

The legacy of Brenda Jones

BY ANDY MUNTZ

The sport of Unlimited hydroplane racing lost a pioneer with the passing of Brenda Hoversten Barto at her home in Washington on January 2. She died just 11 days before her 68th birthday.

According to her obituary in the local newspaper, she had many interests and applied her talents in business ownership, hairstyling, the optical field, and to her hobbies of gardening, sewing, crafting, and researching politics. She was preceded in death by a husband, raised a daughter,

had two grandchildren, and led a life that was defined by love, adventure, creativity, courage, and an independent spirit.

But to the followers of boat racing, she is best remembered for a brief involvement during three summers in the early 1980s as the driver of an Unlimited-class hydroplane. Known as Brenda Jones at the time, she became the first and only woman to qualify as a driver and enter competition in the sport's modern era.

Born in Minnesota and raised in Webster City, Iowa, her story as a boat racer began as a publicity stunt.

Pat O'Day gained fame in the Pacific Northwest as a renowned broadcaster on one of Seattle's most popular rock 'n' roll radio stations during the 1960s; was a highly successful concert promoter who handled the likes of The Beatles, Frank Sinatra, Jim Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Elton John, and Led Zepelin; and eventually became the owner of a Seattle FM radio station called KYYX. He also happened to be a huge fan of hydroplane racing.

In 1981, he purchased a boat that had previously seen action as *Miss Vernors*, *Miss Esquire Products*, and as *The Squire Shop*, named it *Miss KYYX*, and, ever the promoter, he decided he'd like to have a woman drive the boat.

Meanwhile, Brenda had lived in Iowa with her first husband, a man named Alan Jones, a Vietnam veteran who Bren-



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ABOVE: Brenda Jones returns *Miss KYYX* to the dock at the Stan Sayres Pits in Seattle after driving the boat for the first time.

RIGHT: With cameras watching, Brenda Jones prepares to drive *Miss KYYX* onto Lake Washington.

“I knew it was all for show for the news media. I knew that. And that was scarier than driving the boat.”

da would later admit had a huge case of PTSD. Jones enjoyed doing outlandish endurance stunts to raise money for charity. Branding himself as “Captain America” Jones, he once swam 620 miles down the Mississippi River in three weeks to celebrate the nation’s bicentennial, completed 48,000 consecutive rope skips without a miss, did 50,000 jumping jacks for the Marine Corps, and more than 50 times dived into pools of rattlesnakes or piranhas.

Brenda also joined in the act and once did 12,000 sit-ups in front of a radio station in a fundraiser for Easter Seals. In 1980, Jones took a job that caused him to move his family to Seattle, where they continued with the stunts. She did 15,000 sit-ups at the Seattle Boat Show. Jones would eventually meet Pat O’Day who, aware of the couple’s promotional exploits, asked Jones whether his wife might be interested in driving a hydroplane.

She had never seen an Unlimited hydroplane before. “He said he didn’t want anybody with any hydroplane experience at all, so he could tell them what to do, how to drive,” Brenda said in an interview for the *NewsJournal* that we published in 2017. “He knew that I had done all those sit-ups and he also knew you had to have endurance. A lot of it. And, well, the muscles, they would just come, I guess.”

Being familiar with the publicity-seeking antics of her husband, she clearly understood the true purpose of what she was doing. “I knew Pat



Rick Sullivan

was doing it for promotion, but I knew it was a once-in-a-lifetime thing if I could do it,” she said later. “I’ll go slow and take my time and see what happens. You know, it’s gonna be obvious. Either I can drive it or I can’t.”

After driving one of Don Kelson’s limited-class hydros in a race at Black Lake, she was coached in the finer techniques of driving an Unlimited by one of the best in the business: Bill Muncey. “He just looked up and said, ‘Anybody that can do 15,000 sit-ups can race an Unlimited hydroplane.’ He had confidence,” she remembered. “So that, of course, made me feel better. The better you feel, you know, the easier it is.”

Her first time in the cockpit came during a test session on Lake Washington. O'Day alerted the media, and with a crowd of curious reporters and race fans looking on, Chip Hanauer took the boat onto the lake first, turned a lap or two, then brought it back to the pits so Brenda could take her turn.

With a tendency to hook, the boat had a reputation for being difficult to drive. Jerry Bangs was killed when he was thrown from its cockpit at Seattle in 1978. Nevertheless, though she found that driving the boat wasn't easy, she didn't know the difference and thought they were all that way. She reportedly reached a top speed of about 145 mph during her first time in the boat. The drive made the front pages of the Seattle newspapers.

"I knew it was all for show for the news media. I knew that. And that was scarier than driving the boat," she laughed. "Television cameras scared me more than the boat scared me."

Her first Unlimited race was the 1981 Columbia Cup, where she qualified *Miss KYXX* at 112.923 mph, and finished last in her first heat—turning one lap at 93.624 mph. Despite the finish, those watching her first competitive heat were impressed by her start. "I can remember me and Bill Muncey always at the start,"



Brenda Jones and Pat O'Day in 1982.

she recalled. "And then, pshewww... You know, I'd be left behind, of course."

Two weeks later at the Gold Cup in Seattle, the boat failed to start its first heat and didn't finish the second. She then wrapped up the 1981 season with appearances in San Diego and at the World Championship race in Acapulco, Mexico, where she watched as her famous coach was killed in a blow-over accident during the final heat.

She believed Muncey might have hit debris in the water or missed the turn because he couldn't see. "Going down the back chute, the sun was so bright that it was like a different color," she remembered. "It was weird. The back straight-

away, you felt like you were not even on it. You felt like you were just going. You didn't know where you were going because it was so bright."

Brenda Jones's daughter, Wendy Little, says that the death of Bill Muncey had a big impact on her mother. "Why she was not enthusiastic about driving hydros, I'm not sure," Little says. "But I do know she was terrified after the Bill Muncey tragedy. She loved an adventure, but she was also a young mother. My mom said I would cry whenever she left to the pits. 'Mama, don't go!' She always replayed my words with the fear she heard in my voice. I can't imagine that was easy for her."

The 1982 season was her busiest. It started in mid-June with a failure to qualify for the Thunder-in-the-Park event in Romulus, New York, which ended with a victory by John Walters and *Pay 'n Pak*—the first by a turbine-powered boat. That was followed by an appearance at the Gold Cup in Detroit with the boat renamed *Miss CKLV*.

There, she had the opportunity to talk with a famous ex-baseball player. Pat O'Day always gave her the number of somebody he wanted her to call at a local radio station. "In Detroit, guess who I got to call? Joe Garagiola," she said. "I got to talk to him on the phone. Says, 'Well, thanks for calling. I'm going to send my son down.' So, he came down and inter-



Brenda Jones gives a wave to reporters before racing in Seattle.

viewed me.”

The boat wasn't able to start a heat in that event, but she did better at the Columbia Cup in the Tri-Cities, the race that was marred by the death of Dean Chenoweth. She qualified *Miss KYYX* at 107.784 mph and finished fifth in the day's first heat.

Next, at the Emerald Cup in Seattle, she qualified the boat at 105.165 mph. Because the event was operating with the Fan Plan format where separate heat sections were held for the fastest qualifiers and for the slowest entrants, *Miss KYYX* raced among the slow qualifiers. Within that group, she finished second behind Ron Snyder in *Kenney Toyota* in the first heat, then won the second heat by outpacing Jack Schafer, Jr., in *Tempus*. “I could hear the crowd over the Allison aircraft engine,” she recalled. “I could hear the crowd ‘yaying’ for me. It was so loud.”

Her best career contest finish came at the following race in San Diego, where she took third-place honors. She placed sixth in the event's second heat despite losing a skid fin in the process, though she didn't notice. “I didn't know I lost my skid fin,” she said. “It was just really wobbly, but as long as it was going half way, you know, still turning a little bit, I just wanted to finish. That was our whole

goal. Doesn't matter if you're going five miles an hour, just finish.” Another victory came in the consolation heat, which meant she could start the final, but the boat didn't make it to the finish line.

The following season was a disappointment. Pat O'Day realized that being an owner was too expensive, so he sold the boat to Bobbie Howard—or, thought he did. Money and paperwork issues meant the sale didn't go through, so O'Day took the boat back for the Seattle race and, with Brenda Jones behind the wheel, it raced as *Princess Yachts* and managed a fourth-place finish in the first heat.

Her driving career then ended at the 1983 Worlds Championship race in Houston, a race site that was not a favorite. “I did not have fun down there at all,” she said. “Worst place in the world.” With Bobbie Howard campaigning the hydro as *Miss Beco*, it failed to start a heat.

Wendy Little has fond memories of her mother's hydro years. “I was so young, but I remember the sounds of the boats and cranes and boats towering over. I remember being in the hangar and running around the gigantic boat. I vividly remember Uncle Al [crew chief Al Thoreson], my mom, and the crew working on the boats. The one thing my mom talked about the most were the in-



Courtesy of Wendy Little

Brenda Jones in recent years.

credible people she met, such as Uncle Al, the Littles, the Munceys, the O'Days, and many more.

“My aunts remembered flying in [from Iowa] to watch the races with my grandma not even knowing what a hydroplane was. Then to watch the races in disbelief that their little sister was capable of handling one of those. If anyone, it had to be Brenda.”

Little says that her mother went from being put into a boat not for competitive reasons but as more of a promotion, to being a legacy. “I am blown away with how many people who follow hydros really thought of her more than a ‘one-shot wonder’ in the hydro world. I think it always humbled her also to have such a following.”

Brenda Jones was proud of her accomplishment as the driver of *Miss KYYX* and the legacy she left as the first woman Unlimited hydroplane driver since World War II, her daughter says. “She had a gold hydroplane necklace made and she wore it all the time. I think what she was most proud of was raising me and she was so proud of her two grandchildren. They definitely inherited her competitiveness.

“I really want my mom to be remembered for not being afraid of what others said or thought in order to achieve goals or accomplishments,” Little adds. “She certainly lived this in her hydro era and beyond.” ❖



Brenda Jones brings *Miss KYYX* back to the dock at Tri-Cities after a run on the Columbia River.

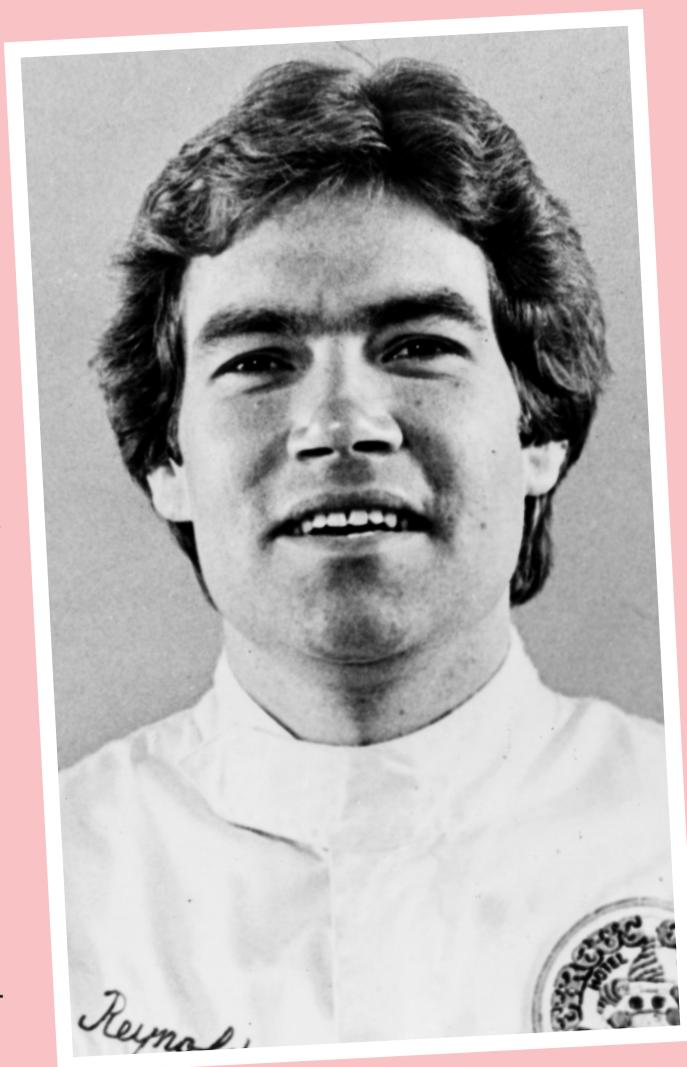
FROM THE UNJ VAULT:

A conversation with Steve Reynolds, Part 2

In last month's issue, we started a four-part series of interviews with Steve Reynolds, one of the most popular hydroplane drivers in the late 1970s and early '80s. Handsome, thoughtful, and outgoing, Reynolds was always a good interview subject for reporters and a polished public speaker for his sponsor and for the sport.

Born in Oakland, California, he moved to Mercer Island with his family when he was four years old. There, like many kids of his age at that time, he developed an instant fascination with hydroplanes. He later volunteered for the Marine Corps, served in Vietnam as a helicopter crewman, attended Long Beach State in California, and returned to Seattle when he was 26 years old. After watching a limited hydro race on Green Lake one day, he rekindled his interest in boat racing, bought a 225-class hydro, and went racing. That led to a Norm Berg hull named Pay 'n Pak that he drove to great success.

Last month, Reynolds talked about his first Unlimited ride: the Miss Circus Circus in 1978 and the new boat that the team introduced in 1979. The story



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continues this month with his recollections about the frustrations of racing for Circus Circus in 1980 and the introduction of the team's experimental (and controversial) four-point boat.

The complete interview was conducted by Craig Fjarlie in 1992 and was originally published in the September, October, and December 1992 issues of the Unlimited NewsJournal.

UNJ: To go on to the 1980 season, there had been quite a few changes to the Miss Circus Circus team.

Reynolds: A tremendous amount.

Rodger Ward was in the picture, Jim Harvey was out, they were going through crew chiefs.

That made a difference. Listen, Circus had eliminated both engineers—Dave Knowlen and Wayne Vincent were gone. Ed Fisher, the team manager, was to leave shortly after that. Jim Harvey was to leave—the leaving of Jim Harvey—I almost quit the team myself.

Jim was my rock. I depended on him for a lot of things. He was one of the guys I had total trust and faith in. He told me, when I got ready to go out, “Watch out, because the boat's going to do this, or going to do that”, or “I've got the wing set here and it's liable to do this.” We had that kind of rapport. Losing Jim Harvey... I almost quit. Bringing Rodger Ward in to manage the team...

I like Rodger very much, away from



The Miss Circus Circus team arrives at a race site.

Las Vegas News Bureau

boat racing. But I don't think Rodger was qualified to call all the shots. He had a lot of ideas that he wanted to make, and he had the background in racing, but he did not have the background in boats. One of Rodger's faults—and I don't want to sit here and criticize him—was that Rodger didn't listen to anybody else. Of course, it was his responsibility, and he had freedom to do what he wanted to do.

So, he brought in people that I felt were very unqualified to make the changes they were making. We ran relatively well down in Miami that year, however, we had brought as many as seven or eight propellers, all of which were supposed to be a little bit different. I couldn't tell the difference in any of 'em. None of 'em. The boat seemed to handle exactly the same with all the propellers.

We felt that we had that capability to change props and dial the boat in for a particular course; never change the wing nor the spoiler, just change propellers. And it didn't turn out that way. So, that was frustrating for us. We took a second down there that year.

Then, Evansville was the last place the boat ever ran competitively. Jim Kerth was now the crew chief. I think we ran 131 on a two-mile course, and Budweiser had a hard time staying with us. But when it got down to competition, we still could not get into the turn as early as Bud could. We could not accelerate with him, and how do you put pressure



Kirk Pagel

Reynolds returns from taking Miss Circus Circus on a test run on Lake Washington

on him, if you can't be right alongside with him? Pressure, to me, is intimidation. If you can intimidate somebody, then you're putting pressure on him. It was hard for Dean to be intimidated. We wound up taking a second there.

Things didn't go so well in Detroit.

By the time we'd gotten to Detroit, that's when I'd fly back to Seattle, drive the four-point boat, which I was very much against. They brought in Mickey Remund, which was a tremendous insult to me. Rodger Ward brought in another propeller man, who had never built a propeller for an Unlimited before, or a limited—he was doing drag racing props. He brought in a friend, Bill Bennett, whose theories were 20 years behind the times. He wanted to flatten the sponsons out and make like the bottom of a ski boat. So, the team was really falling apart internally. The boat was becoming very difficult to handle and not competitive at all.

We talked to you in Kansas that year, and you said, "We're 10 miles an hour slower and

don't understand it." You obviously...

Well, I was—you cannot, publicly, no matter how badly you want to, you cannot publicly say anything against your sponsor. And I would not do that. I would not come out against Bill Bennett, or Pennington, or Rodger Ward, or anybody else on the team. The hard thing to do was to play middle of the road and sound like I was optimistic about where we were going and the changes that we were doing.

That was the hard thing. I don't like to lie to the press, and that whole thing was a lie.

I knew the boat—when I said 10, it was probably 15 miles an hour slower. That's the first time that I was ever told how to drive. Rodger was telling me how to drive. "I want you here and I want you there." I would try to do that and could not drive his style of driving. I had gone away from what I knew, so it was frustrating on me, too.

And I was taking a lot of the heat for it. I don't know if it was because the information wasn't coming back to Bill Ben-



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Steve Reynolds during his frustrating 1980 season.

nett properly, or whatever, but he had a discussion with me. He flew me back from the Madison race. Flew me back to Las Vegas just to ask me a question: "Do you really want to be a hydroplane driver? Is that what you want to be?"

And I got mad. I felt at that time that not all the information as to the boat's performance that was getting back to him was correct. I thought that I was taking a lot of heat for that. So, I said, "Yes, I did." I told him then, "You have not given me the cherriest piece of equipment to drive. If you're that upset with my performance, if you think there's somebody who can get more out of it than I am, feel free to do it. I don't want to drive for you if you're not behind me."

He said, "No, I'm just asking, just questioning your motives. Are you putting into it everything that you can put into it?"

I said, "Under the circumstances, I am."

He said, "That's all I wanted to know." He flew me back to Seattle to test the boat.

The interesting thing, then, seems to be the flow of information, the chain of command on the team at that time. Were Bennett and Pennington not attending the races as often, and relying on other people to do things for them? Not getting the information?

Well, you see, the way it was structured is, Pennington



Sandy Ross Collection

Miss Circus Circus at the dock in the Tri-Cities.

Tony Bugeja Collection



Sandy Ross Collection



Bob Greenhow



TOP: Renolds in the cockpit of *Miss Circus Circus* in Seattle. **MIDDLE:** The crew changes an engine on the boat during the 1980 race in Madison, Indiana. **ABOVE:** Steve Reynolds and *Miss Circus Circus* in San Diego.

did not have the interest in the boats that Bill Bennett did. Pennington was there because he was there to have a good time.

This was Bennett's personal little thing. He wanted performance, but the way he wanted it set up is, somebody had been delegated the responsibility all the way from team manager down to the guy that was going to clean the toilets in the shop. Everything was covered there. He did not want to get involved in the internal politics of the boat racing operation. It's just, "You guys put it together, I hired these people to do this job, when I get to the race, I'll watch it run, when it's done running, I'll fly back."

He hired people to do that, and that's the way it was. So, he hired Rodger, and Rodger had full authority to do virtually anything that he wanted to do. I don't know that all of the information was getting back to Bennett, and I don't know that he wanted to hear it. The boat's either running or it's not. And he got to the point where he was disappointed.

He knew that there was a lot of dissension among the crew. He knew that we were not getting along well with Rodger. Yet, he is extremely loyal to the people that he hires. He doesn't like to fire anybody. I think that he felt that Rodger is a man who had spent most of his life in racing itself, and that he was a man who deserved some respect in a position of team manager, and he gave Rodger the room to either sink or swim on his own; to see what happened.

They had Jim Kerth for a while as crew chief. Then he was out and Bob Espland came in.

Well, we really didn't have anybody. **Lucero helped out for a while.**

Yeah, by the time we went to Pasco, they'd fired Kerth. We had gone through, probably, five engines, complete, by the time we got to Pasco. The year before we had only lost one. Same engines. So, they felt it had to be something Kerth was doing or was not doing. He was extremely upset. You know, Jim is not one to be tactful when he gets mad and teed



ABOVE: Steve Reynolds on the bow of the experimental four-point *Miss Circus Circus* after returning from its test run on Lake Washington in 1980. **LEFT:** The radically designed boat on its trailer.

off on Rodger several times. Told Bennett exactly what he felt. So, he was not somebody that Rodger Ward could get along with at all, because Kerth just called a spade a spade.

So, they let Kerth go. Then we really didn't have a crew chief. Espland just kinda stepped into the role, so to speak. He didn't want to stand up and say, "I am the crew chief." Bob was great at teaching, and the kids that we had working for us at the time, Tracy and Dan and Mike—absolutely loved Bob. Bob was great working with those kids. He would make suggestions and he would set 'em up, and then they would do the work themselves and they felt like they were accomplishing some-

thing. So indirectly, Bob was a stabilizing factor—that and my dad—just because the two of them were older. So, we ran two races, three races, actually without a real crew chief.

I felt that my job—I felt that I would either be fired or I would quit, after the Seattle race. I had gotten very frustrated. I knew the boat was competitive, I knew we'd been taking strides backwards.

Too many people had their finger in the fire. We made too many changes. The boat was difficult to drive. We made so many changes, every time I went out, I never knew what the boat was going to do from one heat to the next. They hired Lucero as

He knew that there was a lot of dissension among the crew. He knew that we were not getting along well with Rodger. Yet, he is extremely loyal to the people that he hires.



The four-point *Miss Circus Circus* viewed from behind at a dock in Seattle.

a consultant, but there was very little that Jim could do. He would just say, “Well, tell me how it feels.”

They would make changes every heat that I would go out and race. We would change the wing or the spoiler or the prop, and in some cases, we had done all three! Never knew what the boat was going to do. Now, believe me, when you go out there to do battle with five other guys, you want to know what’s underneath you. I never had that confidence underneath me. As a result, I probably lost 15 pounds from the beginning of the season to the end of the season.

I knew after Seattle, when I had gotten back and the boat could only qualify in the ‘teens, and that was as fast as it would go, 140 miles an hour, wouldn’t go any faster—I got back and Bennett asked me, “What’s wrong with the boat?”

And I remember getting mad and throwing my helmet across the truck and I said, “Can’t you see? The thing is a piece of junk. It’s not competitive anymore. Maybe the people that are making the decisions don’t know what they’re doing. Maybe we should stand back, and go back to square one, where we know the boat ran well, then we’ll take it from there. See if we can get some kind of competitive performance out of a boat that is competitive and now is not.”

Bennett turned around and walked

out. I figured, well, I said what I wanted to say. It probably cost me my job. But I would rather not do this than to race this way.

From there you went down to Utah.

Should have won the race when Muncey went out with an oil pressure problem, with just *The Squire Shop* and *Circus* out there. We had beaten the *Squire* handily in the beginning of the day. But doing all the rest of the things to the hull. Espland kept telling Rodger, “If you don’t pay attention to some of these other systems, you’re going to have a fail-

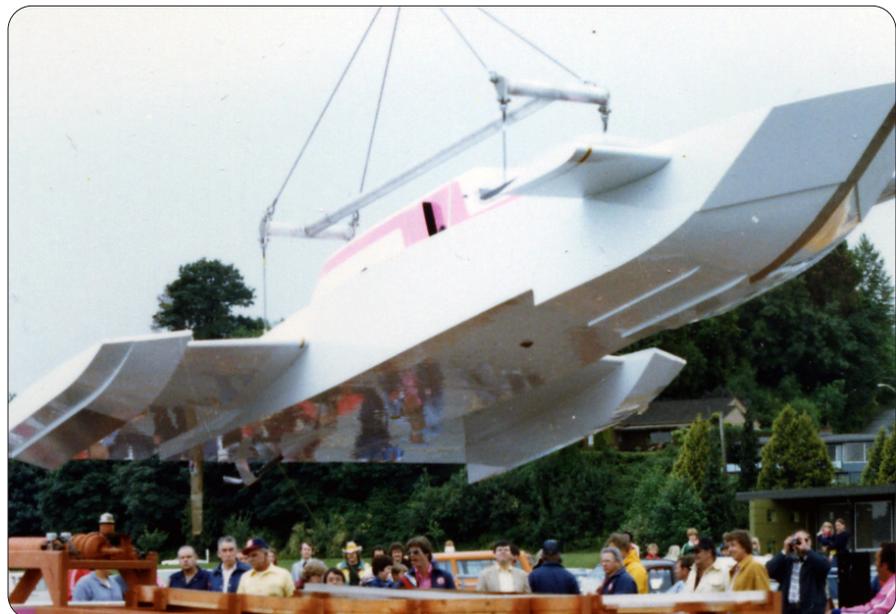
ure somewhere.” You have to do standard maintenance to the hull, and we weren’t doing any.

We were either changing sponsors or adding air traps or takin’ ‘em away or playing with skid fins or playing with propellers, never looked at the rest of the systems. The nitrous oxide system failed. Had a short in the button on the steering wheel. Without nitrous oxide, in Utah at that altitude, the boat might as well have been the *Kawaguchi Travel*. It was just terrible.

It was embarrassing, and I didn’t find out until later that Bennett blamed me for that. He thought I made a bad start. But, actually, when I hit the nitrous oxide button, nothing happened and the engine just quit. Then I’d get off the button and it’d start again. I’d hit the button and it quit. Everybody went off and left me. I think I passed three or four boats in the first turn, but the *Squire* was out in front and without nitrous, just running with virtually a stock engine, I couldn’t catch him. But I wound up taking the heat for that.

Your relationship with Circus Circus ended in San Diego.

I had told them, at that time in Seattle, after I tested the four-point before



The running surfaces on the underside of the four-point *Miss Circus Circus*.

going down there, “I don’t ever want to drive that boat again.” If that’s the boat you want to run next year, and you’ll run this one as a second boat, I’ll be your second driver. You can hire Mickey Remund, anybody else you want to drive that four-point. If that’s your number one boat, then hire somebody to be your number one driver. I don’t ever want to drive it again. I think it’s dangerous; I think it’s going to kill somebody.”

You did drive it in San Diego.

Very reluctantly. Rodger came up to me and he said, “We want to put on an exhibition.” I said, “I told you I never want to drive that boat again.” So, he went over and asked Muncey, and Muncey said that he would take it out.

Bennett said, “No, Reynolds is going to take it out.”

So, Rodger came up and said, “Mr. Bennett said you’re going to take it out.”

I said, “All right. I’m not going over 75 miles an hour. I’ll do it two laps, I’ll bring it back in, and I don’t ever want to sit in that boat again.” So, I did. I took it around for two laps and was lucky I didn’t run into the side of Fiesta Island over there. I couldn’t make the thing turn. I tried to make it look—when you would get the boat over 80 miles an hour, then it had a tendency to fishtail all over the place. A terrible wallowing in the water. So, I kept it at a point where it looked half way respectable. Brought it back, and that was it.

How about the race itself?

The boat was so bad, performance-wise, it just, I mean, I was, I did not have—when you go out for a final heat, or you go out for a heat race knowing that three of the four boats that you’re going to race against are 10 to 15 to 20 miles an hour faster than you are, that you can’t accelerate, that it won’t run decently down the straightaway, that you’re building so much manifold pressure, that the hull is riding so poorly and so flat on the water, that you really don’t have a competitive machine, it’s hard to work yourself up into a competitive state



Bob Greenhow

Steve Reynolds drives the four-point *Miss Circus Circus* on Mission Bay in San Diego in 1980.

of mind.

I had a difficult time doing that. Difficult time not teeing off, and a difficult time taking all the heat from the media, the public. A difficult time accepting all that. Wanting to say, “Hey, this is not my fault,” but still taking all the abuse for it. Still didn’t say anything. The boat broke in the final heat, and they towed me back in. After I got to the dock, it was 10 minutes later that they fired me.

Perhaps not much of a surprise to you.

None whatsoever. But I didn’t think that they would do it that way. They came down to the pits before I had taken my uniform off. Rodger and the Circus attorney asked if they could see me in the motor home. I knew instantly what was going to happen. It just shocked me that they would do it there at that time, while they were still putting the boat on the trailer.

So, they threw everybody out of the motor home, took me in, and told me that I failed to communicate well with the management, and that I was too vocal in the press about the four-point, and they didn’t feel that I gave 100 percent competitive effort during the 1980 season. I told ‘em they could stick it where the sun don’t shine; they’d insulted me.

What disappointed me was that Bill Bennett himself didn’t come down

and tell me. After that race I really had planned to leave San Diego and go to Las Vegas and talk to Bennett and tell him I was not happy with the way things were going. I was not happy with who was running it or how it was being run. I wasn’t happy with the four-point, and that probably the best thing for me and the best thing for Circus Circus was to part as friends.

I just never had the opportunity. That disappointed me. I thought I had a real good relationship with Bill Bennett. He still is a very nice man.

Before you ever got into the four-point, the first time, before you ever had a chance to drive it, did you think it may have had any potential, or were you skeptical of it from day one?

Skeptical from day one.

Had you ever seen the model run?

Oh sure, even drove it.

Oh, did you?

Yeah. Ed Fisher and his father are tremendous model builders. But I think that they were really out of their element when they tried to take the dimensions of a 26-inch model and blow it up to a 32-foot-size boat.

There are a number of things that are not consistent. The density of the water and how buoyant it is on a model that weighs about 12 pounds is not the same as it is on a boat that weighs 8,000

pounds. So, Bennett wanted to build that four-point from the very beginning. Before we built the three.

Oh, is that right?

Oh sure. He had asked Fisher and his father, before he even got into racing, if they would build an Unlimited like their little model boat. So, nobody on the team was for it. Before we got it built, it took a couple trips on my part down to Las Vegas, talking to Bennett, to at least let us give all the figures, let Dave Knwlen take all those figures, take them to Boeing, and pay the money to have a feasibility study done.

Well, Boeing did that for us. I have no idea how much it cost, but they did that. It took 'em about three weeks, and they came back, and their suggestions were that if we strike a wave any more than about six inches, with the way that it was designed to be built, that the boat would break in half, right behind the cockpit. They didn't know if it would displace enough square footage to even float.

They thought that the rear sponsons might be under water, and if we hadn't made some changes, they certainly would have been. They felt that the void created in the water—the depth of the propeller—that there would be a trough created by that front shoe that would not allow the prop any water to bite, and that it would have to be designed completely different, because the way that the stress was divided up and down the hull, that it would not hold together. The bottom would split out, the thing would break in half, the engine would fall out.

Their suggestion was that if we were going to stay with that concept, to make it into a delta wing, almost. To put the steering up front. Their correlation was like a tricycle. A tricycle corners extremely well.

Yeah, a bow rudder.

Put the rudder up in the bow. All those suggestions. Bennett went with the people that designed it, the Fishers, and didn't believe in that feasibility study. My

suggestion, then, was listen, if we're going to do this, let's take it in small stages. I wanted to build a limited-sized version of it, so we'd go out and test that.

But Bennett said the cheapest thing he could do was build a hydroplane. He said, "If I build a limited and it works, then I'm a year behind. No, I'll just build the Unlimited." It was very hard for me to approach it open-minded.

The very first time I sat in it, I drove it—we probably put it in the water three times before we ever got it to run. It wouldn't get out of its own way, and it burned holes in the banks.

Wouldn't plane

No, couldn't get it up on a plane. So, when I came back after finally driving it for the first time, it was hard for me to put into words. The only thing I could say to them was, "I have been in a boat that's competitive. I know what a competitive performance is. I can tell when a boat has got minor problems to it. I still can tell you whether it's going to be a competitive machine, or not. This boat gives me absolutely zero indication that it will ever come to the point where it's drivable in race conditions.

Whether it is ever competitive..." I said, "I just don't think that it will ever achieve any kind of success, whatsoever. That's just what I sense. All of my instincts tell me."

Did it surprise you, the next year, when the boat qualified for a couple of races?

I don't think it ever qualified. I think the Unlimited Commission...

Helped it in?

Sure. I've never seen a boat qualify at 100,000. Go to Pasco and run 80 and 85 miles an hour laps and then go back out and do 100? I think they gave it to 'em. They would have given it to them in Seattle. They got the boat up to 130 and they said they were making progress.

I had the boat up to 130 several times. The only way to keep it at 130 was to keep it in a big corner. Once you got it started turning; if you kept power in,

you couldn't stop it from turning. It had a tendency to go anywhere it wanted to. The boat would fishtail from one side to the other until it found clean water to bite into. There was a trough right in the middle, a void there. It would slide off to one side or the other until it got a bite.

And so, I was working the wheel back and forth, back and forth, to try and keep it going straight, because it would fishtail so bad. Actually, the prop was just sliding around until it found water to bite in, then it would bite, push the boat off to one side. I'd compensate for it with the steering wheel.

They took video tapes of it and accused me of sabotaging the boat—one of the guys that Rodger Ward had hired. "Look at the film, Steve's moving his hands back and forth. I think he's doing it intentionally..."

It was a joke, the whole thing got to be a joke, and I'm glad to get out of there.

Is Bill Bennett still convinced that could be a possibility? Is he still working on that project?

From what I understand. They built a 20-foot, 7-litre that they're testing. They put a couple rudders on it and changed the sponsons, turned the boat around a little. That's achieved more success than it has in the past. Working on it for a year and a half, testing and running it and whatnot, and it seems to be doing very well—better, let's put it that way, without being there, just listening to what they're doing.

If that thing proves successful, it would not surprise me to have Bill Bennett build another one. In fact, I think he'll have Jim Lucero build it and put turbine engines in it. And build it out of foam and Kevlar. Lightweight. They think that weight is the only problem. I don't know who they'd find to drive it. ❖

The story will continue next month in part three of our interview with Steve Reynolds. He'll talk about driving Captran Resorts in 1981, and more. Be sure to watch for it.

AROUND THE CIRCUIT

Race Team and Race Site News by Chris Tracy



The Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum (HARM) hosted a retirement party on January 17 for longtime HARM executive director, David Williams. With a Seattle Seahawk playoff game being played that day, the museum shuffled the time around to an early-afternoon affair. The event was well attended by past and present museum volunteers, board members, and friends.

Williams mingled with the large crowd. There was a brief presentation. Teri Fornwalt, assistant to the HARM executive director, presented David and Linda Williams with lifetime memberships to the museum. Longtime volunteer, Peter Orton, said he had heard that Williams would mainly write in retirement; Orton presented Williams with a handmade light for his writing desk.

In Williams's brief remarks, he noted that his friend Brad Haskins was taking over for him and that the museum was in good hands.



Silly Season

The off-season is sometimes called the silly season, as this is the time when Unlimited rumors circulate. Sometimes the rumors are true, sometimes there is only a shred of truth to them, and sometimes they aren't true. Here's what is going around now. I would not bet the farm on any of them.

Start Procedure: Some are saying that a different starting procedure has been recommended to H1 by the competition committee, more like Grand Prix starts. One rumor says that "fight for lanes" is gone. (For more information, see the article about this topic elsewhere in this issue of the *NewsJournal*.)

The Bucket List Team: Rumor is circulating that Sharon and Kelly Stocklin will campaign their U-40 in 2026 for at least part of the season. Dylan Runne is being considered to drive.

Decatur, Illinois: A rumor was going around this fall that H1 was planning to race in Decatur, Illinois, in 2026. Some had said that H1 was expected to make the race announcement before Christmas. Christmas has come and gone.

Beacon: Will Beacon Plumbing sponsor one or two boats in 2026?

Jimmy Shane: Jimmy Shane gets to pick the boat he wants to drive for Bruce Ratchford. We assume his choice is between "Sharky," the boat that raced most of last season as *Miss Apollo*, and the U-27 boat that was built by Charley Wiggins and that crashed at Guntersville last year.

San Diego: The San Diego race is considered "iffy" for 2026. We understand that APBA has told H1 that if the season doesn't include at least four races, a national champion can't be crowned. ❖



Scenes from the party at the Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum celebrating the retirement of David Williams, the museum's executive director for more than 30 years.

Photos by Chris Tracy

MY \$0.02 WORTH

Editorial Comment by Andy Muntz



How to start a hydroplane race

Here we go again.

We hear from reliable sources that H1 Unlimited is considering a proposal to change the starting procedure for the races in 2026. We've been down this road before—many times.

In 2019, I was asked to give a presentation at the annual H1 meetings about the history of the sport's starting procedure. I was later given the opportunity to chair a committee for H1 Unlimited that looked at the starting procedure and to come up with some recommended improvements.

In doing that, I realized there are several truths about starting hydroplane races and there are some interesting patterns.

About 35 years ago, a new problem emerged within the sport. The rules up to that point required the boats to maintain a speed between the one-minute gun and the start of the race that was fast enough for the boats to be on a plane, which the rule book defined as "a speed sufficient to create minimum wake, and at all times shall maintain a planing attitude." In other words, not plowing through the water.

The rule worked when the sport was dominated by the old shovel-nosed hydros—boats that were slow to accelerate from a stop. But as turbines became more common in the 1980s, transoms got wider, and the area between the sponsons grew larger, the boats were better able to accelerate quickly from a slow speed and the line between being on a plane and not became difficult to judge.

Drivers will go to extreme measures to gain an advantage on the racecourse, and if the rules provide any tiny loophole, they'll find it and barge right through.

Getting the inside lane at the start provides a huge advantage, which led drivers to use the uncertainty of what's on a plane to their advantage. Drivers would camp their boats into a preferred lane before the start, even if doing so meant going so slow that a person paddling a dingy would speed past them. Then, as the last few seconds ticked down toward the start, they'd hit the accelerator and off they would go.

Many in boat racing saw the tactic as an abomination—certainly not the kind of thing a fan wants to see from the world's fastest race boats.

Consequently, the sport has been engaged in a constant battle against the problem of park-and-go starts, or what is often described as trolling, during most of the past four decades. A great many different ways to start a race have been dedicated to this effort, but a solution has so far been elusive. With every attempt, a loop hole is left that drivers are eager to exploit. No matter what's tried, something always doesn't work.

Looking at the issue closer, the rules that regulate the start of a hydro race fall into three general categories: time, lanes, and speed. Let's go over each of them.

Time: Clock or flag?

The traditional way of starting a boat race is with a clock that runs backwards. The driver should know before leaving the dock how much time remains until the clock hits zero and the race begins. The driver's challenge is to reach the starting line at the instant the clock hits zero. If they arrive too soon, they will receive a penalty; if they get there too late, somebody else will probably cross the line ahead of them and they will spend

the race trying to catch up.

The alternative is a flag start, like what you'll see at a car race. The cars line up and make their run to the starting line and, if the referee likes how the cars are lined up, a green flag will be waved and the race is underway. A flag start is easy for fans to understand because they see it whenever they watch a NASCAR race or an Indy Car race, but it eliminates a special skill that only boat racers possess and take great pride in.

There have been past efforts to implement flag starts in Unlimited racing, but they always eventually run into opposition by the participants, who see clock start as an important skill that make boat racers special in the world of motor sports.

Lanes: From which lane will you start?

The traditional way to start a boat race is with the drivers trying to outmaneuver each other in fighting for lanes as they are also timing their run to the start. The alternative is to assign each driver to a lane that they must be in when the race gets underway, like they do in a car race.

Again, assigning lanes is contrary to the nature of being a boat racer; drivers take pride in that part of the job. Many people feel that the clock start and fighting for lanes is what makes boat racing special, and serious fans know that it's those two things that help make the sport so appealing. It's the race before the race that often makes the difference.

But it's confusing to casual spectators.

I remember many years ago trying to explain how a boat race starts to a group of tourists from New Jersey who were in Seattle to catch a cruise ship and

had never heard of hydroplane racing before. They had a look of complete befuddlement on their faces as they tried to make sense of what they were watching.

Many ways of assigning lanes for an Unlimited race have been tried over the

years. There have been random draws, they've been assigned based on qualifying speeds, on the standings in national points, on the points a driver has earned

so far in that race, and so on. However, no matter what method is tried, it typ-

ically ends up being scrapped because the drivers hate it and want to fight for lanes. They feel that's what makes them who they are.

Starting procedures over the years

YEAR:	THE ISSUE NEEDING A SOLUTION:	THE RESULTING START PROCEDURE:
1990		Traditional start procedure in place: Clock start. Fight for lanes. Boats must remain on a plane after one-minute gun.
1991	Races are too confusing. Officials want a start procedure that will be appealing on TV and familiar to fans who watch other motor sports.	Fan Plan adopted (fast qualifiers vs. slow qualifiers, fast vs. slow). On-a-plane rule remains, everything else changes. Flag start (when properly lined up). Lanes assigned by random draw.
1992	Drivers don't like randomly assigned lanes. Want lanes assignments based on merit.	Fan Plan and flag starts continue. Lanes are assigned by qualifying order, then by order of finish in previous heats.
1993	Fan Plan is scrapped. Heats are assigned by random draw.	No change in start procedure.
1995	Desire to "shake things up" and give slower boats a better chance.	Flag start and on-a-plane rule continue. Lanes are assigned by qualifying order, then by inverse order of finish in previous heats, and then by points earned.
1996	The Unlimited Hydroplane Racing Association (UHRA) is formed.	No change in start procedure.
1997	Drivers ask for return of clock start.	No change in start procedure. Too many issues (cost, maintenance) involved in conversion back to clock starts.
1998	Drivers still want return of clock start.	Clock start returns. On-a-plane rule continues. Fight for lanes, but lanes are established at entrance pin to turn two. Score-up buoy to eliminate trolling (position depends on racecourse).
1999	Outcome of races is too predictable. Trolling continues.	No change in start procedure. Boats with consecutive victories can't start from inside lanes.
2000	Outcome of races is still too predictable. Park-and-go starts become an issue.	No change in start procedure. Fuel-flow restrictions for previous race winners.
2001	Hydro-Prop buys the sport. The entire rule book is rewritten. Top priority is to get rid of park-and-go starts, improve competitiveness.	Flag start returns. Score-up buoy is introduced, placed according to racecourse. Lanes are assigned by qualifying order, then by inverse order of finish in previous heats, and then by points earned (same as 1995).
2004	Three race sites hold events that are not sanctioned by Hydro-Prop.	No change in start procedure.
2005	Revolt against Hydro-Prop. American Boat Racing Association (ABRA) is formed. "It is time to let the drivers drive again."	Clock start and fight for lanes return. Score-up buoy moved to exit pin of turn one. Boats must hold lanes after score-up buoy.
2008	Race sites are not happy. The trolling continues, but at the other end of the racecourse on approach to score-up buoy.	Score-up buoy is eliminated. Clock start and fight for lanes continue. On-a-plane rule returns.

Speed: Don't go too slow

This is the battlefield where the combat against trolling has been waged in recent years. This is also the category that has produced the most controversial solutions. To prevent a boat from poking

along in a preferred lane, as though its driver is fishing for trout, several methods have been tried.

The most common of these attempts to regulate speed has been the score-up buoy, which is an imaginary line that the

driver is forbidden to cross before a certain time remains on the starting clock. In theory, this eliminates trolling to the starting line because passing the score-up buoy at or after the appointed time shouldn't leave the driver enough time to

YEAR:	THE ISSUE NEEDING A SOLUTION:	THE RESULTING START PROCEDURE:
2009(A)	The "on a plane" rule is too difficult to enforce.	Clock start. No rule to regulate speed before start. Lanes are assigned by qualifying order, then by inverse order of points earned in previous heats.
2009(B)	New rule was immediately disliked. After first race, owners decide to return to 2008 rules.	Fight for lanes and on-a-plane rule return. Clock start continues.
2010	Trolling returns.	Lanes are assigned using first 2009 system. Clock start continues. Renewed attempt to enforce "on a plane" rule. (ABRA adopts the name H1 Unlimited.)
2011(A)	The "on a plane" rule is again too difficult to enforce.	Score-up buoy returns, placed at the exit pin of turn one. Clock start continues. Fight for lanes returns, establish lanes at entrance to turn two. Boats must pass the official tower at least once before start. Overlap rule reduced to five boat lengths before start.
2011(B)	The trolling returns approaching the score-up buoy. Concerns about ingesting salt water at San Diego and Doha.	Score-up buoy is dropped (no rule to regulate speed before start). Clock start continues. Lanes are assigned by random draw.
2012	The "on a plane" rule again too difficult to enforce.	Score-up buoy returns, placed at exit pin from turn one. Clock start continues. Fight for lanes returns, establish lanes at entrance pin to turn two. Minimum speed of 100 mph, monitored by GPS transmitter.
2013	GPS system too difficult to implement.	Rules are the same as 2012, but without GPS system.
2014(A)	Trolling continues.	Clock start and fight for lanes continue. Minimum-speed rule is introduced, enforced by referee's judgment.
2014(B)	Minimum-speed rule seems to be working.	Clock start and fight for lanes continue. Score-up buoy is eliminated at mid-season.
2016	Trolling continues. GPS strobe lights became available.	Clock start and fight for lanes continue. Minimum speed of 80 mph before start, monitored by a strobe light on engine cowling.
2018	San Diego wants more competitive racing.	(San Diego only) Minimum-speed rule eliminated. Assigned lanes based on national points, then by inverse order of points in previous heats.
2019	San Diego wants more competitive racing.	(San Diego only) Minimum-speed rule eliminated. Establish lanes at entrance pin to turn two.
2021	Strobe lights are not reliable and difficult for officials to see.	Clock start and fight for lanes continues. 80 mph minimum-speed rule continues. Data recorder monitors speed, N2, and fuel flow. Checked at end of race. DSQ for violations.
2024	Minimum-speed rule was disliked and caused too much confusion. "Winner should be boat that crosses finish line first."	Minimum-speed rule eliminated. Clock start continues. Score-up buoy placed at start/finish line, time before start set by racecourse. Fight for lanes, establish lanes at entrance pin to turn two.
2026	Recommendation to eliminate fight for lanes.	To be determined.

troll before reaching the starting line. But theories don't always work as they were intended. What ends up happening is that the trolling simply gets moved to the area of the racecourse where the score-up buoy has been placed.

For example, this last time around with the rule changes of 2024, the score-up buoy was set at the start/finish line, then the boats had to go around another lap before they officially started. Not only did the trolling eventually return, but because of where the score-up buoy was placed, fans on the beach were also confused about which of the two approaches to the starting line was actually the real start.

But there was more. In a further effort to eliminate trolling, another layer of the rule said that a boat wasn't committed to a lane until it reached the entrance pin to the final turn before making their final run to the start. But, as we learned last season, that also didn't work. Lacking a realistic opportunity to change lanes after the score-up buoy had been passed, the drivers started camping in lanes and trolling before they reached the score-up buoy.

The other infamous method for reg-

ulating speed and preventing trolling was the minimum-speed rule that simply says a boat can't drop below a certain speed before the start. While the concept has merit, enforcing this rule has always been the biggest challenge.

The minimum speed was initially set at 100 mph, but when GPS systems couldn't be tracked properly, enforcement was left to a judgment call by the referee. Nobody liked that, of course—including the referees. At one point, strobe lights that flashed when a boat dropped below the minimum speed were used to enforce the rule, but that didn't work, either. They didn't always work and the referees found the lights too hard to see.

Until the latest batch of rule changes were made in 2024, the boats had to maintain a speed of 80 mph as they prepared for the start. Keeping them honest was a data recorder on each boat that kept track of their speed and, if they went too slow, it meant disqualification—because that is the only option once the race is over and the boats are already sitting on their trailers.

The severe consequence of violating the rule, plus the mind-bending concept of having one the world's fastest boats

lose a race for going too slow, led to the eventual demise of the minimum-speed rule.

The consequence of changing the starting procedure to eliminate trolling has always been an exercise that would make Sir Isaac Newton proud, because it shows that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If you eliminate the minimum-speed rule, you get trolling. If you implement a score-up buoy, you just move the trolling somewhere else. If you implement a flag start or assign lanes, the drivers will eventually become unhappy.

Check out the chart that goes along with this story. It chronicles how this question has been addressed time and time again during the past 35 years. Pay attention to the changes that have been tried and to the reasons each idea was eventually discarded. You'll see that this merry-go-round has already gone around several times.

Sometimes it pays to stop and take a look at history, otherwise we might be doomed to keep repeating it. ❖

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