race this season and there are at least five other patrols with talented duos.

Yet, there is always a chance, which is why Bud Johnson is never the first one at Wildwood Crest Beach Patrol headquarters at 6:30 a.m.

“Once you get that sand in your shoes and between your toes, it’s hard to get rid of it,” Bilkins said. “You’re working with and competing against people from 16 to 60. It’s almost like you don’t notice any age barrier. It’s just a great lifestyle.”

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