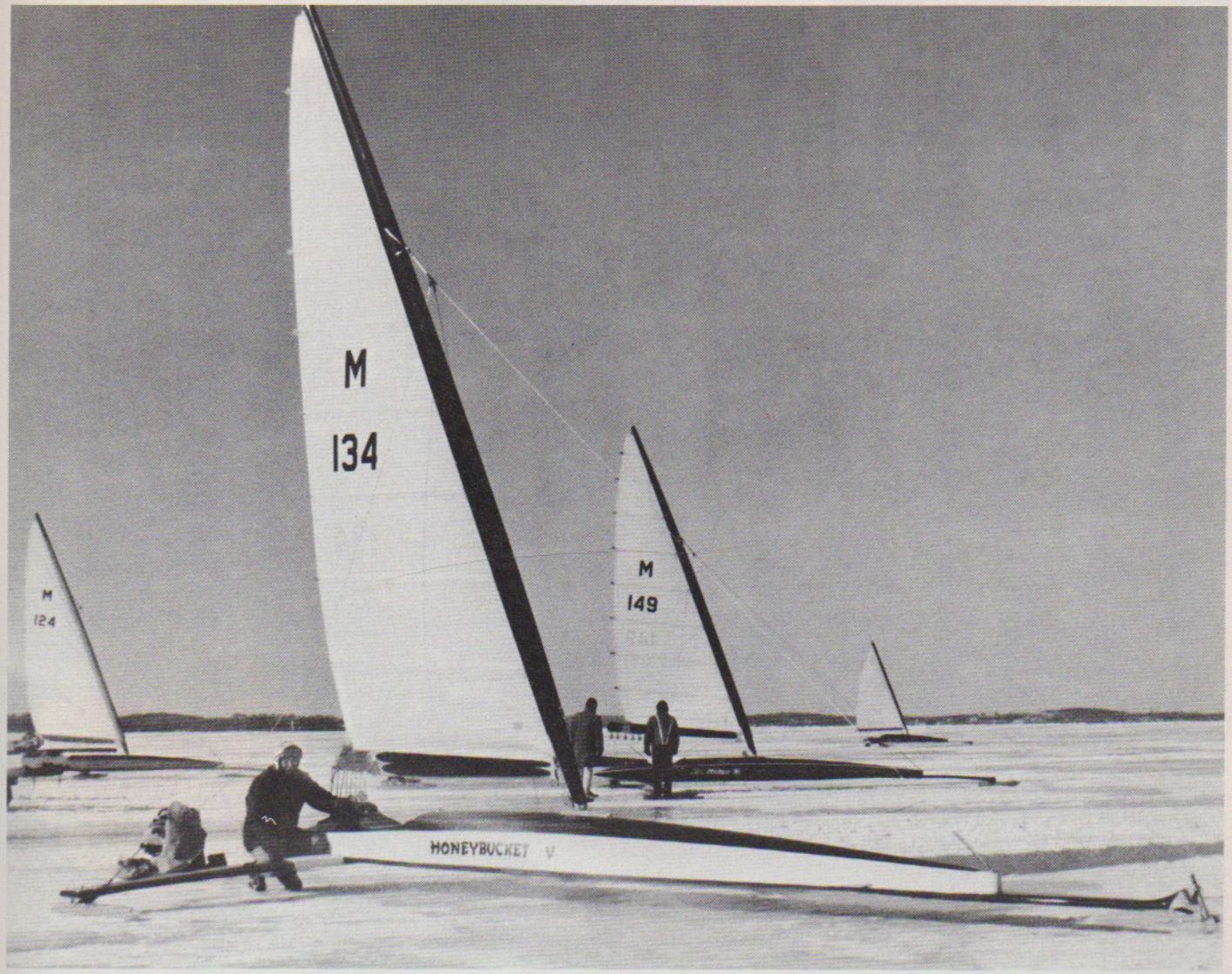
By Barbara Sanford



Bill Mattison and his "Honeybucket V," the best Skeeter design in the world.

Shooting the breeze with Bill Mattison

"How far would I go to sail a regatta? Siberia, if they have good ice."

The red and white E Skeeters approach the leeward mark on the second lap of a Saturday afternoon race of the Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club in Madison. Runners grind and ice chips fly as the boats round the mark and head upwind. Bill Mattison is in the lead right now. Competition is keen, but Bill manages to keep the rest of the fleet at bay and stays right there — number one over the finish line.

Leading the fleet is an old story to Bill. He's been part of the Madison iceboating scene for the past 40 years — designing, building, and racing iceboats.

Bill has repeatedly won the season championship at the Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club. But his achievements go beyond the local level to national and international competitions. He has been the world champion of the International Skeeter Association (ISA) eight times. With no false modesty, Bill says, "I've won everything you can

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The sporting life



Bill Mattison in his home workshop.

win." He was the first winner of the Triple Crown Trophy, a combination of the ISA and Northwest Championships and the Garwood Regatta, and has won the trophy eight times since 1964. In 1977 Bill won the Northwest Free-for-All, a 20-mile race of winners in every class. He also has won the Northwest Regatta Championship, which is a Midwest all-class tournament.

Bill's reputation as a champion iceboater extends beyond the boundaries of the United States. In 1961 his picture appeared on the cover of *America Illustrated,* a magazine published by the United States Information Agency and sent exclusively to Russia under a mutual cultural exchange program. The picture, taken by *Wisconsin State Journal* photographer Edwin Stein, showed Bill skimming across Lake Mendota in his iceboat, "Honeybucket IV." The story was entitled "Hot Ice in a Cold Country" and told of the iceboating craze in Wisconsin, emphasizing Madison in particular.

But racing winners is only part of the Mattison story. Throughout the iceboating world, Bill is known for designing some of the fastest boats. Brochures and books on the sport often use diagrams showing the Mattison creations. He has been a leader in styling and shaping the modern sleek Skeeter, the most popular boat on the lakes.

Bill got his first taste of iceboating as a kid in Madison. Back in those days it was just a matter of asking someone who sailed a big boat for a ride. On windy days they would often take young passengers to ride on the ends of the runner planks. The advent of winter often found Bill and some of his buddies working with hammers and nails, turning an old sled into a primitive iceboat. Old bedsheets rescued from the rag bag or spirited away from the linen closet served as sails. Bill says, "At first all I did was push. But each boat was better and faster and needed to be pushed less and less."

Bill likes to experiment with different construction and design techniques. When conditions aren't right on the frozen lakes, they're usually perfect for building in his basement workshop, which he likes as much as sailing. "Building an iceboat doesn't require special skills," Bill claims, adding that

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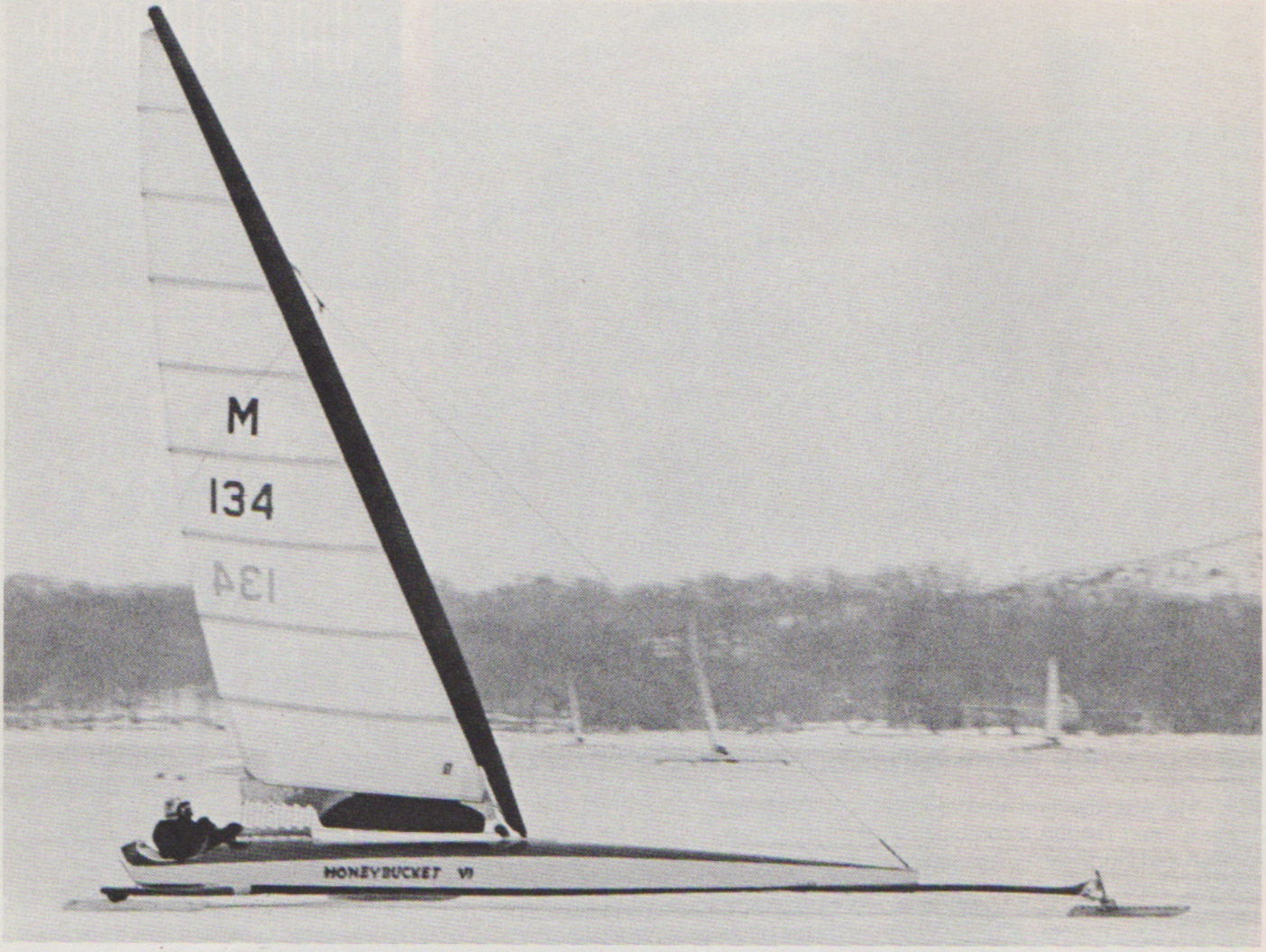
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Bill Mattison in his Skeeter, "Honeybucket VI," at the 1979 ISA regatta.

"two left thumbs can even help." As he sees it, "Each boat you build teaches you something about building the next one. It's a constant learning experience." Building an iceboat, especially Skeeters or stern steerers, the original iceboats, tends to be a team effort. Bill has worked on many of the older stern steerers, including the famous "Mary B" and "The Deuce," and is currently helping a friend with a B boat, a smaller stern steerer. He has built all of his own boats. "When you build your own boat, you can really feel at home in it, knowing exactly what went into it," he believes.

Bill built his first Renegade class iceboat in 1948. He sailed these one-design iceboats until the mid-1950s, when Skeeters began to come into their own. Up until then Renegades and Skeeters sailed against each other in club races. Bill built his first Skeeter around 1958 and has sailed them ever since.

The Skeeter is the largest, fastest, and most expensive class of modern iceboat. The E Skeeter is a development, or open-design, class, with no specifications required except that a boat must carry no more than 75 square feet of sail. The hull and runner plank may be any design or size. E Skeeters can do 100 miles per hour or better, with record claims in the 160-mile-per-hour vicinity. With good ice and a 15-mile-per-hour wind, a Skeeter racer can, from a standing start, get his craft up to 30 miles per hour within 50 yards. Once under way on a good day, a Skeeter will average about 40 miles per hour on a windward beat and 65 miles per hour downwind. They travel anywhere from 3 to 6 times the speed of the prevailing wind. The name "Skeeter" comes from "mosquito" — little with a big sting.

Skeeters are custom built and always feature the latest in the iceboat technology and design. The hull is approximately 24 feet long, with a six-foot springboard. Masts average 23 feet, and runner planks are approximately 19 feet long. They look fast. The needle-like hull has a one-man cockpit in the rear. The tall mast is raked back to create a highly efficient airfoil. The steering is controlled with a wheel and foot pedals connected to the forward runner. Five pairs of mainsheet blocks on the boom and deck develop the mechanical advantage needed to control the sail. The hull is built out of wood using an epoxy-based glue.

Recently Bill built a Skeeter plug for Vanguard and Harken Yacht Fittings, which is now manufacturing fiberglass Skeeters from his mold. Bill got involved in the project to perpetuate

the Skeeter class and to overcome the technical difficulties involved in building the iceboat hull in fiberglass. Four boats have been built to date, and he hopes to see the new fiberglass boats out on the ice this year.

He doesn't see any big changes in the E Skeeter design in the near future. "But, you know, people will keep trying new things," he says, "that's what the Skeeter class is all about." The Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club has made every Skeeter change in the past 25 years.

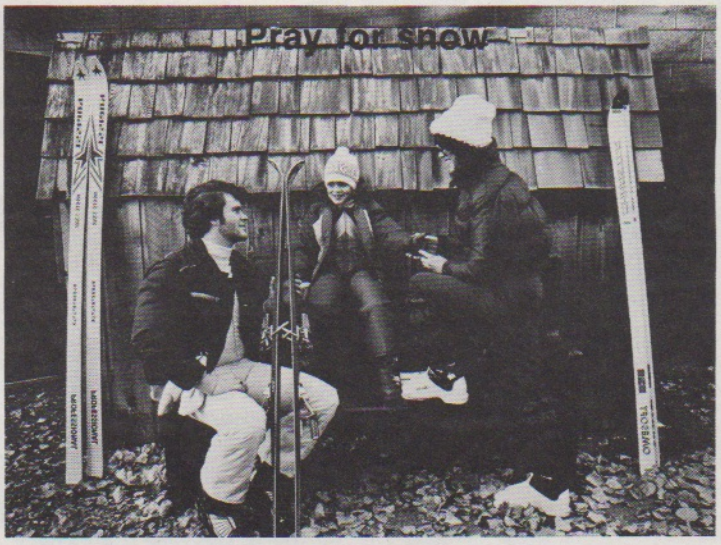
Bill currently sails the E Skeeter "Honeybucket VI," a striking, vividly painted red and white boat. There is a tradition of red and white iceboats in Madison. Bill was the first to have one, and the reason was simple — red and white are the University of Wisconsin colors. There are now several red and white E Skeeters in the Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club.

Bill has always had the name "Honeybucket" on his boats. He picked up the name in Korea, while he was in the army. There it was a nice word for the farmers' manure spreaders. Bill liked the name, and all his boats have carried it in an oriental script ever since. "You never come out of it smelling like a rose," Bill says.

He is a long standing member of the Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club. Madison's national iceboating fame dates back 100 years, for Wisconsin's capital city is right in the middle of one of the few parts of the country where the right sailing conditions occur with any frequency. Four Lakes, founded in 1904, is the oldest ice yacht club in the country, "the home of the champions," and its members have a national reputation for notable performances in regattas. Their innovations in Skeeter boats, such as moving the cockpit to the rear and using better materials, have set the pace for iceboat enthusiasts across the nation.

"The comradery of iceboaters is fantastic," says Bill. "Without the help in building and tuning boats that each of us receives from the other members of the club, no one would be able to accomplish much. Everyone helps everyone. Without help and friendly pressure which results, we'd not do very well," he adds. In the recent Northwest Ice Yacht Association regatta, the "Red and Whites," or Madison Skeeters, captured six of the

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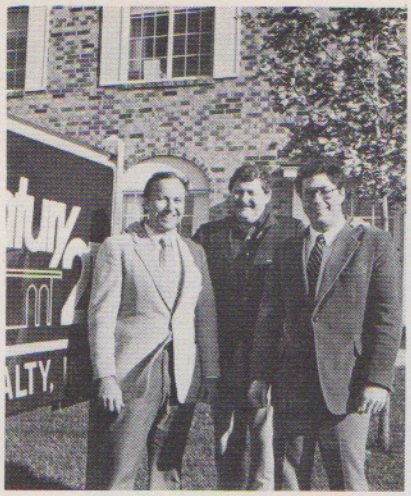
You can see it in other neighborhood commercial districts where local neighborhood or merchants' associations, in partnership with MDC, market loan programs and prepare long-range strategies for up-grading the district.

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The sporting life

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"How far would I go to sail a regatta?," Bill asks. "Siberia, if they have good ice." He doesn't know of any other sport so dominated by nature. A good race is dependent on perfect conditions, and these include a fresh breeze, clear ice (black ice is the best), and the right temperatures. Official races cannot be held when the temperature falls below 10 degrees Fahrenheit because the wind-chill factor makes it too cold to breathe. Having all of these conditions occur simultaneously is asking a lot, especially on a weekend when all the sailors are available to race. When the ice does come, though, iceboats seem to pop out of the snowbanks around the Madison lakes, and people sail from crack of day until sunset trying to get in as many rides as possible.

Luck is possibly the biggest factor involved in iceboating. "I don't get too wrapped up in it," says Bill. "I just take it lightly and sail hard." Bill believes that there is only one speed for an iceboat — flat out. Asked how he feels when he's sailing at 100 miles per hour, he replies, "It's part of me. I'm not awed by it. I expect the speed." Asked if he competes, he responds, "I try to win. I don't get worked up. I give it my best shot. It's flat out every time."

Unlike summer sailing, iceboating is not always easy to practice. One cannot go north in the summer to find sailing ice to practice on for the following winter, so nobody gets a head start. "There is no substitute for time at the helm. Success is proportionate to the time and effort you put in," Bill believes. In addition, iceboats must be set up and tuned before the start of each race. Once underway, the skipper is confined to the cockpit and is unable to make any adjustments on the rigging.

Iceboating is the most dangerous of all winter sports. Boats occasionally collide, runners often drop through cracks in the ice, and equipment failures occur under the extremes of temperature and vibration. Iceboaters are a coolheaded lot in more ways than one. At high speeds and in the close quarters of a race, they have to think quickly and make split-second decisions to avoid accidents.

Bill has not gone untouched by these dangerous circumstances. There was a year in the hospital, a broken nose and a kidney injury, among numerous other injuries. In short, says Bill, "I'm full of sponges." But for him, risks and inconveniences are negligible compared to the thrill of a run over perfect ice. "It's the individual challenge. You're all alone. You're just a few inches off the ice. It's quite a sensation, quite a ride," he says. "In fact, there's nothing else like it."

With all the trophies Bill has won over the years and all of the innovations he has made in the Skeeter class, one wonders if he still has any worlds left to conquer in iceboating. "Iceboating is so fickle and uncertain," says Bill. "Everybody gets his day in court. As soon as you think you've mastered something, somebody sticks it to you." Actually, Bill claims he's never had any goals to begin with. "I started iceboating because it was fun, and that's still the major reason I sail." As he sees it, "Once you've been out on hard ice with a good blow and the wind hits you broadside, lifting you off the lake four or five feet, as you make the turn down the home stretch, you'll be an ice sailor from then on." ■

