

Paths of Recruitment to a Minority Sport Model Yachting in Britain, 1820 to the Present

Russell Potts

The Journal of the British Society for Sports History, London

Model Yachting is a tiny minority sport with fewer than a thousand participants in Britain and perhaps five thousand world wide. It has no exposure in the educational system and practically none in the mass media. To address the question, "Where do its recruits come from?," this paper examines a number of well documented cases exemplifying different methods of seeking to interest the uncommitted, which may be applicable to other sports that depend on their own effects to fill their ranks. It also offers some vignettes from the history of the sport in Britain.

There are a number of paths to juvenile recruitment. They include: 1) Family tradition. Many families can show two generations of activity and there are a number of three generation examples. It is facilitated by the ability of the young to compete on equal terms as soon as they can walk and understand the basic principles; 2) Contact with a non family adult. The prize example is G.T. Sanderson, befriended by a modeller as a boy in the 1820s. He went on to work as a maker of doll's houses and model boats and in the late 1890s, still an interested member of his club, recorded his reminiscences of sailing in Regency London; 3) The press gang. Young people coerced into activity by an adult in a position of authority. The oldest surviving members of the Birkenhead club, now well into their seventies, were recruited as 11 year old runners when the club was founded in 1929; 4) The provision of rational recreation for social inferiors. George Colman Green and the Imperial Junior League in the 1930s London. An attempt to improve working class boys by exposure to model yachting and imperialist propaganda. Unsuccessful, no permanent recruits to model yachting effect on political attitudes not recorded; and, finally, 5) Genteel provision for the sons of gentlemen. The Junior London Model Yacht Club in the years before 1914 had an explicit exclusiveness, even to the exclusion of girls by democratic vote of the existing male members. Adult recruitment included, 6) Full size yachtsmen seeking a cheap means of trying out design ideas, as with the group of yachtsmen who invaded the original London MYC in the 1850s; or a winter pursuit while their full size boats were laid up, as in the second London MYC in the late 19th century. This was also a hotbed of design experiments; 7) Spontaneous combustion. In 1881 a lonely modeller wrote to the local paper in Hull proposing a club, which formed 'to the general derision of the townsfolk' with six members. By 1883 there were 170 members and 400 boats. Clearly there had been preexisting latent membership in this seaport town; 8) The modelling press. The first specialist modelling magazine was published in Hull on the base of the 170 members of the local club. It lasted ten years and was the catalyst for a great leap forward in the number of clubs and the sophistication of organization. Since that date there has always been at least one magazine giving some coverage to the sport. Many recruits come from the conversion of passive fringe readers into active participants.