Boating with a purpose

The Leukemia Cup Regatta is about so much more than racing. Today, it boasts 43 fun events around the country and benefits an estimated 1.3 million Americans.

Five years ago, my 15-year-old son Grant was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia. The next two years were a blur of ER visits, chemotherapy, and long hospital stays. Those long months of treatment and (hopeful) recovery are tough on patients and caregivers. But, fortunately, there are groups that offer support, education, and even transportation and financial assistance for patients and families. Many of these groups also provide critical research in treating cancers. We learned firsthand how these organizations can make a world of difference, and came to appreciate the thousands of people involved in them.

One such person is Gary Jobson, world-class racing sailor, winning tactician on America’s Cup and Fastnet races, among many others, and for years the face of sailing on ESPN. In 1993, Jobson was asked to help a struggling regatta reinvent itself as a charity race for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society (LLS). That first Leukemia Cup race turned out to be a great success with 100 boats participating and $30,000 raised. “The [organizers] asked me to be the chair, and I agreed to do it for three years,” Jobson said. “I ended up retiring from the position two years ago, after 25 years.”

There are 43 Leukemia Cup events for this year alone. Visit leukemiacup.org/search-events to view a calendar.
In a dark twist of irony, 10 years into his chairmanship, Jobson himself received a shocking diagnosis — non-Hodgkin lymphoma — and he went on to spend two grueling years in aggressive treatment. “I became a beneficiary of the very research advances I’d helped support!”

There are several organizations that help with cancer research and patient care, but the 501(c)(3) nonprofit LLS is unique in that much of their donations come from boaters through the Leukemia Cup, a series of regattas around the country.

These events include not just racing sailboats, but powerboats, paddlecraft, and even model boat racing, and all skill levels participate in the races. The biggest difference from other regattas is that these races aren’t just about the fastest boat or best-prepared crew. The coveted Leukemia Cup goes to the crew that raises the most money by getting donations from family, friends, co-workers, and employers who sponsor their boats. National and local event sponsors also support the Cup.

There are 43 events scheduled for this year, hosted by yacht clubs around the country, from Florida to Washington, Rhode Island to California, and nearly everywhere in between, with all donations going to LLS. Jobson says that around 10,000 people sail in these annual regattas, which now donate around $4 to 4.5 million a year to LLS, most of which goes to grants for cutting-edge blood-cancer research. Over the past 31 years, the Leukemia Cup races have raised more than $66 million.

“So many people are touched by these cancers,” said Jobson, talking about the reason for the Cup’s success. “I remember one year when a kid dragged a wagon full of coins — $3,500 worth — into the event. He said he was doing it for his friend Johnny, who had cancer. There were tears all around as he told that story.”

Jobson is still involved with the Leukemia Cup and attends several events a year. He sails his Hood 32-foot daysailer in the Annapolis Leukemia Cup. Today, Jobson — and our son Grant — are cancer-free. “I don’t like the word remission,” Jobson said. “It sounds like it’s coming back. I use the word ‘gone.’”

That’s the same word my wife, Susan, and I use, too.

LIFESTYLE

Boaters — power and sail — pay it forward

Here’s a list of other boating and fishing charities around the country that help those in need. Also, look online for many more state and local events.

- The C.A.S.T. (Catch a Special Thrill) for Kids Foundation enriches the lives of children with special needs, supports their families, and strengthens communities through the sport of fishing. More than 121,000 kids have been taken fishing at over 1,000 events. castforkids.org
- Heroes on the Water gives veterans, first responders, and their families a path to a successful life through no-expense kayak fishing trips. heroesonthewater.org
- Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Inc. is dedicated to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of disabled active military service personnel and disabled veterans through fly fishing and associated activities including education and outings. projecthealingwaters.org
- Make A Difference Fishing Tournament Inc. is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping children with disabilities through fishing tournaments and other programs that facilitate involvement in marine education and recreation. makeadifferencefishing.com
- The Kids Fishing Foundation was set up to give less fortunate kids who may not have the opportunity a chance to go fishing. kidsfishingfoundation.com
- Sailing Heals provides a free day of relaxation and joy for patients and guests of those who are undergoing treatment for cancer or dealing with the effects of a serious illness or injury. sailingheals.org
- Chesapeake Region Accessible Boating (CRAB), started in 1991, provides sailing experiences and instruction to those with disabilities, recovering warriors and youth from at-risk communities from its base of operations on Chesapeake Bay. crabsailing.org
- Cystic Fibrosis Foundation’s fishing tournaments bring together anglers to help find a cure for CF. cff.org
- Fishing Has No Boundaries, Inc. is a nonprofit organization whose goal is to open up the great outdoors for people with disabilities through the world of fishing. There are 27 chapters in 13 states, enabling thousands of individuals with disabilities to participate. fhnbinc.org
- Casting for Recovery provides healing outdoor retreats for women with breast cancer, at no cost. castingforrecovery.org
- Reel Recovery is a national nonprofit organization that conducts free fly-fishing retreats for men living with all forms of cancer. reelrecovery.org
- Line, Vine & Dine Fishing Tournament The Emeril Lagasse Foundation’s event returns next February in Fort Lauderdale, including a billfish tournament, wine tastings, and a cook-off from well-known chefs. Proceeds benefit local charities dedicated to providing culinary and hospitality training to young people with developmental disorders and other life challenges. Last year’s event weekend raised over $800,000 for local beneficiaries. linevineanddine.com – C.F.