

ANNE ARUNDEL

THE SUN

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Color header

Tacking toward an inclusive yacht race

ON THE WATER

ANNIE LINSKEY

THE SELF-PROCLAIMED oldest regatta on the Chesapeake Bay will, for the first time this year, include a new competitive class for Maryland Special Olympic athletes.

Any Governor's Cup Yacht Race skipper who brings on board one intellectually disabled athlete (along with his or her nondisabled partner) will qualify to compete in the new class, or division, during the overnight race from Annapolis to St. Mary's College. The regatta begins Aug. 4.

"We're always looking for opportunities to develop the Governor's Cup and make it something that is an interesting event beyond just the race itself," said Torre Meringolo, vice president for development at the college.

"Our hope is that it is not just a one-time effort, that it will be a stable long-term relationship."

St. Mary's College has a long history of hosting Special Olympics sailing events. The sailors train at the college every week, and, in 1999, the Special Olympics International World Games Regatta was sailed at the college.

Individuals who have cognitive delays or developmental disabilities can participate as Special Olympians. In Special Olympic sailing events the athlete has to sail 50 percent of the time, said Thomas E. Waite, a senior vice president for Special Olympics Maryland. That rule will not apply with the Governor's Cup.

The college expects to have roughly 200 boats competing in the regatta this year. It expects to have between two and 10 boats in the Special Olympics class.

"One of our objects is to promote what our athletes can do — which is a lot. That is one thing that we want to get out to the public," Waite said.

Jim Muldoon — who races *Donnybrook*, a 72-foot boat that holds the course record for the race — plans to include a Special Olympian in his crew this year.

"We sometimes have [guests on board] who are rail meat," Muldoon said, using a sailor's term for crew members who do nothing but sit on the windward side of the boat. "We'll want [the Special Olympians] to do more. We'll want them to experience a big boat and big-boat sailing."

Ben Collins, 49, of Rockville is a Special Olympics athlete who has a cognitive disability and is blind. He had heard of the Governor's Cup and was pleased to know that he might be able to compete this year. "I like going out on the water, listening to the wind," he said.

Collins has sailed in regular catamaran regattas with Annapolis resident Todd Cro-
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Annual St. Mary's regatta opens to Special Olympians

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teau for six years. In those races he competes against other Special Olympians.

Croteau rigs up the boat and does some of the steering, but Collins also takes the tiller. Croteau tells him which way to push the tiller.

"I have to be extra aware," Croteau said. "I have to say 'Left,

left, left!' My voice is drained by the end."

Croteau said the lines — or ropes — on his boat are geared specifically to help Collins when he's working the jib (a triangular sail in the front of the boat). There is a thick rope on the left side of the boat and a thin line on right side of the boat.

In six years the duo has capsized only once.

"Ben has a pretty good feel for [sailing]," Croteau said. "Because he's blind some of his senses are more developed. He can feel the way the boat is handling; he can hear the sails when they start to flap," Croteau said.

"Next time you go sailing close your eyes," he said. "Feel the wind. Feel the boat keel over. It is pretty impressive."

Croteau is also interested in participating in this year's Gover-

nor's Cup — he'd already been planning on sailing in it when a reporter told him about the new Special Olympics class.

He said: "It sounds like I'll sail with Ben."

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To register for the Governor's Cup Yacht Race, contact St. Mary's College of Maryland by calling 240-895-3039 or by e-mail at govcup@smcm.edu.