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UNJ INTERVIEW:

A conversation with crew chief Cindy Shirley.

Cindy Shirley has been around hydroplane racing most of her life. She was named crew chief of Miss HomeStreet in 2018. Before that, she was a long-time member of the Madison team's crew. Shirley was born in Louisville, Kentucky. Madison was only 40 miles away on the Ohio River and, beginning in 1981, she attended the Madison regatta with her family. She was around boats before that, however. "I was a boater before I was even out of the womb," she explains. "My mom was sailing, doing different things, I grew up walking on docks and grew up boating. That's how I got started in boat racing."

Shirley earned a degree in accounting from the University of Kentucky. Currently, she is Director of Research at the University of Washington's campus in Bothell, Washington. "I help faculty members make sure their proposals are complete. Then I review them, sign them, and submit them to the sponsor. Being in that kind of position and that type of work allowed me, in boat racing, to understand how to stay calm and keep your head about you. When you're working in grants and contracts, it's deadline-driven. Very similar to boat racing."

In the following NewsJournal interview, conducted by Craig Fjarlie on December 14, 2018, Shirley talks about her involvement in boat



Chris Denslow

racing and her role as crew chief on the Miss HomeStreet team.

UNJ: Did your interest in boat racing start at an early age?

Shirley: When the boats would leave for the West Coast, my mom

would drive whoever wanted to go. It was always me, my mom, and sometimes my sister. WORX in Madison would carry the race. At 6:00 their time, which was 7:00 our time—this was when Madison didn't change time—they would

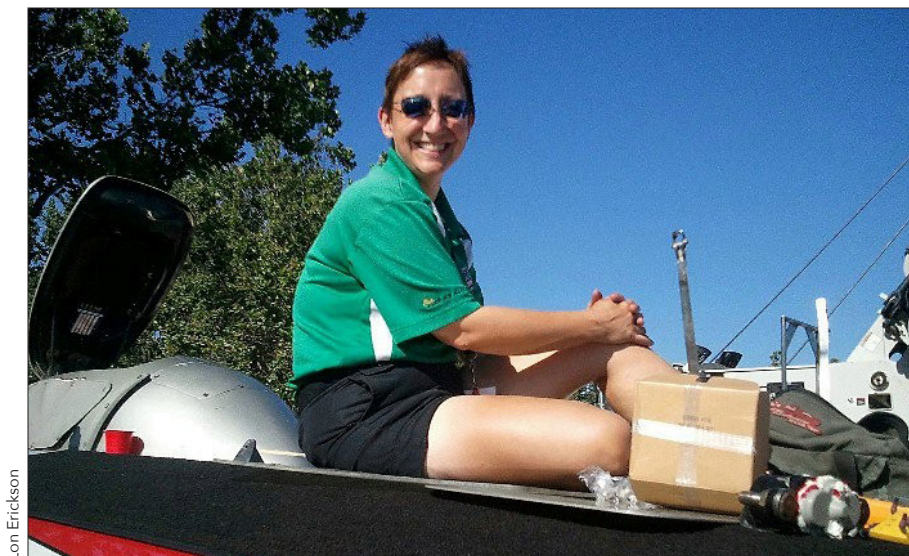
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Cindy Shirley on the deck of the *Oh Boy! Oberto* in 2012.

drop their power at 6:00. That was the time of the final heat on the West Coast. So, we would go into Madison and either picked up burgers over at the Dairy Queen on the Milton side, or maybe go to Key West [Shrimp House – Ed.] and take the transistor radio in. If we picked up burgers, then we'd just go over to the Madison side and sit in the car listening to the race from the West Coast.

Besides being a spectator, what was your first direct involvement with race boats?

Well, my ex-husband, Chuck Moore and I, started a website called Hydrofest. It had the Unlimiteds, but we also brought in the Unlimited Lights. We were the only people paying attention to them. My dad was traveling with DeWalt at the time, with the boat.

He was on the crew?

He was the display boat driver, but he was also on the crew. Loading, unloading, that kind of stuff. Gofer as needed. So, he would report and he would give me not only the Unlimited information, but also the Unlimited Light information, 'cause I thought that was a really neat class. So, my dad would call me, give me the information,

and then we would send it out. Patty Darling got wind of this.

I ended up getting a call from her one day. Maybe an email, because we had an email address on the website. Anyway, she contacted us and said, "Do you want to do more?" At that point we said, "Yes," and I became an Unlimited Light official. My ex, Chuck, ran the website. He ran that website, the Miss Madison website, and I believe he ran the Unlimited Light website for a while.

As an official, what were your duties, then?

In the beginning I was more of a scorer.

OK.

Well, actually, I wore a lot of hats. I can't say I was just a scorer.

This is for the Lights?

This is for the Lights. I helped put together a newsletter, I was a scorer, I took care of their registration blanks. I started putting in as much as I could and then putting them out for signatures, trying to get as much of that kind of work done before you get to the race. Then I also was a dock official and watched getting the boats launched, getting them in.

I knew Jerry Hopp. He had that old boat with the single fin. It had to go in last because if it sat in the water too long it would sink. All these little kinds of things you had to learn and figure out along the way. So, that's what I did. Lots of different hats. I helped Charlie Wiggins and I worked on re-writing the rule book.

The rule book for the Lights?

Mm hmm.

Did you ever drive a boat?

I've not driven one. I have been a passenger in, I believe it was the *Burien* in Detroit. That was a scary moment.

How long ago was that?

The year the vintage boats went to Detroit, but the Unlimiteds weren't there. I can't remember what year that was. Peter Orton was the one who drove that boat, if I'm not mistaken. I think it was the *Burien* although I'm not sure. That's where I received my hundred-mile-an-hour certificate. I've also ridden



The *Oh Boy! Oberto* (hull #8806) in 2006.

in the X-1 two-seater with Bill Seebold. I rode in the JS-7 Jersey Skiff *Rolling Thunder*, with Tom Patricini. Again, amazing. You know, only the top people in each of their respective classes. And I've ridden in the four-seater with Mark Evans. And that was crazy, too. In fact, insane.

So, I've been able to do some really neat things. I've always wanted to drive. I've always had that speed bug. When I was a little girl my dad said that we were out in our runabout. We were racing people while my sister slept between the seats. So, from day one I had this speed bug. My mother has said I always wanted to race, and she's always said no, you can't. And now I could, and I have fear now. When I'm home I get out our little runabout and I throttle down as much as it'll go, and that's what I do.

Did you work on any other boats besides Unlimited Lights?

No, I eventually transitioned into the Unlimiteds, with a similar position during the Hydro-Prop era. There were some fill-in times. I was a dock person a little bit with the Unlimiteds, but I wasn't doing scoring work or anything until 2001, when I worked with Hydro-Prop. So, between '99 and '01 I was with the Lights, and then would do some fill-in with the Unlimiteds, especially when they were joined. They were always joined racing. So, if they needed somebody else...

But not crew work?

Not crew work, no. I was always with the administration.

Who did you work with? Who was in charge of the administration back then?

I don't remember. Lori Jones was the one who cut my check one time. I was thinking, "What, I get money? That's crazy." I was with Patty Darling and some with Lori Jones. And then in 2000 I was in

San Diego. Not with the Lights, but Gary Garbrecht was taking it over and he wanted Patty to run medical, but she didn't want to. So, they had me come out and shadow her that weekend. That was the weekend that George Stratton blew over.

Yeah.

So, I was shadowing her that weekend. They didn't care that I didn't have a medical background, they just wanted somebody to organize it and they thought I could do that. In 2001, I was full-fledged Hydro-Prop. I had my own gig because I was the administrator. I was, for all intents and purposes, Amy Garbrecht, Amy Sullivan, because she was pregnant and couldn't travel. So, I had her role the whole season writing checks and all that stuff. Worst summer of my life, because I was also running with the Prop Series. I was doing both hydros and F-1 Prop.

So, you were busy.

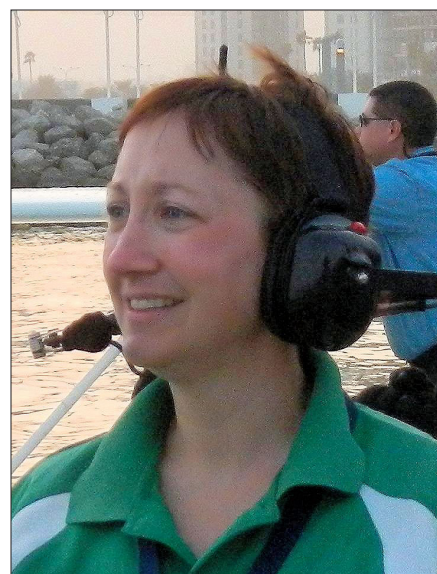
I was very busy. There were seven weekends in a row at one point and that was pretty tough 'cause I didn't have as flexible of a job, even though it was a job I could leave. Today, I can't just leave and leave my job there. I have to take it with me. But I had more flexibility in this one. Those seven weeks were pretty tough right in a row.

Sure.

But it was always with the administration. After 2001, I wasn't doing that again. I didn't want to be in administration any more, I wanted to do something different. It was 2003 when I decided to give Madison a shot.

Did you stay with administration until then?

In 2002 I just kind of hung out. My parents went to races, my dad, so I went to most of the races. My ex was still doing his web stuff, so I was around, maybe helping him get a story out or something like that. But other than that, I wasn't really



Miss Madison Racing Team

working. I was just hanging out, getting to know the crew.

So, you got hired onto the crew as a volunteer?

I did. As a volunteer, yeah. There was no one on the crew, really, pretty much at that point. We didn't have a sponsor when I started. But I figured there'd still be somebody there at the shop. It was a Saturday when I went and took donuts. Eric Bell was running the team at that time, for what there was of a team. John Ashby had just started so we kinda sat in there as the two new volunteers. I didn't really work that weekend. Eric said, "Let me know when you're coming back and I'll have something for you to do."

There was a time in the year that the *Madison* blew the bottom out in Seattle [2003 – Ed.]. I was also working with the Lights. I was helping that and then at night I would go over and see what I could do to help the team. They had pulled the boat out and set it in the *Bud* shop. Our hotel was right down the street. I normally didn't stay with the administration, I stayed with the team. My dad was staying with the team so I would just stay there, too. The *Bud* shop is where I learned how to use a drill press.

Oh, wow!



[Top] Cindy Shirley and Mike Hanson at Qatar in 2011. [Middle] Shirley, Oberto driver Steve David, and Aubree Hanson. [Above] The Madison team celebrates in 2010.

First time, yup. I also learned at that point you need to wear long sleeves when making doubler plates.

Yeah.

All those little burrs on the back side of it. So, I was cut up...

They're flyin'. It'll get you, yeah.

I was working in engineering at UK. I remember, they all know how to use a drill press. My dean saw my arms. I wore short sleeves and he saw my skin. "What in the world?" I said, "Oh, I learned how to use a drill press." (Laughter.) He said, "Great, now you're a machinist first class." It was like, "Thanks." So, because he thought I was always out doing something crazy. And so, I made doublers. And then, eventually, the next thing I learned to do was mix glue, 'cause that's a pretty important thing.

Yup.

And I was pretty good at it.

In addition to those things, did you have other preferences for what you did on the crew, whether it was in the shop or at a race site?

No, I was so green that whatever they wanted to hand me was what I was going to do. I kinda figured out where I would fit in on some of the things that were a lot less mechanical. Filling air bottles, that kind of stuff. At that time, we had our old, old boat, our '88 boat. Things were a lot different in it than they were in the next boat. But it was nice to work on that kind of boat and then make the transition to the new boat when we went to the '07 hull. By that time, I'd spent enough time in the shop that I was actually able to help doing some of the lay-up and that kind of stuff.

Glue mixing, oh, my gosh, I'd never mixed so much glue in my life. We actually had to have multiple people mixing, because we couldn't keep it mixed up enough



Ron Harsin

[Above] Filling in as the *Oh Boy! Oberto* at Detroit in 2011 was hull #9210, the same boat that won last year's national title as the U-9. [Right] Jon Zimmerman.

because you're laying so much down, when you lay the decks down. We did it all in one seating really; not quite all one seating. I think maybe we did it in two separate pieces on each side. So, you're laying out, whichever we did, fairly large pieces and it takes a lot of glue. Really thick glue so that when you mix glue, the more you work with it the faster it's gonna go off. So, mixing all that Cab-O-Sil in there, the thickener, it's a white silica powder. You don't want to breathe it. I always stirred it like this (gestures) with my head facing away from it so I could get it down in there.

But we always seal ours based on food. Mike (Hanson) would say, "I want it mashed potatoes," which means that's about as thick as you can get. I make my mashed potatoes very thick, and that worked for him. If I want it even thicker, I'll call it ice cream. Maybe we shouldn't put that in there. Mike will kill me for that one! (Laughter.)

It's kind of funny, actually.

But mashed potatoes. That's what we'd call it. "I want mashed potatoes."

As long as everybody knows what it means.

And it did. I don't know how I knew what it meant, but I did. When he said, "mashed potatoes,"

that means thick and it turned out right.

As long as you are communicating about the same thing.

Right.

Anyway, you worked on three different boats.

Three different hulls, one team. Although, no, four different hulls. We rented, we used that hull for Detroit that one year, which we pretty much put together in a day.

OK, yeah.

That was one of the most gratifying moments, I have to say, when we got the boat in the water to qualify at 5:00 or 6:00, whatever it was that night. Zimmerman went out and turned a really decent lap. It was just, "look what we did," 'cause we left half the crew in the shop working on the primary hull. So, we took this hull and there was the race group and there were the people who stayed back at the shop.

And you were...

I was with the race group, not the shop group. The race group had to put a lot of the systems in. Hooked up the boat. It wasn't ready to go, by any means.

Did you have a preference for working on the hull, or engine, or propeller, or skin fin?

I really didn't. Because of my size they gravitated me toward the cockpit. It's easier to put somebody



Karl Pearson

that doesn't have as much mechanical background into the cockpit area and the batteries, that kind of stuff. In each of those, I kinda jumped in and really started to learn the whole area. Really deep knowledge. You know, our battery chargers. I can look at them and know in a moment if there's a problem.

And, of course, San Diego. Every San Diego there's a problem with the battery charger, if it's power, if it's something. This year we blew a fuse. I went down there and looked at it; I'm like (slaps her forehead) "A problem." Everybody's like, "No, there's power..." "No, no, that reading is not right." They start taking everything out. Sometimes they don't want to believe you when you tell them that it's true. It's a problem.

But I think they kind of gravitated me toward the cockpit area because there's just not as much mechanical. Now, when I was in the shop every single weekend, I guess it was around five years, I did help with some gearbox teardowns, engine teardowns. I've never really worked on the prop.

There was a great moment with the teal boat. We'd been in Tri-

Cities and we got hit in the sponson by J. Michael Kelly. Then he went around and that's when he blew over our tail. Took our fairings and wing off. But he also hit us in the left sponson.

We got to the hotel, which was our shop. We couldn't afford to go to the *Bud* shop all the time. We were hangin' out at the hotel. Got our stuff out and Mike put me on the front sponson. That was mine to fix. Larry ground everything out and then I had to lay up all the material, and it was a decent size. I'd get my template and then get my glass and carbon and glue and all that going. Then when it was finally time to lay it all up, I had to get other people because one person wasn't enough. And, of course, the sun was shining on that part of the boat right at that moment. The glue is gonna kick too fast. It's gonna get too hot. It all worked out fine, but that was a really cool moment, to be able to be one of the people fixing the hull. So, I don't do engines and gear boxes without positive supervision.

Even as crew chief?

Even as crew chief, yeah. I can



Cindy Shirley gives a VIP tour while at Doha, Qatar, in 2013.



Kim Eldridge

That's Cindy Shirley on the deck of the *Oh Boy! Oberto* while at San Diego in 2008. In the foreground are her sister, Kim, and father, Dave.

help. I helped Dan and we tore a gear box apart in May. I had remembered some of it. Let's see, it's been almost 10 years, probably, since I'd been involved in tearing a gear box apart.

When you started, did you have any thoughts that some day you'd end up as a crew chief?

No, not at all.

Did you have any desire to go that route?

Not really.

Was it as much a surprise to you as anybody?

Yes, it probably was. Maybe even more of a surprise to me than to others, although it was quite a surprise to others as well. I don't know. I never thought that. I always had to learn and figure out what was going on. Even though I wasn't part of some different things, I always paid attention to what course we were on, what the conditions were, what gear box we were using, what engine we were using, that kind of stuff. Just because that's who I am. I'm an accountant, I'm a data-driven numbers person. So, numbers make sense to me.

OK.

I've worked with that. Those are things that to me, commit to memory very easily. Learning is this versus that, and understanding gear box drop-down. Is it rougher? And so for a race set-up you do this, but for qualifying set-up you do this. But that was such a small part of it. I didn't see it coming. It was a complete shock [being named crew chief – Ed.].

Who would you say were some of your mentors when you were getting started? Who did you learn from? Did they take you under their wing, so to speak?

Well, certainly Mike and Larry Hanson. Definitely, Larry, always, he never really saw me as a girl. They saw me as a crew person and somebody who had two hands that could help. And, uh, I think they believed I could learn. Especially Larry, because he would show me why he was doing something. If we were taking an engine apart, why you do certain things, which was always, really, super good. And

Mike, with his organization. Mike is such an organized person. It's crucial that the whole thing stay organized, that everybody's doing the same thing. When it gets out of organization, chaos ensues and that's never a good thing.

So, definitely them, but also Dan Walters. That man has so much knowledge in his head. Forty-two years in the sport and he's done it all or seen it all or on some level participated in. I mean, it's just all there and he is really super helpful. But I didn't know him until a little later on. Oh, no, I knew him before I actually started crewing, I guess. But nobody ever told me not to try. I think I remember talking to Dan beforehand, 'cause, you know, "I think I might give this a shot." He never said, "Oh, my gosh, no." He said, "Go for it."

One day, I'll never forget this, I was in the middle of a divorce and hadn't changed my name back. He called me crew chief Moore. I remember him saying that. And, like, crazy, man, crazy, 'cause my last name was Moore at the time. And, uh, learning not just from the crew chief but from the drivers. Steve David taught me a whole bunch.

That was something else we wanted to get into. You worked with quite a few different drivers. What made a driver successful?

What made a driver successful? That is a tough question.

The ability to communicate with the crew?

The ability to communicate to the crew about the boat. Some varying degrees of success...

Mike Hanson was probably real good at that.

He was one of the best set-up guys in the business. He's been on the driving end, he understands the boat, and he talks to the driver. Sometimes the driver can't get, they couldn't get exactly... So Mike



The Oh Boy! Oberto (hull #0706) in 2013.

Paul Kemiel

would figure out what he thought the boat was doing, visually and the data behind it, and make changes and see, you know, working with the drivers if that worked. If that did not work, every driver has their up and down moments.

Steve David is very positive, always positive. Jon Zimmerman was fun to work with. He was nice, so, so nice. And he can work on his boat. He is a driver who, by the time you get to the Unlimited ranks, in the lower ranks he worked on his boat. He crewed on his boat. By the time he got up to the Unlimited ranks and was in our boat, Mike said, "Uh uhh."

Oh.

And Steve, I don't think, really had a desire to crew at that point. I remember they wanted to do a photo shoot, with Steve washing the boat. Steve's up there with the brush and Mike sees it and he throws a fit. He's afraid Steve's going to fall off and get hurt, and then who's gonna drive the boat? So, "Get down, don't do that." So, when Jon came along and we worked with him, uh, "Here you go, can I help?" I'm like, what? The driver wants to help? OK. So, he did. He helped put almost the whole cockpit together. So, yeah, me and Mike Sontag and Jon, that was really a lot of fun, too. And then Jimmy Shane, completely different.



The Oberto team celebrates their Gold Cup victory in 2014.

Yeah, sure.

He was a (pause) how do I say... hmm... Steve would fit into, with his mindset, depending on the day and the race and stuff, he might not be the jokester that everybody sees of him. He could get very, very serious, which is fine, which is good. It's a serious thing he's getting ready to go out there and do, OK? You had to know how to read it, that situation. Jimmy, he's very serious, but he can also, at a moment's notice, be silly. And you thought he was serious, you thought he was in a serious mind frame, and suddenly he comes off as something totally off the wall, and you're thinking, "What?" He's so much fun. And he's so nice, such a nice guy. I've worked with all nice drivers.

Yeah.

That's the thing, you know, I've worked with the nicest guys. And they're all family-oriented. I really appreciate that because I grew up with my dad and it was family for us to go to the races and stuff. So, the fact that they are also family-oriented is really one of my favorite things. I like watching their kids grow up.

Steve's daughter was already grown by that time, but he'd bring Sabrina and occasionally Emma

would come. So, that was really neat. And Jon, with Joanne. Joanne wasn't around much. We only had Jon for what, one race? The race boat and Steve were back for the next race. We weren't sure if Steve's ribs, if he was gonna be able to endure the pain to get out there. But he had this really neat flak jacket thing made. It worked wonders.

But I was trying to figure out, in that hull, how we were gonna fit Jon in the cockpit. I remember Mike came to me. He goes, "Figure out how we're gonna get Jon in there if we have to." We were just standing there staring at the cockpit going, "I don't know, Jon's too tall, I don't know." I'd have to take the seat back out totally and just move the actual seat back. I didn't know if it would fit right, and the mirrors. The driver, he would do whatever he has to do to get into the boat. If he has to make himself fit, he's gonna figure that out. We see that all the time.

Jimmy, his sister, and Bianca, they're so much fun. He's just so nice. He's a taskmaster. He's so organized himself, and I appreciate that as well. He's brought a different element of a driver to our team. He talks more about the business side of it as well. Where I was never in those conversations with anybody

before, so I don't know for sure, but I don't think the other drivers really got into the business side, except for Mike. When he was the driver, I'm pretty sure he would have been in that business line. But Jimmy's really helping the business.

That's the sponsorship element?

Right, exactly. And that's the thing between Steve and Jimmy. Those have been two very high-profile people that worked great with us. The kids. Great with the PR opportunities and that kind of stuff. So, that's them. Jimmy will see the ideas and he'll be OK with doing something a little outside the box. I grew up not going outside the box. Mike had a very defined box. Outside that you shall never go.

But Jimmy will see something, or we'll talk about it, and he'll say, "Yeah, I can do that." I'm always going, "No, I don't think we should do that," when they bring out some kind of different opportunity for our boat to go out on the water. To me, not the greatest reason. I grew up in that. I told Mike, I grew up in your mentality. You don't put the boat out there unless you have to and if you're gonna learn something and what you want to do with it, not just for the PR opportunity.

Yeah.

Although we have, we did and it turned out fine. Turned out really well, although I've not seen the video of it, but I hear it turned out really great. So, working through those things has been really interesting. ♦

This is the end of part one of the interview with Cindy Shirley. Next month, in part two, she talks about taking over as crew chief of Miss Home-Street and the launching the new boat at the Tri-Cities, and she also reviews the 2018 season.

A dream comes true.

By John Woodward

Back in the mid- to late-60s, I have vivid memories of my face plastered up against the pit fence just to get a glimpse of my favorite boats. How I dreamt of being on the other side of that fence wearing a dirty crew shirt and crawling all over an unlimited hydroplane.

That dream would fester in my soul for several decades until the opportunity would present itself in the unlikelyst of all places: a bowling alley. "I think these guys (Muncey Racing) are looking for some help with their race boat, you interested?" said a fellow bowler. Information exchanged hands and two weeks later I found myself standing in an old barn that had been a worm farm and was now made into a boat shop outside of Redmond, Washington.

In this shop were three unlimited hydroplanes and a 280-class limited hydroplane. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. From late November 1984 until early June 1985, the Muncey race team worked on the 1972-51 U-15



Teah and John Woodward

Webster Racing Team

Burien Hobby Center (made famous for her dock-jumping abilities at the 1980 World Championship Seafair race in Seattle), converting her from an awkward-looking conventional hull with a shallow pickle fork into a thinner but wider cabover hull with a much deeper pickle fork.

The new U-9 *Boatracng Magazine* and crew left for Syracuse, New York, in early June 1985, but I was not part of the East Coast road crew, so I would have to patiently

wait for their return and the one race I had dreamt about being a part of for nearly 20 years: the 1985 APBA Gold Cup at home in Seattle. I would finally get my chance to crew on an unlimited hydroplane team in front of practically everyone I knew!

But, as fate would have it, the road trip took its toll on the U-9, as she came close a few times, but could not qualify in four straight events. With a truck full of worn-out Allison's and a dried-up bankroll, the team's season was over as they returned home a little less triumphant than when they left. And, just like that, my Gold Cup dream was put in an extended holding pattern that would last for 28 years.

Instead of heading to Wheeling, West Virginia, for the Labor Day weekend, my wife, Teah, and I decided to stay closer to home by attending the 2013 Diamond Cup in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho and crewing for the N-22 *Bolam's Express*



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

The U-9 *Boatracng Magazine* in 1986.



The official team photo for the U-22 Webster Racing team.

vintage 225 inboard at the invitation of our good friend Bob Bolam.

By a bizarre set of circumstances at day's end on Friday, I found myself crewing for the U-22 Webster race team tending ropes from the trailer down to the dock. It's hard to explain the feeling of wrestling a 7,000-pound hydroplane from a single rope as the hull is suspended 50 feet above you like it was at the Diamond Cup. It wasn't the most glamorous job, but for me it was incredibly gratifying to finally be a part of the sport at its highest level.

My small contribution must have paid off as Teah and I were asked to crew for the U-22 in 2014 when the boat returned to Seattle. Teah's recent knee surgery just a week before had her in a limited role, but I had the opportunity to work on the turn fin, checking the tightness of every nut and bolt after each run along with making sure the fin is measured parallel to the transom.

Again, it doesn't seem like much, but it's a vital area to maintain in order to keep the driver as safe as possible during his four-g turn. It gave me a great sense of

what teamwork was about and how important every role on a race boat team is. However, some of the best times we had as a team happened outside of the race course, usually in the evenings when things were a bit more relaxed. Lots of racing stories to be told and lots of fun and laughter to be had.

As the U-22 team prepared for the 2015 season, the owner Steve Webster upgraded my position on the team to the "prop guy" working underneath the boat with the short shaft and propeller assemblies, changing them out based on the intel from the driver and the crew chief. Unfortunately, the U-22

team, along with five other teams, withdrew from the first race of the season in Madison due high water and debris on the river, so the first real racing for the team took place in the Tri-Cities for the 2015 HAPO APBA Gold Cup.

Yup, the Gold Cup! And, just like that, my dream was taken out of its holding pattern and put back into the fast lane. I had to be a fast learner under the boat, as I was thrown right into fire during the qualifying period. Each prop had to be meticulously checked after every heat of action, looking for fine cracks in the hub or propeller blades. Without this procedure, a cracked blade left unchecked could break off during competition causing a possible catastrophe to the hull and driver. The safety of the driver was first and foremost on my mind as I worked against the clock getting the underside of the boat prepared for competition.

Out of all the jobs I've ever had on a race boat team, this is the one I took the most serious. But, if I were to take away one memory from that Gold Cup weekend, it would be seeing a handful of kids eagerly watching our team work on the hull from afar. For a split second, I could see myself standing there with them dreaming of the opportunity to one day be on the other side of that fence. ♦



The dream comes true for John and Teah Woodward.

The colorful life of Jerry Schoenith.

WHAT WOULD JERRY DO?

Jerry Schoenith drove unlimited hydroplanes in the 1960s, during the sport's most dangerous period. He competed against the best drivers of that time, men such as Bill Muncey, Ron Musson, Rex Manchester, Chuck Thompson, and Col. Warner Gardner. Although he retired from driving over 50 years ago, Schoenith continues to study hydroplane racing and imagines ways to pump new life into what he calls "an aging sport." Schoenith himself moves more slowly now and occasionally walks with a cane, but he's not shy about floating new ideas. Ask him about fixing the sport and he speaks with passion, exuding more energy than a tall can of Red Bull.

by Steve Nelson

The Clock is Ticking

Schoenith grew up when boat racing drew enormous crowds and the pits were sometimes packed with 18 hydroplanes. So, he is particularly saddened by the dwindling boat count and by the public's lack of awareness about the sport. He says the decline is painfully evident in Detroit. "Ask the younger generation about hydroplane races and none of them have heard of the Gold Cup, he says. "That's the problem we have. Frankly, if you guys don't get your crap together in Seattle, in 10 years they are going to have the same problem. You are going to lose generations of fans."

Schoenith claims that boat racing is dying, and it's dying because they aren't doing it right. "And, you can't keep running the same show over and over and over again. You just can't."

Can it be fixed? Schoenith believes it can. But the sport must take a completely different marketing approach.

"I've never thought of myself as a driver of an unlimited," he

explains. "I like to do what I do best, which is to promote. That's my whole view of boat racing. That's how I think. If I ran the sport, it wouldn't be dying and I'm not afraid to say that. I know more about the sport, marketing wise and promotion wise, than any human being living."

Obviously, Schoenith isn't bashful. He has tons of ideas and isn't afraid to express them.

So...What Would Jerry Do?

Simply put, Jerry Schoenith would change things. He likes the H1 name, but after that he would likely tinker with the show and add some piston power in the process.

Race Format Changes

This might be tough for die-hard fans, but Schoenith wants to make qualifying more exciting. He says there's no longer a need to trim the field to 12.

"The races this year will not have 12 boats," he says. "So, why do you have the fastest 12? Why in the hell are you qualifying? There is no reason to qualify. I would say, 'Here's qualifying guys. We are going to time you, from one end of the log boom to the other.'

"Quarter-mile or half-mile, let's say. The fastest one through? That is your qualifying speed. Put in new



gear boxes, new props, fill it with nitrous oxide, I don't care what you do. I want to go through that as fast as humanly possible. It gives the little guy a chance to be up with the big guys. It also means we are qualifying at much higher speeds. Maybe 190 miles per hour, 200, 210. How exciting would that be?"

Schoenith would also limit heat racing to a single day.

"I don't like two-day races. There aren't enough boats. When you've only got six or eight or 10 boats, why waste two days? People don't have time anymore to go to two major events in the same weekend. No! They don't have time for that. And, you never give the customer an out. When they say

we're going to have two days, they'll sit there trying to figure out which day to come, and they don't go."

Third, he would ditch the five-minute period before heats. Always a good story teller, he described a televised race he recently watched where the five-minute period felt like an eternity.

"I turned channels, I went and made breakfast, and came back and they still had two minutes to go. They were still doing the same thing. If they are going to have three laps, then go ahead and have the three laps and don't bore us with the, 'Well, we're getting ready for the start.' I mean, you know as well as I do that 90 percent of the drivers very easily could hit that starter and leave the pits at one minute and 25 seconds, and still get there at the proper time, right?"

The Fan Experience

Schoenith says the sport must appeal to people who know nothing about boat racing mumbo jumbo. He says, just make it something the average guy doesn't want to miss.

"Make it an 'Event.' We want to make it where the fans can say, 'I don't even care if I know what a boat is. I want to go there.' If they want to save the sport, they had better come up with a way to make people care. The problem with Seattle is you guys grew up with the idea that you can't grow up without hydroplane racing. Well, [in Detroit] that left us back in the 1970s and was replaced with a 'We don't care' deal."

For starters, he would bring more action to the fans. All the fans.

"Why can't we have kids in the pits? I got an idea. Have a kids corner! Every kid. I want to see every mother with a stroller coming in. I want to see every kid and every kids club. IT'S FREE! Come on in, guys. At every race. I don't



Jerry Schoenith (left) and the author.

care who you are, come on in to the pits for free!

"They say, 'No, can't do it. Insurance.' If I hear 'insurance' one more time, I'm going to shoot! You can get into a race car and go 120 miles an hour, you can jump off bungee cords, you can zip across the city of Detroit on a zip line, no problem. You can go down a water slide that's a mile long. No problem. But, we can't walk kids through the pits? Wake up. And, get another insurance company."

Then there's the free stuff. The giveaway items. Schoenith says that's a tradition boat teams should go back to. "They think selling pins will save their team. I wouldn't sell a pin. I would have free ones to give out, and then special pins for corporate, and stuff like that."

"Once in the Tri-Cities, I noticed they were giving tours. So, I went up to the tour guide and said 'Why don't you give them T-shirts?' 'Well, we can't, blah, blah, blah.' I said, 'Listen, give me the sizes and I'll give everyone a hat and a T-shirt.' Next day, I came into the pits and the place looked like it was sponsored by Renault!"

Schoenith would also resurrect his idea from a few decades ago, to create a Hydro Mart at each race

site. "Ask each race site to give us a huge area and in the Hydro Mart area we will do corporate entertaining. We will sell merchandise. We will allow our sponsors to come in and set up their booths. It's a totally organized thing that we would advertise. We would also set up an area where there would be drivers at all times in there. That's the rule."

Publicity

Of course, a few billboards would be nice. But, Schoenith says there are ways to grab a community's attention without spending a penny. Back when he drove the *Gale V*, he would rack his brain for new ways to generate interest. His best stunt was in San Diego.

"A guy from a TV station came up and said, 'can we take film of your boat?' I said, 'Well, the cameraman can come with me. Lug up his big camera and sit on my shoulders.' So, I go out in San Diego thinking, 'If he falls off, I'm going to die.' He goes out there and the shots were 20 years ahead of time. All he saw were my hands and the deck going up and down. I told the guy, 'I think you're nuts,' but it was virtually on every 30 seconds of that television station."

"I did stunts at every possible race," he remembers. "Whatever I could think of, I did it. I had to fight a lot of people because of their small-minded thinking."

Schoenith would also bring 'star power' back to the pits. Years ago, when the entertainers arrived, TV cameras would follow. "Think about Bob Hope and when Wayne Newton walked into the pits in Seattle. When the rock stars were there. U2 was all over the race boats. How many stars have you seen in the pits in the last two years there? Nobody. Are you getting your football players or baseball players out to the races? Maybe

once? There's just not a lot happening in powerboat racing that gives it the status that it once had. "

Sponsors

Schoenith says owners need to realize that some sponsors may not care much about racing. What they want is an opportunity to sell products, an opportunity boat racing needs to cultivate.

Schoenith defines a national sponsor as one that sells products across the nation. "A lot of the teams struggle to get a national sponsor," he says. "It's impossible. I want somebody to call me up and say, 'Damn it, I want my name on the boat, because I can sell products.' That's what we don't have an attitude of."

He says turbine power compounds the problem. "Among the unlimited sponsors, there is not one thing to sell. There's no oil, no spark plugs, nothing that we can sell in a boat. That's the problem. They've got nothing to sell, the head counts have died, and there is no national TV."

Schoenith described how he inked a deal with Renault to sponsor his boat in the 1980s. The fans on the shore—the potential customers—made the difference.

"We had all the vice presidents down at the Roostertail. I'm asking myself, how am I going to close this deal? So, I'm looking over in the pits and there is this helicopter that was flying around with some beer company in the back. It had landed, so I ran over there and said, 'Are you done for the day?' They said yes. So, I got the vice president of marketing and the president of Renault and said, 'We're going to watch the final heat, up in the air!'"

"We went up, in that race where the *Budweiser* and the *Atlas* where going boom, boom, boom. I had earphones, they had earphones, and



The UR-5 and its hauler before it left the Tri-Cities for Detroit last fall.

I was showing them all the hundreds of thousands of people on the shores. I didn't care about the race. I said, 'Look at those people!' And that's what closed the deal!"

Finally, Schoenith would look for new ways to get attention. That's what a promoter does. Like the time he plastered his sponsor's name underneath the *Miss Renault*.

"Every time they put the boat up in the air, you see the bottom of the boat. If I had a boat, the whole bottom of the boat would be decals. We are better off putting names on the bottom and everyone asking us why?"

The Newest Project

That brain full of ideas has propelled Schoenith from the sidelines and back into the center stage of boat racing. He is now helping new owner Alex Bogert get his feet wet in the sport, as part of the UR-5 project.

The team is resurrecting the last wood unlimited, a Staudacher design built in 1983. Bogert says the boat is in remarkable shape, having been in storage for the past 30 years. Incredibly, the boat has never needed hull work. It's light at 4,500 pounds and is well balanced. The team feels it's been proven at the speeds they are looking for.

The hull features a fully enclosed F-16 driver capsule,

complete with a roll bar. It needs a gearbox and skid fin, and the team is looking at five-bladed props. Work on the Chevy-based Mercury racing engine will be handled by crew members Michael and Larry Rutkauskas. The brothers have concluded the boat will run fine without a horizontal stabilizer and canard in the front. Schoenith says if they had to, they could be ready in three weeks. But of course, they don't have to.

Visually, the paint job is original, and is stunning, with Bumblebee Yellow and accents in Magenta and Baby Blue. Towing it will be the original color-matched GMC truck. Schoenith says people are almost as excited about the truck as they are the boat. Simply put, the combo will make a beautiful entrance to any race in the nation.

But Why?

The boat may be gorgeous, but can it compete? Honestly, the answer is no. Beauty is only skin deep and the UR-5 is 36 years old, running a piston engine in the sport's last wooden hull. Bogert acknowledges they won't outrun turbines. But, Schoenith says they will make some noise this summer.

"We're not looking to beat turbines or anything. We know that can't be done unless you get a

real power package and a new hull. Then, maybe you can go after them. But, for now, it's just trying to get another boat on the circuit that will cause some excitement, to draw the fans down to the races.

"The public in Detroit and in Madison have lost the kick out of the turbines," he explained. "To them, they are old Vietnam War engines now. I said, 'My God, it's bad enough that I've lived through the Allisons? Do I have to live through the Vietnam engines too?' They are getting blasé to the public. That's the only reason we are doing what we're doing, is to try and get some excitement to the public. That's basically it."

And, of course, an opportunity to promote.

"I'll guarantee you one thing. I'll draw more people than every boat combined. And, we'll get a lot of press. That's one thing I'm still good at. Drawing people and getting press."

If the experiment works, Schoenith feels the sport will benefit.

"The noise I want to make is in the pits, to get people activated, to get the younger generation. My God, I'm so old that I remember I met Gar Wood. That's how old I am! We've got to get a whole new younger generation. The only way to go is with the pistons, and younger people do relate to that. That's all we are trying to do. If we qualify that's our goal. Very simple." **Final Thoughts**

It's fitting that we end this two-part series with Schoenith's own words. He has many, and he's a hard person to be neutral about. Jerry Schoenith is brash, provocative, salty, and loves the center of attention.

"That is the way I think. I am boisterous, I am loud, I am Jerry Schoenith."

He's also an idea guy who has never been satisfied with the status quo.

"The biggest thing I hate about boat racing is they have never allowed anybody in who is creative. Think about the history of all the commissioners. They were good business people, but not one of them ever produced a Broadway show. Not one of them ever produced an album. Not one of them ever made stars out of people. Not one of them put on a party for 15,000 to 20,000 people. That's the problem! They've shut people out like that, because they are afraid of them."

Clearly, Schoenith is passionate about hydroplane racing. He's already part of its history, and now he's working toward the new future of the sport. If he happens to ruffle

some feathers in the process, so be it.

"When it comes to these guys in boat racing, it isn't like I dislike anybody. I just feel they should be working harder at what they do, because a lot of us from the old days worked a lot harder, so they can be where they are now. We died boat racing. I put myself in a mess physically. Other drivers got killed. Boat owners went broke, lost their best friends, and got divorced. All, over boat racing. So, these guys are riding on something that was developed through the years.

"I get mad because they aren't using it to their best ability," he says. "It was our sweat, blood, and tears that made it possible. Think about that, guys. That is where the passion comes from." ♦

Seafair leader retires, board appoints interim CEO.

The organizers of Seattle's Seafair celebration have announced that Richard Andersen has retired as president and CEO and that the board of directors has appointed Eric Corning to fill that role on an interim basis while a formal search is conducted for a permanent president and CEO. Andersen has led Seafair since October 2015.

"It has been my great pleasure to serve Seafair and the greater Seattle community these past three years," he said. "However, the time has come to pass the torch. I am very proud of our team's accomplishments and Seafair is well positioned for a great future."

Michael Kim, the chair of the Seafair board, praised Andersen for his leadership and many positive contributions during his time with the organization. "We appreciate his support and commitment during

this transition and consider him a lifelong member of the Seafair family."

Corning served as Seafair's director of operations from 1993 to 2001 and again as its chief operating officer from 2005 to 2014. Most recently he has served as the vice president of production for the Special Olympics USA Games, which were held in Seattle last summer. In that position, he led 40 full-time staff members and more than 15,000 volunteers.

"Richard and the great team he built have upheld the wonderful Seafair tradition and have honored its mission of creating memories and uniting communities," Corning said upon his return to Seafair. "I am thrilled to continue that work and help lead the organization into a very special 70th anniversary year." ♦

My \$0.02 Worth

Editorial Comment



**Andy
Muntz**

It's no secret that the sport of unlimited hydroplane racing is having a challenging time. It doesn't take a great deal of insight to realize that if the sport is to have much of a future, certain things will need to be different. Because most people can see the issue, it's also true that everybody has a viewpoint about what should be done to make things better.

Elsewhere in this issue of the *Unlimited NewsJournal*, we hear the ideas of Jerry Schoenith, one of the oldest names in the sport, on how he believes unlimited hydroplane racing can be saved. Additional ideas are also often posted on Facebook and elsewhere. It seems everybody knows how to fix unlimited racing, except those who are in position to actually do something about it.

As I read all of these ideas, I'm reminded of a process in management that may be familiar to many of you. It's a process of collabora-

tive decision making that is a standard for solving vexing problems and setting goals in an organization. It's called brainstorming.

The process goes something like this: A group of employees or other stakeholders are gathered together in a room, presented with the issue, and led by a facilitator to develop solutions. Each facilitator uses different techniques, but typically follows a similar set of rules for the brainstorming session.

The facilitator will want everybody in the room to be involved in the process, insist that everybody stays focused on the issue, ask that the participants speak one at a time, and seek to get as many ideas recorded as possible. There will also be two other hard and fast rules: encourage wild ideas and defer judgment.

Nothing can shut down the creative process quicker than a know-it-all in the back of the room who, when someone offers an idea,

immediately scoffs and says, "That can't be done." That's why many facilitators will tell a brainstorming group that there is no such thing as a dumb idea. Every suggestion, no matter how outlandish it may initially seem, is worthy of consideration.

Yes, not all ideas are equal. But brainstorming is only the beginning of the process of doing something different. Eventually, after enough suggestions are collected, the ideas with the most merit will rise to the top. The key at this stage, however, is to open the floodgate of ideas and tolerate the unusual among them.

So, please, let's try to keep that in mind as concerned hydro fans voice their opinions. They are well-meaning in their desire to reinvent the sport. It's something that clearly concerns them. They care. They simply want to save their favorite sport. ♦

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