
skimming the black fantastic

by jeffrey marvin



The *Black Ice* film crew had to master iceboating in sub-zero weather to make their film. Jeffrey Marvin explains how they did it, and Anne Frank reviews the end result.

Soon it's full speed ahead for these iceboats, approaching the starting line in the Canadian Iceboating Championship

The National Film Board of Canada undertook the ardent task of filming Canadian Iceboating Champion, Don Walton, as he tracked the winter wind on the fierce iceboat racing circuit.

A circuit encompassing a radius of approximately 600 miles, the crew of **Black Ice** travelled to points in and around Toronto, Hamilton, Northern Ontario, and Ohio, capturing the sport of iceboat racing on film.

Perhaps the only drawback to the making of **Black Ice** was our dependence upon a combination of weather conditions. While skiers need snow, and soft-water sailors need wind, iceboaters pray for ice and wind, plus an absence of snow and rain. Understandably, good iceboating areas are few and far between. But construction compensates for these conditions: iceboats are capable of being quickly assembled and disassembled with bare hands, in subfreezing weather, and are designed for easy transportation on a trailer or car roof.

We tracked Don Walton racing his DN Class iceboat. The DN's are characterized for their streamlined hulls (for wind resistance), regulation 60 sq. ft. sail, and three runners or skate-like blades that glide over the ice with minimum friction. The DN weighs about 125 lbs. yet is capable of reaching speeds of 60 m.p.h. and more. In fact, the lightweight DN can travel almost four times the speed of the wind.

As all of our filming took place outdoors with temperatures well below freezing, both our cameras had to be winterized. Filming in 35mm, we choose the Arriflex 35BL, due to its easy handling ability, and the Arriflex IIC for its rugged design.

Preparing for the start of the season, we ran several tests using various methods of tracking the boats. Initially we tried tracking by snowmobile, but the procedure would only yield footage of high vibrational quality. Next we opted for a Steadicam, but in the extreme cold we felt the electronics would give us trouble. Finally, we decided on boat-to-boat tracking.

Mounts were made out of aluminum and built to fit either an Arri flat base plate or a high-hat adapter. Also, a motorized rotating plate was incorporated into the mounting system: this enabled pre-selected panning from point to point. The entire system ran off a 16 volt battery and could be moved via sandwich clamps to virtually any position on the hull or runner plank of the iceboat.

*Jeffrey Marvin is a documentary filmmaker and free-lance writer. He was line producer and writer for **Black Ice**.*

The next challenge was for cameraman Michael Savoie to learn how to sail the rigged boat to assure proper framing. After some hair-raising first attempts, the results were better than we ever anticipated. By having the camera mounted right onto the boat, the boat and camera were able to vibrate in sync, creating very little distortion of the picture. Manned with this new system we were ready to undertake any shot that director Peter Shatalow could dream up.

Luckily the weather held out, and we were fortunate to film some exciting racing sequences in Hamilton Harbour, Lake Scugog and The Bay of Quinte — the panning system enabled us to swiftly manoeuvre back and forth through the racers without disturbing their ponderous progress. And ponderous is putting it mildly.

An iceboat is subject to tremendous forces on its rigging, hull, planks and chokes (its construction is a compromise between weight and strength that is literally held together by pins). As a result, it is not unusual for something to break while at high speeds. Masts and stays can also snap under high gust loads.

In a typical race situation there are boats to avoid, tacks to be made (unlike sail boats, an iceboat travels faster tacking into the wind than it does with the wind), and markers to be rounded — which indicate where you must head. But even more common obstacles to avoid are pressure ridges in the ice, water holes, sudden gusts of wind that can send an iceboat into abrupt hiking, and break-up — a situation that left producer David Springbett "sweating bullets" with the apprehension of our camera boat breaking up. Fortunately, during our entire two winters of shooting we lost only one runner plank, resulting in minor damage solely to the boat.

Despite the seeming irregularity of perfect iceboating conditions, we were able to shoot with lenses as tight as 50mm, no matter what ice conditions prevailed. But the real treat came in Hamilton Harbour when we encountered Black Ice. Like a freshly waxed linoleum floor, Black Ice is that newly-frozen water which gives a flawless consistency. Its clear, clean surface is the ultimate condition sought by all iceboaters. As racer Don Walton puts it, "It's like a giant hand grabbing the boat and shoving it skimming across the ice. The speed is fantastic." Coming off the ice, Walton was ready to take on the world. And so he did.

Following the Canadian Team to the World Championships in Sandusky, Ohio, proved to be our toughest assignment. The weekend was brutal with high winds

and skin temperatures of -40°. Many of the boats on hand, from as far away as the USSR, snapped under these pressures. It was so cold that our Arriflex 35BL froze solid. But second unit cameraman Mark Irwin, using the "olde" ICC pulled through. Filming from within the hazardous downwind marker, close-up shots were obtained just as the boats pivoted upwind. Many boats were photographed in full hike, lines snapping from inertia.

In addition, we employed the use of a 1500mm Questar lens, which is really a telescope. A two-man operation, the Questar has one field-searching element as well as the normal lens viewing port. By having one man scan the subject through the searching element while the other maintains focus, it is possible to track a subject at extreme close-up range. This procedure is highly critical as both men must equally coordinate their movements.

Black Ice has taken two years to produce under some of the most adverse filming conditions possible, but we have documented it all. Soon, it will make its movie debut as a 35mm, stereo, theatrical short in theatres across Canada.

John Grierson would have been proud.

Film Arts

461 Church Street · Toronto ·
Ontario · Canada

Telephones:

962-0181

962-0182

Black Ice : Film Review

p.c. National Film Board of Canada (1978/79) exec.p. Don Hopkins p. David Springbett assoc.p. Michael Savoie d. Peter Shatalow sc. Jeffrey Marvin ph. Michael Savoie addit.p. Mark Irwin cam.assist. Dan Hainey, Jeffrey Marvin ed. Peter Shatalow mus. John Mills-Cockell sd. Ralph Brunjes narr. Jonathan Welsh re.rec. Gary Bourgeois grips Robert Arvay, Jim McCammon p.co-ord. Judy LeGros unit admin. Louise Clark line p. Jeffrey Marvin tech. co-ord. Frank Ciavaglia

Black Ice is a ten-minute film, stunningly shot in 35mm, with a mag-stripe stereo mixed sound track. It is a powerful and energetic film created for commercial theatrical release. It seems to indicate that a strong and enormously beneficial relationship can and does exist between the National Film Board and the independent producer / filmmaker. Michael Savoie and Peter Shatalow of Cedar Films combined their talents with David Springbett of the National Film Board's Ontario regional office, to produce a film that is not only artistically successful, but that also has strong popular appeal. **Black Ice** makes an excellent argument for increased involvement of the private sector with the public, with a view towards creating a unique and viable commercial product.

Based on an idea by Jeffrey Marvin, **Black Ice** opens with a boat skimming across a lake. The sky is clear, the blades are sharp and the boat skims smoothly and swiftly across the ice. A quick cut, and we find ourselves gathering information about the precision needed in the construction of the boat. We feel the care and concentration the sailor devotes to his

craft : all this is a brief series of very tight close-ups — the man's face, his hands, his work. Only those objects which bear a direct relationship to the boat are chosen. The effect is sparse, clean and without superfluous detail. In an extremely dramatic cut we are suddenly whipped back to the frozen lake. The camera is mounted on the boat which is now skimming at 60 miles per hour along the lake surface. Sound builds and gradually becomes inescapable. The blades cutting into the ice become a roar, a cacophony of sound; the wind, the sail and the blades blend together to become synonymous with the speed and the power of the elements.

Images imprint themselves on the senses — men, standing alone or in groups, heavily muffled against the bitter cold. The effect is ominous. There is little individual definition, but somehow, through all of their protective covering, one still senses an incredible expectation and fierce concentration. These men are intent on only three things ; the wind, the sail and that black, black ice.

Rules of competition are stringent and conditions can be treacherous. In spite of the risks ahead, the sailors stamp their impatient feet. They are willing to confront almost anything. They want the exhilaration, they want to win. When thwarted from achieving this objective, they suffer enormous frustrations. A man's boat overturns and his reaction is almost comic in its intensity. From here on in, picture and sound track blend beautifully to create a feeling of anticipation and urgency. The adrenalin begins to flow, the race is on. The viewer is drawn in and the film doesn't relinquish its hold until the very end.

Black Ice is constructed by using a series of almost impressionistic imagery. Its iceboating theme is rendered in a highly subjective manner. The film-

makers have chosen their material primarily for its emotional content, rather than for its explicitly realistic or factual detail. With surprising effectiveness, they have managed to apply both dramatic and documentary principles to their material — a technique which allows them not only to record the actual events of an iceboating experience, but also to engage the viewer on a far deeper emotional level, to give him an almost visceral comprehension of such an experience. On that level, the viewer quite spontaneously feels the hardships, the agonies and the eventual exhilaration of sailing when all conditions are absolutely perfect.

An intuitive understanding of the film's intention is successfully achieved through image and sound. Narration was added to the film, but somehow the words are incompatible with the strength of the image. The two elements work against each other, because much of what is said in words has already been conveyed through picture. When this happens, and it happens inconsistently throughout the film, the narration becomes redundant and could well have been dispensed with altogether.

The emotional appeal of **Black Ice** is achieved by fully exploiting the space and movement intrinsic in the chosen material. The effect is increased by the momentum of Peter Shatalow's superb editing, and by the use of an intriguing technique which could be termed 'heightened' sound. Natural sounds were amplified to appear larger than they were in reality. To this was added synthetic sound, often composed of natural sounds broken into their various components and then subjectively recreated and amplified to achieve a specific effect. Much of this is not immediately apparent, except that one does have a sense of continuing underlying tension. The original music by John Mills-Cockell works extremely well, because it is often integrated with those sounds, or seems to rise out of them. The overall result of the track as a whole is to increase the impelling and vigorous nature of the film.

The cinematography by Michael Savoie is bold, and manages to arouse strong feelings for the beauty of the sport, the severity of the conditions and the challenge to the men involved. Shatalow and Savoie have imprinted a unique style on their material ; as a result, **Black Ice** becomes a film that is not only beautiful to watch, but to experience as well.

Anne Frank

Anne Frank is a free-lance writer, and a producer at the CBC Drama Department in Toronto, where she works on **For The Record**.

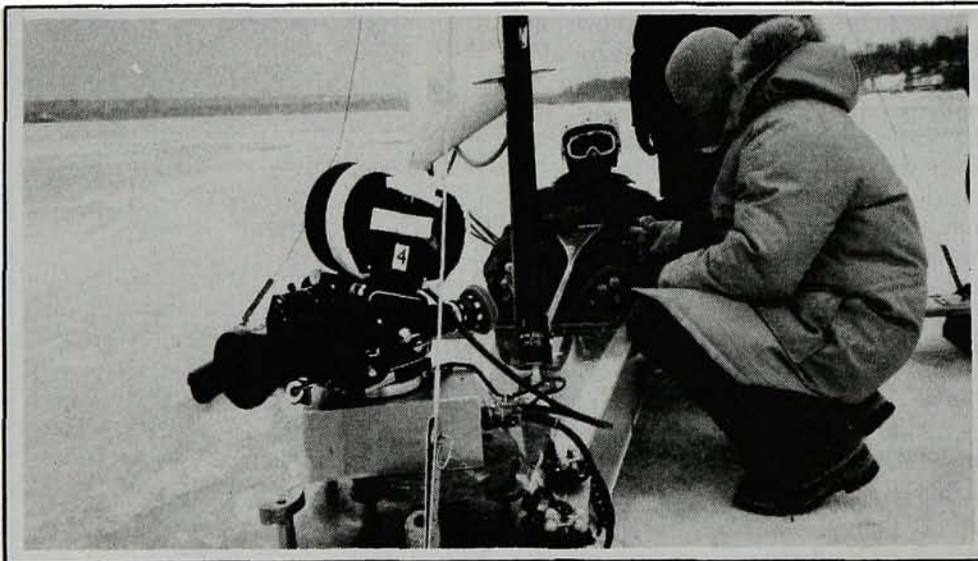


photo : Jeffrey Marvin

About to sail... Walton's boat can travel almost four times the speed of the wind