

## Love for sail



POULAMI BASU

Weekends need never be boring for youngsters who know the joys of sailing, reports **Meher Marfatia**.

Eight-year-old Omar Vakharia knows the value of wind power. He's been out on the water since he was three, accompanying his parents on jaunts in the Colaba Sailing Club's Sea Bird and Lightning boats across Mumbai harbour. Last month he dragged his family back from a Diwali vacation in Gujarat to return to Mumbai in time for his first formal sailing lesson. "I love feeling the wind in my hair and the controls in my hand," he said. "I'm going to do this every single Sunday now."

Vakharia is among the 150 kids who've joined the Optimist Sailing Programme at the Indian Navy Watermanship Training Centre in Colaba since it was launched in 1999 by the city's three premier sailing clubs – the Royal Bombay Yacht Club, Bombay Sailing Association and Colaba Sailing Club – to encourage children to take to the water. Optimists are easy-to-handle, single-person boats perfect for novices. Since

they were designed in 1947 by American boat-builder Clark Mills, Optimists have become the prime racing vessel for youth sailing competitions around the world.

Financial adviser Meher Ashar, who is in charge of instruction at the Optimist programme, said that sailing is "a phenomenal sport" that combines physical activity with the mental stimulation of a thinking game like chess. He plans to introduce his toddler to the splurge of sea surf "ASAP". She's all of two years – "old enough to

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learn bystander skills when I sail with her," Ashar said.

Among other advantages of this sport: learning to think on your feet. "There can be only that much advance planning," Ashar said. "Kids soon figure strategy, flexibility and adaptability in the

course of sailing." They must deal with changing climate, be aware of safety procedures, judge an opponent's strengths or weaknesses and make quick decisions. "It any day beats weekends spent hanging out in malls," Ashar said.

The Optimist Sailing Programme trains kids for contests in Mumbai, Chennai, Goa and Pune (on the Khadakvasla Lake and Mula River) as well as for international events. The programme is open to children between 8 and 15 years who pass a swimming test establishing that they're able to swim 50 metres and stay afloat for five minutes. Each Sunday morning, 100 Optimist-class boats set sail in Mumbai harbour under the watchful eye of qualified trainers.

Since May, the person in charge of introducing the sport to school-children across the country has been Cyrus Heerjee, chairman of the Sailing Development Committee of the New Delhi-based Yachting Association of India. Now that the Optimist project has proved a success in Mumbai, Heerjee's attention will shift to the shores of Chennai and Goa and lakes in Secunderabad, Bhopal and Chandigarh.

Optimist sailing took off in India in 1980, when a group of sailors at Pune's College of Military Engineering formed the National Optimist Association of India to groom youngsters in Opti sailing. The association organises annual Coastal and Inland National Optimist Championships to select children to represent India at the European, Asian, African and World Sailing Championships. The sport got a boost two years ago when the International Optimist Dinghy Association accepted India's bid to conduct the Asian Sailing Championship in Mumbai in December 2003-January 2004. "Though 90 per cent of the country's sailing activity takes place in Mumbai, this is not a very visible sport," said Heerjee. "It receives low media coverage and sponsorship support."

Among the most enthusiastic of the city's young sailors are members of the Sea Cadet Corps, an association that helps introduce young people to the potential of a career at sea. They operate from the gigantic model ship *Jawahar* stationed beside the INWTC. The young candidates are "preparing not necessarily for a life at sea but for life itself", said Commodore Rabi Ahuja, who heads the organisation.

The year-old Aquasail Youth Sailing Foundation in Fort also wants to spread sailing awareness among kids. Lawyer Shakeel Kudrolli, the foundation's managing trustee, was the first Indian to win a gold for sailing in international waters at the 1998 Asian Championships in China. The charitable trust provides low-cost publications on sailing. Kudrolli has taught children for over 20 years with the Sea Cadet Corps and trained the victorious Indian junior cadet-class squad for the 1998 world championship in Mumbai. In October, 30 kids participated in an introductory workshop on sailing the AYSF conducted at the Mafatlal Boat Club in Marine Drive. More such camps for children are planned. See *Ongoing for details of sailing opportunities for children.*