



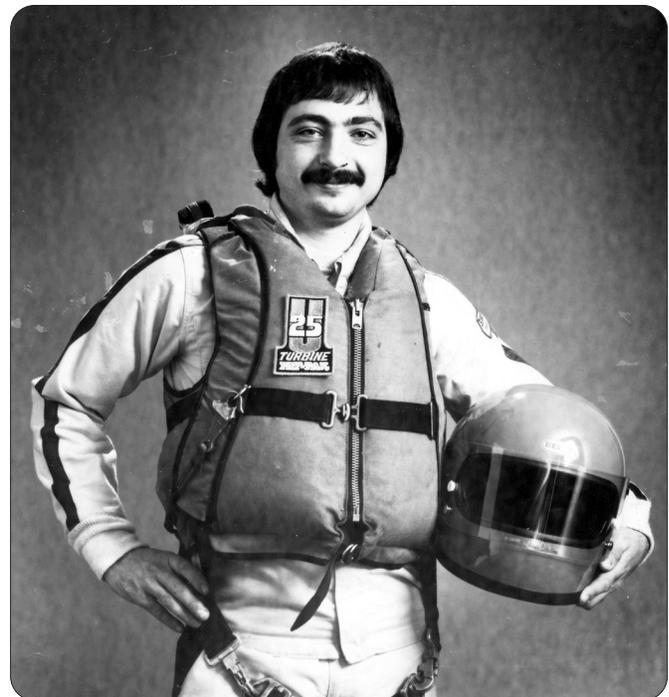
## UNJ INTERVIEW: PART THREE

# John Walters drives the turbine *Pay 'N Pak*.

In part one of our interview with John Walters, he talked about his early involvement with boat racing, starting in outboard classes. He later moved to inboard boats and worked for Ron Jones in Costa Mesa, California, where he proved his mechanical aptitude and woodworking skills. Walters discussed his work on the crew of *Red Man* and *Miss Vernors* and his employment with boat builder Don Kelson in the second part of this series. He also moved over to Bill Muncey Industries and was working on the *Atlas Van Lines* crew with Jim Lucero. In part three we'll learn what happened in 1980 when Dave Heerensperger decided to build a turbine-powered *Pay 'N Pak* and hired Jim Lucero to head that project. The interview was conducted by Craig Ejarlie.

**UNJ: Well, Dave Heerensperger made a decision to get a turbine boat.**

Walters: Yup.



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

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**“And, you know, I was young at the time. I was eager. I was willing to learn and adapt to do whatever was necessary.”**

**How did the whole process come together? How did he come up with crewmembers without stealing them all from Muncey?**

You know, Bill Muncey was always an ambassador for the sport and always looking to make improvements in the sport, and that meant securing its future, as well. Bill, of course, purchased all of the equipment from Dave Heerensperger. After a couple of years, Dave decided that it might be a fun thing to come back and do it again. There were a couple of meetings at lunch. There were a couple of other meetings where Jim [Lucero] and Dave Heerensperger got together and talked about things.

Dave Heerensperger had a great amount of respect and loyalty to the crew chief that had made his *Pay ‘N Pak* teams work and made ‘em famous, really. So, Dave wanted to go racing again, but Dave didn’t want to go racing again starting from scratch. He wanted to come in and be competitive right off the get-go. Wanted, you know, help to ensure and guarantee that as much as possible and, of course, he wanted Jim Lucero to be his boat designer and crew chief.

Jim had talked with me about that a bunch of times. He’d also talked with Bill Muncey about it a bunch of times. Jim was pretty confident that we could go start another team, enhance the sport, make things better and at the same time still have enough time, at least on an advisory capacity, to keep the Bill Muncey Industries effort respectable, as well.

Bill was in favor of it. Again, anything to help the sport and whatever it took to make things work there. Jim came to me one afternoon and we went to lunch and talked about things and he kin-

da explained to me what was goin’ on. He paid me the ultimate compliment and said that I’ve got an amazing opportunity here to go racing with *Pay ‘N Pak* and Dave Heerensperger again. I won’t do it unless you come with me.

**Oh!**

And again, that was one of the most amazing compliments anybody had given me in my racing career. So when I agreed to do that there was, build the boat, do the installation of the hardware and the rigging and all that sort of thing, and at that point in time there was never really a thought in my mind that I was gonna drive this boat. You know, you always hoped that things like that could happen and I was hoping that the stepping stones and the things that I was laying in place, it was going to lead to an eventual ride in an Unlimited hydroplane, but I honestly didn’t expect that it was gonna be, you know, that day and at that time.

So naturally I accepted the offer. We started looking for buildings and shops and gathering equipment and everything while still working with Bill Muncey and guaranteeing that, you know, his boat was gonna get done and that his effort was gonna be good. We got all moved into the shop and everything. The turbines started showing up and we ordered the honeycomb and started laying out the boat and getting ready to build this thing.

I was still continuing to race boats. I was driving boats for Mike Jones, the *Ragged Edge* 280 and different rides as they presented themselves. As the boat was getting closer to being finished, we used to run on Green Lake in May...

**Sure.**

...and usually we’d get to go to Green Lake and I’d get to drive on Green Lake before we’d leave

On Thursday, July 24, 1980, a large crowd of hydro fans gathered at the Stan Sayres Pits on Lake Washington to witness the christening and first test runs of the new turbine-powered U-25 *Pay ‘N Pak*.

Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum





Boat owner Dave Heerensperger (left) and John Walters at the debut of the *Pay 'N Pak*.

for Miami or whatever the first race was. That particular weekend I think I was driving boats in seven different classes. Dave Heerensperger, of course, came to the race, you know, to watch the races and all. I won first place in five of the seven classes that I raced in and was second and third, I think, in the other two.

Later on that week when it was getting time to make an announcement on who was gonna drive the boat, there were several discussions with Jim Lucero, Dale VanWieringen who was giving us a hand at that point in time, even Bill Muncey and myself. And Dave Heerensperger thought that it would be best to

get someone who didn't have any Unlimited experience, who didn't have any, you know, a lot of experience with a Merlin or Allison. In his words, "I think we ought to get somebody and train 'em to do what we want rather than get somebody with a bunch of habits and try to adapt them to what we want."

**Yeah, yeah.**

Again, at that time I wasn't clever enough to pick up, you know, on the idea or the fact here that they were talkin' about me. So later on, there was another discussion with Dale VanWieringen and Dale made the comment to Jim that, yeah, John has won races and every boat that he's been in he's managed to win races in—boats that other people struggled to drive. And, you know, I was young at the time. I was eager. I was willing to learn and adapt to do whatever was necessary.

And, uh, Dave Heerensperger came to the shop one day and he asked me if I had time to do him a favor. And how do you tell the boss, "No"? [Laughter.] "Yes, sir, of course I do." And he gave me this address and he said, "I need for you to go downtown to this address." Honestly I should, but I don't remember the person's name that I was supposed to ask for, and I was most of the way there before I realized that I was going to the *Seattle*

*Times* and I was about to make the announcement that I was gonna drive Dave Heerensperger's new *Pay 'N Pak* turbine-powered hydroplane, so...

**OK.**

It was kind of a surprise. I guess I was kind of silly and innocent and didn't realize at the time how special it was 'cause I was still kind of in shock, but it was a real honor and a real privilege to be part of that team.

**Something we'd like to ask about was the turbine engines.**

Mm hmm.

**They weren't the same as the ones that were used on the U-95.**

Correct.

**How did they choose to go with the T55?**

You know, there was a fair amount of research gone into that, including Chuck Lyford who had been with the *U-95* program. His son, Charlie, was working with us on the *Pay 'N Pak* program and then Chuck came to the shop quite often and kinda checked on things, and it was several things. One was the T55s were in the early stages of becoming surplus, so they were available. They were in the horsepower range that we were looking for. They were certainly in the price range that we were looking for, and it's much more simplistic to run one engine than it is to run two engines into a combining gear box and all that sort of thing. So, for ease of maintenance, ease of installation and parts and all the other things, it made more sense to go with one engine that could make as much horsepower as two T53s.

**Yeah.**

And actually, at that point in time they were almost less expensive because the T55s were being surplused. The T53s were still currently in production. They were still currently being used in the Hueys and a lot of other different helicopters and so the parts and the prices and everything were as expensive, if not more expensive, and just for makin' it simple we decided to go with one engine.

## CLARIFICATION

In last month's issue of the *Unlimited NewsJournal*, readers may have been confused by a reference contained in the story about the passing of Pat O'Day. The story indicated that the *Miss KYYX* that O'Day campaigned in 1981 was the same boat that originally raced as the *U-95*. While the former *U-95* did carry the 96 *KYYX* name in 1977, the boat that O'Day owned was built in 1976 as the *Miss Vernor's*. Ironically, it was the same hull that was discussed in the John Walters interview elsewhere in that same issue.

**Something else that was done in those days that eventually they didn't have to do was the start cart with the plug-in. Was that a different set-up than what was used on the U-95, or was it still...**

Very similar. In fact, the start cart that we used came from the U-95.

**OK.**

That big cart on wheels and everything that set on the dock was mostly just a huge, big bank of batteries. And those batteries then, plugged into—with a long extension cord—the side of the boat and you were able to start it.

**You locked the shaft so whoever was handling the plug-in could get back off the boat?**

We put a disc brake on the N2 side, the power turbine side of the gear box, actually, to lock up the N2 and power turbine wheels. And, so, you could start the engine. It would sit there and idle but the propeller shaft or nothing was turning. Somebody could then, you know, remove the cord and get back on the dock, give me the all-clear signal, I could release the brake and drive away.

That was something that was done for several reasons. That's the way they started the helicopters and the aircraft. That's the way the U-95 had done it, so that was the technology that was available and we kind of followed what had been done before. There were some disadvantages to that, certainly. The start cart was bigger than two engines, so it took up a lot of room in the truck. It was heavy, it was a lot of maintenance. The biggest problem was that because you relied on that start cart so much, if I had a problem on the racecourse and had to re-start the engine, I couldn't do it.

**Yeah, you were done.**

Right. And so as time went on, we started to understand and realize that maybe a better way to go—and we eventually did away with the disc brake, too—to get rid of the weight, get rid of all the stuff that needed to be done and we didn't really need to have the engine

running at the dock for any reason without it going to the racecourse. So in an effort to be able to re-start it, in an effort to get rid of all those extra systems and all the weight and the hassle of carrying the start cart around and all that sort of thing, we started to put more batteries in the boat, which was a little more weight.

I'm not exactly sure who came up with the idea of going from just a standard 24-volt start system to a 48-volt start system. And so, we would initially start to roll the engine over on 24 volts. When it got up to 5 or 7 percent then I would hit another switch and bring on another set of batteries that would jump it to 48 volts. Then the engine would start, and it was easy to start and very controllable. I had to do multiple starts in those batteries so if you had a problem on the racecourse you could re-start. It just kind of evolved to a simpler way.

**Got away from the start cart completely.**

Yeah.

**Well, the first year, things didn't go too well. You had a flip.**

Yeah. We tested here in Seattle late.

**Yeah.**

We ran into issues and problems, which honestly, I don't really recall what all they were. We ended up not making the first few races. Jim was never a big fan of going to Miami, particularly in the saltwater races later on, but we were just under the gun tryin' to get everything

done and David Heerensperger by no means wanted us to show up and look unprepared or unprofessional. Let's not go racing until we're ready to go racing sort of thing.

So, we started in Tri-Cities. We tested, as I remember, I think we tested on a Tuesday here in Seattle of the race week in Tri-Cities. We were trying to do a lot of different things with that boat and so weight was always an issue. There was no minimum weight on the boats in those days. So, the shaft log and the stuffing boxes and things, um, where in the past were usually cast aluminum, we made 'em out of molded fiberglass and foam and they were very light. We had a bit of a vibration and it turned a propeller shaft here and broke one of those when we were testing, which cut our tests a little short.

But we had done, we'd accomplished what we wanted to do. The boat started, it ran, and the systems worked. We had a little oops there that we needed to fix and that, so we got back to the shop, worked to get that all done. We ended up going to Tri-Cities, um, I think we got there on Saturday.

**I can't remember right now.**

I remember it was a big deal. Tri-Cities was always good to Pay 'N Pak and they were always good for boat racing. You know, *Pay 'N Pak* seemed to be a favorite. Of course, we had stores in all three cities, and everyone was familiar



Making its first appearance at a race only two days after its launch, the new turbine-powered *Pay 'N Pak* heads onto the Columbia River in Tri-Cities for a test run.

Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

with Pay 'N Pak and in the old days *Pay 'N Pak* was certainly a favorite there. They had people with radios set up from, I think, the shop in Seattle all the way to Tri-Cities, radioing where the boat was and all that sort of thing.

I had to help work. I was still working on the crew with the boat and we worked pretty late. David thought that it made sense for Arlene and me to fly with him to Tri-Cities in the Lear Jet so that I could get some rest and some sleep while the guys were driving over. And I think [pause] that it was Saturday. We got there on Saturday, got the boat set up, got it trailer-fired.

Think we ran twice that day. We ran, like, a 125 mile an hour qualifying lap right off the trailer. Things looked pretty good. It was obvious that the boat was gonna be, you know, have some handling issues. Came back and we had another problem with that shaft log thing, which we got repaired, but it was an all-nighter for the guys. I don't think we ran heats on Saturday in those days, so I think there was a testing/qualifying thing and we got there on Saturday.

Then Sunday morning I went out to get some start times and get a little seat time and a little more time in the boat. We had trailer-fired that morning. We didn't run a wing blanket or anything in those days and again, in an effort to save weight, the wing didn't have any spars in it. It was just a honeycomb core with carbon fiber skins. They used to pick up water out of the river in pumps and pump it through



Photos by Al Borrmann

During a test run on the Columbia River on race day morning, the *Pay 'N Pak* suddenly lifted off the water, did two complete back flips, and landed with a huge splash.

white PVC pipes and things to supply water to the pit area. We had guys on the boat with hoses, you know, keeping things wet and keeping the wing and everything from melting.

And for whatever reason, as the engine was running there, the pumps shut down. All the water in the pits went away and by the time we could get the engine shut down it had delaminated about a 20-inch or 24-inch section of the bottom skin of the wing directly over the tail pipe there. And, uh, not knowing any better, I guess, being anxious for all the wrong reasons, I guess the decision was made, do you want to run,

or should we just wait 'til the first heat? And I said, "No, I'd like to go run the boat." I needed some more time and I didn't have start times or anything.

So, we went out to run and a patrol boat had gone across the start-finish line area there from the tower. I remember running a warm-up lap, getting some start times, coming off the exit pin and standing on the throttle to time it to the starting line. And when I got to the area where the wakes were from this patrol boat, the boat kind of rattled over the top of the wakes and got up in the air and it just hung there. I felt like it was gonna come back down, everything was gonna be OK, but it just seemed to hang there, and hang there, and hang there, and it kept getting worse and worse.

And, I kept thinkin' the last, the worst thing you can do is come off the power. You gotta stay on the power to keep the propeller up and keep it, you know, from tipping over on its nose. And it just kept getting higher and higher and higher. Eventually it got to the point where it was so high that I thought I was gonna turn it a little bit to try to settle it



Randy Hall

**ABOVE:** After the flip in the Tri-Cities, the boat missed the rest of the 1980 season. It and John Walters were back the following spring with another test run on Lake Washington.

**BELOW RIGHT:** Walters in the cockpit of the Pay 'N Pak.

back down and by the time I turned it the rudder was out of the water, everything, there was really no control.

And then it was like someone just kicked a jack stand out from under the thing and the back end settled down and the blue bridge disappeared and my infamous quote of, “Sky, water, sky, water, sky, water.” And the boat just took off. I honestly believed that I was gonna save it right up ‘til the minute that the blue bridge disappeared.

I remember goin’ around, you know, the first revolution and, uh, kind of leveled off and I was a long way in the air. Because of the rotation of the boat the g-forces just kind of pinned you in the cockpit. I really couldn’t move or do very much. And I remember as it was comin’ back towards the

water on the last revolution there, it was like in slow motion and every tick just took a long time and I could see the shadow on the water getting bigger and bigger and bigger and thinkin’ “Boy, this is really gonna hurt and the guys are gonna be upset and I’m frustrated trashing our brand-new boat.”

The next thing I knew I went from being hot, I guess from the outside temperature in the boat, to feeling like I was freezing when I hit the water. The boat hit the tip of the sponson. It didn’t quite have enough rotational speed to come around and land flat, or enough altitude to do that. And then, when the sponson touched the water, it spit me out of the cockpit immediately. The boat went over the top of me. Stuck the transom in and spun

**“Was I just not ready yet? I did have some second thoughts and I guess I kinda doubted my abilities at times.”**



Randy Hall

around.

I remember being in the water just feeling freezing and cold from the temperature differential. And of course, from the limited days and everything else my first instinct was to make sure that everything worked and that I had arms and legs, and everything was OK. And once I was confident that I wasn't in any serious danger that way, in those days the sign to the rescue boats and to the tower and everything was to wave your hands above your head to indicate you were OK. And I remember when I did that there was just a huge roar from the crowd, you know, everybody yelling and screaming and all the noise.

By that time the rescue boat was on the way and again I just felt like I was freezing. As the rescue boat got closer I kind of rolled over onto my stomach and I tried to swim to the boat, and boy, the minute I kicked, my left hip let me know that was not gonna be a good thing to do, and my right shoulder. And it turned out that I later on ended up with a fractured hip and a dislocated hip and a dislocated shoulder and things from tryin' to hang on to the boat and all. But, you know, it mostly was just disappointing.

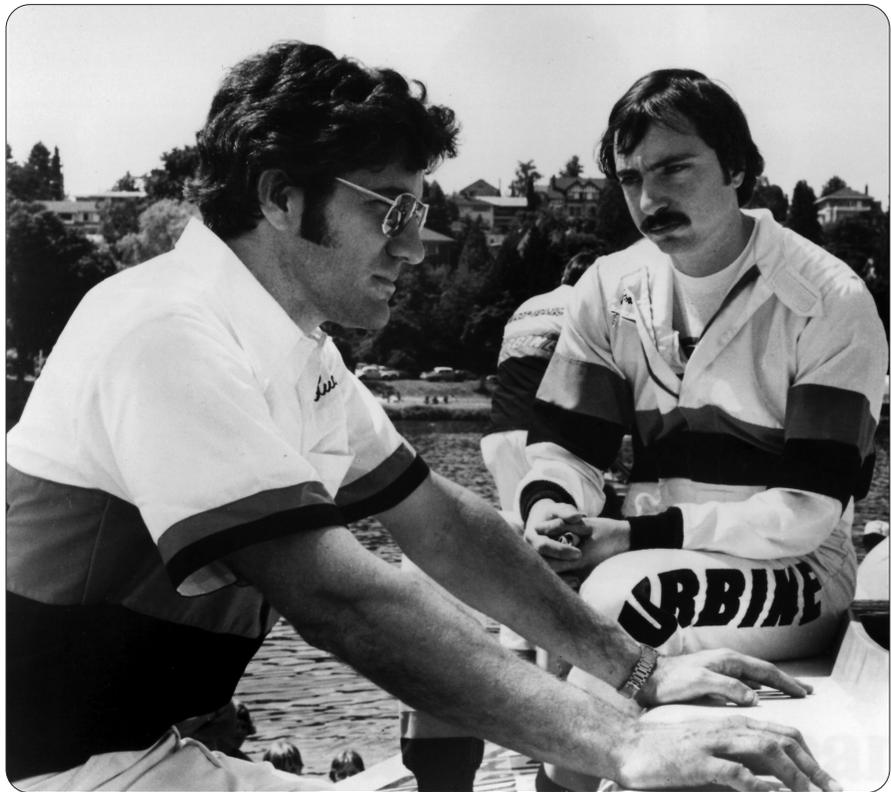
**Yeah.**

So, we got that close to being able to go racing and couldn't do it. In those days the boats were much more difficult to repair and knew that it wasn't going to be a thrash and be back in Seattle or San Diego. It was gonna be a season-ender. And it really was our season beginner.

**Yeah.**

So, it was frustrating from that point of view. But, you know, we got back to work on the program and got the boat back together. I got healed up and had physical therapy and all the things that needed to be done, and we started testing in February of that winter and ran a lot of times before we ended up going to the first race in Miami.

**Did you have any concerns that you might not be able to continue as the driver, or were you confident that you**



The *Pay 'n Pak's* builder and crew chief Jim Lucero with John Walters.

**could make a come-back?**

You know, I honestly had some doubts. I had some second thoughts. I guess I questioned my abilities at that point in time. You know, could I have done something different? If Bill Muncy or Dean Chenoweth or Chip Hanauer would have been driving this boat, would the same sort of thing happen? Was I just not ready yet? I did have some second thoughts and I guess I kinda doubted my abilities at times.

I had lots of support. Certainly, Arlene and my family were very supportive. Very supportive in a more concerned way than they had been before. I had fallen out of limited inboards at different times, different places, and outboards at different times, different places, but this was different. It was pretty rare, honestly, in those days that guys survived accidents like this.

**Yeah.**

So, there was a real concern for myself and the family and that sort of thing, but as always, Arlene was there to

support me and back me at whatever I wanted to do. Dave Heerensperger and Jim Lucero and all the team members, my brother and Mark Smith and Charlie Lyford and Kirt Kirkpatrick and all the guys that had worked so hard to put this thing together, spent the winter repairing a brand-new boat. So that was kind of frustrating and, you know, concerning, I guess, but as we started to run the boat, each time I got a little more confident. Just about the time that I'd start to get confidence up and feel good about it, something weird would happen that would make me question that decision again. But it was such an exciting thing and scary at the same time.

**Yeah...**

So, it was a fun time in a scary way.

**Well, the '81 season you went to Miami. You didn't win a race that year.**

Right.

**Without trying to go through each race, are there any specific things that stand out?**

Yeah, uh...



Randy Hall

**Besides Acapulco.**

Yeah, you know, the most difficult part of driving that boat was the inconsistency and the unpredictability. You could drive the boat the same way in the same conditions in two different laps and get two completely different responses. Because of that, it seems like every time we ran the boat, we made changes. I never got to run the boat the same way, and every time you ran the boat there was something new, there was something different and I never got the opportunity to feel comfortable. I never got the opportunity to feel like I knew what it was gonna do or how it was gonna react, because it never did the same thing twice.

There were times that we were very competitive. There were times that we were fast in qualifying. There were times that it seemed like we were making very good progress and then something'd jump up and bite us that we hadn't thought about or that was, you know, that never happens. So, the first year especially was the unpredictability, the inconsistency. It was so unpredictable.

**Yeah. And then you were at Acapulco.**

Yes.

**You lost Muncey.**

Yes.

**That must've been a really difficult day for you...**

It was an extremely difficult day.

**...and for Jim, too.**

Yeah, for a lot of reasons. You know, one obviously was losing the icon and the hero of our sport. And more

than that, even, a close friend. Bill was like a second father to me and he had become so close to the girls and Arlene and my family and all that I think everyone was still in somewhat disbelief. It really brought home the reality that if something like this could happen to Bill Munciey, it could happen to John Walters.

**Yeah.**

I won't say anything about that, you know, made me feel good or made me feel better, but it started to change my feelings on my own abilities. If the Blue Blaster can fly over backwards on Bill Munciey, then I guess I shouldn't be surprised that the *Pay 'n Pak* flew over on John Walters. And then it also really upset the confidence and the fun factor of racing boats for my family and Arlene and the girls. They went from being so excited and so much fun watching the boats, and we're going racing this weekend, to almost being afraid, that I'm not sure I want to watch dad do this again.

**On another topic, *Budweiser* was running the *Griffon*. That was a very powerful piston engine. Did you have concerns whether the turbine engine in *Pay 'n Pak* could run with that?**

No, I was pretty confident that the turbine program would eventually, you know, we'd stumble on the right combination and things would go the right way to where we could run with those guys. I think—this is taxing my memory here a little bit—I think it was in 1981 that in Tri-Cities I actually drove around Dean on the outside and we had a pretty close race for a couple of laps there, until we had a mechanical fail-

ure. And a lot of people that saw that, I still see pictures of that come up on Facebook every once in a while where people feel like Dean took a cheap shot there and moved out on me and took me out, and in all reality what was really happening there, of course, like I say, that was the first time I think ever, maybe, that anybody had driven around the outside of Dean in that *Griffon Budweiser* in the first turn there. Uh, actually it was the second turn.

We had a real close, real tight race there. And of course, me being on the outside position, I was trying to pinch Dean as much as I could and hold him on the buoy line to hopefully bleed off some speed. Dean, on the other hand, was trying to push me out at the same time to, you know, have me make a mistake and use up some time to where he could get the advantage. And in the first turn, I think of the third lap, we were real close to each other there and the P3 line, which is an air line, pressure line, that goes from the fuel control to the air diffuser on the engine, to let the engine know that it's running and everything so that the fuel control will work properly, that line broke at the fitting. And when that line breaks the engine goes to ground idle. There's no throttle response and it will just idle.

When that happened, I had my foot on the throttle, to the floor, and was turning and trying to pinch Dean and everything. When it slowed down so fast and settled in the water, it almost tried to hook on me. When it did, I ended up driving right through Dean's rooster-



James Smith

John Walters and the *Pay 'n Pak* round the Roostertail Turn on the Detroit River.

tail. Went blastin' through his roostertail, right into the infield. When the water settled enough that I could see what was going on and looked up, there was a rescue boat with four guys right in front of me.

**Oooh.**

Fortunately, I was able to make the necessary corrections and make all that work. Me getting wet had nothing to do with Dean. He was a clean driver and didn't do anything wrong there. It was purely a mechanical failure on my part. But even though the end result wasn't what we wanted, it showed me and the guys on the beach, and I think maybe even Dean and the *Budweiser* guys, that we aren't there yet but...

**It won't be long.**

...it won't be long.

**Well, in the 1982 season, what changes and things were made to the boat during that winter, before the '82 season? It seemed like it improved in performance.**

It did. It came out of the box better. It still wasn't right, but it was a lot better. Because the boat was so light and the sponsons were so big and there were inside secondaries and outside secondaries

and primaries, and so much surface area and the tunnel was so big and so much air packed under the boat, and the weight was so light, we made an effort to try to calm the boat down some. We flattened out the angle of attack on the sponsons. We narrowed up and increased the separation between the primary and secondary sponsons, so they didn't pick up that surface area quite so fast.

We started running propellers with a little more rake in 'em, which tended to pick up the nose just a little bit so that it didn't hit hard on the sponsons and

over-react. Honestly, I'd like to maybe pat myself on the back a little bit that I was learning how to drive it a little better maybe, too. I kinda knew some of the things that I could do that would make those things better.

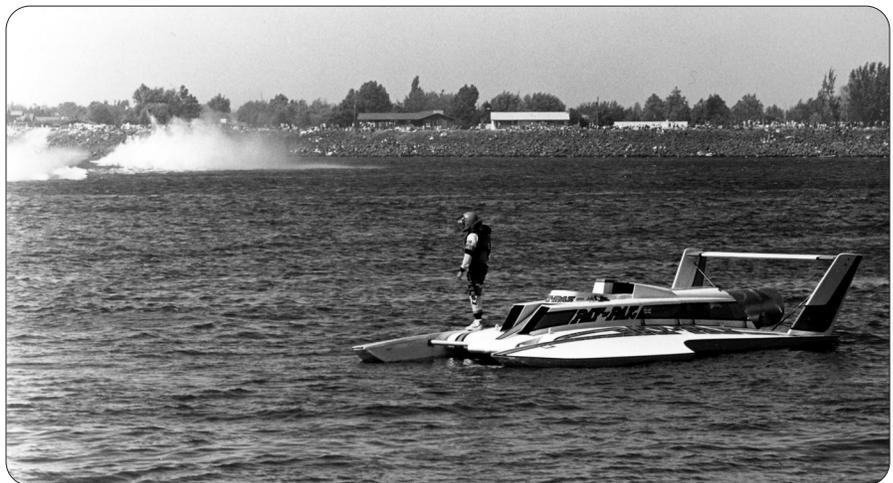
We put a set of adjustable canards on the front, hoping that I would be able to have better control over the attitude of the boat. Unfortunately, because of the position and for different things, they didn't work the way we thought that they should and actually caused more problems than they did good, and so we took 'em off and they never saw competition. But I think that we made some subtle changes in the boat to settle it down, make it a little more forgiving, make it a little more predictable. And, again, I think I just was maybe learning to drive it a little better, too.

**That season started in Miami and then you went to upstate New York and won that race.**

Yup, and actually we should have won in Miami. We were fast qualifier in Miami. We were runnin' really well. Unfortunately, John Walters learned a very valuable lesson in the final heat in Miami there: that this was a different level of racing. You know, some of the guys that I used to race 280s with drove differently in the Unlimiteds.

**Oh.**

I was more thinking about making



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Walters could only watch from the deck of his boat after its engine went dead during the second heat of the 1981 Columbia Cup in the Tri-Cities.



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John Walters at the controls of the *Pay 'N Pak*.

**“...it literally is every man for himself. And you do whatever you need to do to put yourself in a position to win, including taking out the competition if you need to do that. And that was a valuable eye-opening lesson for me.”**

the boat work properly, about me making a good start, not making any mistakes on the racecourse, and more focused on the things that I had immediate control over than the other drivers. I should have paid more attention to Bill Muncey when I would see him standing on the dock or on the back of the truck watching what the other drivers were doing and how they were doing it. I honestly never put much thought into another driver or another team taking me out before we got to the starting line.

And we were fast. I was poised and ready to win my first boat race in an Unlimited and everything was looking like we could do that. I went deep into the first turn area of Miami, having my timing marks and everything to where I thought I was in good shape, and just as I came out and started to go down the back straightaway, Chip came from the infield, drove right in front of me, turned right in front of me, stood on the throttle and just washed me down big time. It was hard for me to believe at that point in time that Chip would do that intentionally, but the sport's different in the Unlimiteds...

**Yeah.**

...and it literally is every man for himself. And you do whatever you need to do to put yourself in a position to win, including taking out the competition if you need to do that. And that was a valuable eye-opening lesson for me. Of course, I got wet down big time. The salt water was very unforgiving on the turbine and that sort of thing and we limped around, and I think we did finish the race but not in the winner's position like I thought we would.

Then we went on to New York and were pret-

ty successful there. Made a really good start and was in a good position on the racecourse to maintain and keep that start. I think when we went to Detroit, we had a win in New York, had a very respectful performance in Miami, and I think we were leading in points when we got to Detroit.

**Could be.**

Detroit was a horrible experience. The water was rough, the boat was just pounding me to death. It got way out of shape going to the first turn in one heat with Dean on one side of me in the *Budweiser* and Chip on the outside of me in *Atlas Van Lines*. The boat came down hard on its nose, up on the recovery areas, and I remember seeing deck hatches up on the tips of both sponsons blow off.

**Oooh.**

And they came flying up and geysers of water, you know, comin' through the holes just crushed and caved in the recovery areas up there and cut our day short. At that point Dave said, "You know, I appreciate all this fancy foam and carbon and all this stuff but let's take this whole thing home and put sponsons on it that we know are gonna work." As I remember, we skipped Madison...

**Yeah, I think you did.**

...that year and took the boat home to re-do the sponsons and put oak battens and aluminum runners and everything on it and showed up in Tri-Cities. The boat was really hard to get on a plane. It went from poppin' up like a cork that it used to be, to really being a handful and difficult to get on a plane. However, once it was on a plane and it was a race boat, it handled nice. It didn't over-react. It was predictable. It was all the things that I thought we wanted it to be. I thought we had

a pretty decent shot at winning the race in Tri-Cities.

As it turned out for the final, Tommy D'Eath was driving *The Squire Shop*, Chip was driving the *Atlas*. I guess Dean had had the accident in the *Budweiser* on Saturday. And that was another horrible day. Got me and the family, just one more opportunity for the kids to worry and Arlene to worry, having gone to the hospital with Dean and the things, that was, it was tough.

As it turns out, it was windy and nasty and they decided to go ahead and run the final heat. I struggled and struggled and struggled tryin' to get the boat up on a plane and every time it was just about, the wind was blowing right at me, and just about the time it'd start to break over the hump and get on a plane, the water'd blow over the front, go right in the inlets and put the fire out.

Finally, after many times of doing that, I realized that the one-minute gun had gone off and I wasn't eligible for the final anyway. And as I was lookin' around to see what else was going on, I noticed Chip was still at the dock. He couldn't get started. It basically was a gimme win and I was really frustrated, you know. That's another one that should've been our win. Just something that we couldn't predict

took us out again.

So, then we came to Seattle. We ran early. We were fast qualifier, I think. That was the first time we'd run a 140-mile-an-hour lap with the boat. Came back to the dock and I could see the guys were all excited. The radio wasn't working. I didn't know, have any idea how fast we went.

It was easy to drive the boat. I was comfortable. We could make a few changes and go a fair amount faster. Came back and found out that lap was 139.9-something, or whatever. And I thought, "Wow. That's crazy," 'cuz it was just effortless. I mean it, was finally doing the things that we had hoped that it would do. And then, of course, on Sunday we ended up having the accident that was a career-ender for me. And, you know, I don't honestly have any first-hand memories of that. I have a lot of what I call acquired memories, I guess.

**Yes.**

I watched the video tapes so many times. I heard the stories and read the articles and all the different kind of things. I kind of feel like I know what happened and all, but I honestly don't have any first-hand memories of what really happened.

But as near as I can tell, we had

talked that morning. Um, Jim and Dave Heerensperger and myself, and everybody kind of agreed that we have a legitimate chance of winning the race. But we were pretty short on equipment. So the agreement was that I would start on the outside and just stay out of trouble and, you know, pick guys off as best I could. A couple of thirds would put us in the final and then we'd go all in to try to win the final.

I remember starting on the outside and trying to stay out of trouble. I remember thinking to myself as I was watching my watch and paying attention to my starts that, um, Ron Armstrong was driving the *Budweiser* that they had brought out of the shop to run in Seattle after Dean's accident the weekend before in Tri-Cities. Chip was in the *Atlas* and Chip and Ron both jumped the gun. When they jumped the gun I figured, OK, I'll just stay on the outside here, in three laps I can pick off the *Executone* and *The Squire Shop* even from the outside here, and even if I don't it will put us in the final with another good finish.

I just remember tryin' to stay out of trouble and stay competitive and the next thing I remember, really, was wakin' up in Harborview [hospital]. There had been a three-boat collision goin' into the first turn in Seattle there. The *Executone* had gotten badly out of shape and turned hard to the left and banged into *The Squire Shop*, and in an effort to over-correct and the energy that it absorbed from bein' hit by *The Squire Shop*, it made a hard right-hand turn and I ended up driving right over the top of him.

It was a big, ugly mess there for quite a while. Lots of confusion. It looked like a hydroplane yard sale with all the stuff in the water and things scattered everywhere. I had made a horrible mistake. I had gotten a new life jacket and I would always jump in the water or swimming pool or something to make sure that it did what it was supposed to do and roll me over and do all the right stuff. It came special delivery on Saturday, UPS, to the



John Walters racing side by side with Dean Chenoweth and the *Miss Budweiser* during the 1982 Champion Spark Plug Regatta in Miami.

pits. I didn't test it. I put it on and wore it in that heat there and it did make me float but, unfortunately, I floated face down for almost nine minutes before rescue teams found me.

Part of the confusion was that George Johnson, who was driving the *Executone*, his boat was a wood and aluminum construction. It sank. As it sank, in an effort to save himself, he swam over and got up on top of the *Pay 'N Pak*. Well, when he was standing on the back of the boat, everybody just assumed that was me.

**Oh.**

So, they were lookin' in the complete wrong area where the *Executone* had gone down for George Johnson, thinking that he was missing, and I was standing on the boat. Then when somebody finally realized that he's way over there, they got to me. Doc Peterson and Eric and the divers got there.

Like I say, at that point I had floated face down in the water for almost nine minutes and was clinically dead when they got to me. I had no pulse, no respiration. They managed to roll me over, get me back to the dock. It wasn't until the cameras and the news crews and everybody on the dock there that they were pullin' the helmet off that they realized it was John Walters, not George Johnson.

And my kids didn't come to the race

that weekend because we'd lost Bill the year before, we lost Dean the weekend before. They were just really concerned. Arlene and the girls had not come to the race that weekend. They had stayed with close friends and neighbors across the street from us in Renton, Lance and Kathy Baze who always had a big Seafair party and barbecue. They were scared. You know, we lost Dean the weekend before; we lost Bill in the last race of the season before that.

Now all of a sudden something that had been so wonderful and so much fun for the girls, to go racing, was something that they were afraid of and they were concerned about. Arlene didn't think that it was a good thing for them to be there just in case something like happened were to happen. And I honestly again don't have many first-hand memories of, just because of the head injuries and things, but I've got lots of, again, acquired memories from looking at the stories and hearing the stories and hearing the things from friends and relatives and all and I was hurt bad.

**Yes, you were.**

I ended up being in and out of Harborview for the next 14 months. I had 11 different major surgeries including a replacement elbow on the right side, a replacement hip on the left side. My knees and ankles are held together with

pins and wires, and plates in my head and face. Had a very serious, close head injury, uh, the amnesia for a while, and had fractured the eye orbit and broke my jaw. Did substantial damage...

**On the left side?**

...to my chin. Yeah, it was on the left side. Again, fractured my hips and pelvis again and dislocated that. A compound fracture of the left femur where, when I hit the other boat, obviously things decelerated very quickly. Again, I don't have first-hand memories of this, but I did, you know, go back later and take a look at things and try to, you know—crime-scene investigation—figure out what happened. To the best of my abilities to figure out what happened, when the boat went forward hitting the *Executone*, it decelerated, of course, very quickly, which made me go forward in the cockpit. No seat belts, no canopies again.

**Sure.**

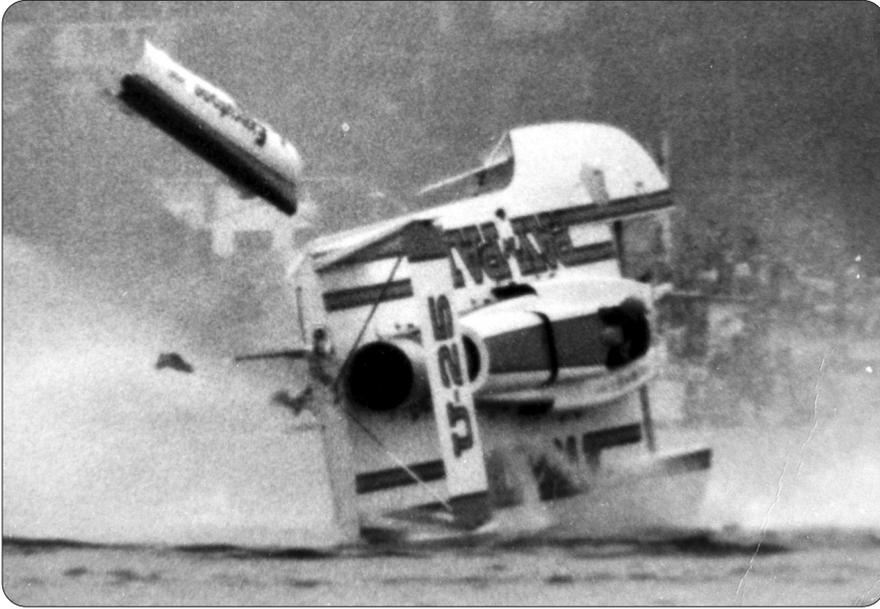
When it hit, the boat went into a right-hand barrel-roll. As the left side of the boat came up, the cowling, cockpit area hit me underneath the helmet, which was a full-face helmet at the time. It pushed that back. The chin strap, when it came across, it broke my jaw and that's what caused the scars on my chin here. The bottom of the eye opening in the helmet hit me in the top of the eye orbit here, fracturing my skull, doing severe damage to my jaw and teeth and eye and everything on that side. It rotated the helmet back and displaced my neck vertebrae and caused some spinal damage back there. Fortunately, just bruising.

Again, as I got pitched out of the boat, the seat was meant to hold me in because we didn't have seat belts. It fractured my hip again and dislocated my hip. My left femur, here, hit the bottom of the steering wheel and caused a compound fracture of that. I've still got pictures of me hanging onto the steering wheel with my right hand and this arm is over the top of the cowling, bent like this [gestures] the wrong direction, and



Sandy Ross Collection

Walters has a discussion with Jim Lucero after he returned from a run on Lake Washington in preparation for the 1982 Sea Galley Emerald Cup in Seattle.



The Pay 'n Pak collides with George Johnson and the *Executone* during the first heat of the 1982 Seattle race

so it trashed that elbow. It broke several ribs; it poked holes in my esophagus, my heart, and my lungs.

Because I floated face-down in the water, I ended up with pneumonia and different things and lots of lung and problems that way. So, it was a long, serious process. I didn't have any feeling from my hips down for several months. I had to learn how to walk all over again. And once again, my beautiful wife, Arlene, was there to pick up the pieces and take care of me. With all of the support of friends and family and Dave Heerensperger and Pay 'n Pak, the fans of Unlimited hydroplane racing, I guess I'm here to tell the story.

**Well, if we can back up to just one thing and talk about Dean Chenoweth's accident at Tri-Cities. It was a really hard day for everyone.**

It was a really hard day and it was difficult on every level. Not only, um, the reports that I got said there was no chance Dean was gonna survive.

**Yeah.**

But when they towed the boat upside down past our dock and my daughter, Katrina, was on the dock there with me and, as they were bringing the boat, the *Budweiser*, by upside down, Katrina

looked up to me while holding my hand and said, "Daddy, I know this is really important to you, but next year would you just stay home with me?"

**Wow.**

And it just kinda ripped my heart out. And then, you know, in addition to knowing that my good friend and competitor, Dean, was not gonna survive, it really put some doubt in my mind as to,

you know, were we doing the right thing as a sport? Was I doing the right thing as a father and a husband? And so, it was a really difficult time, really difficult day.

**To kind of wrap up for now, after the '82 accident you put yourself through turbine school. How did that happen? Did you have help from somebody? Obviously, you had some healing to do after the accident first.**

Yeah, it took a long time to get better. I mean, it was the better part of three years before the doctor would give me a release to be able to go back to work. Actually, when I did go back to work it was with Dave Heerensperger and Pay 'n Pak in a store management position.

**OK.**

After a year or so of doing that, I was good at it, I was OK at it, but it wasn't where my heart was at. And I think that Arlene knew that, and I think that she and Jim Lucero had had several conversations that, honestly, I didn't know about at the time, and I believe Fran Muncey was involved in those conversations as well.

Arlene, I think, kind of initiated that thought process that John is working and we're doing fine, but I don't think he's



Team owner Fran Muncey (left), John Walters, and driver Chip Hanauer celebrate the Miller American's victory in the 1986 Gold Cup in Detroit.



Craig Barney

John Walters now serves as a race official for H1 Unlimited.

happy, and if there's a chance that maybe he could go back to boat racing, could you guys maybe help? Kind of, it seemed, out of the blue to me, I got a call from Jim Lucero one day and he asked me how I was doing. It was a good lunch that we did, and I went and spent some time with them and, you know, he asked me if I had any thoughts or inclinations to ever want to come back to boat racing.

And I said, "Yeah, I did." But I felt obligated to Dave Heerensperger and Pay 'N Pak that they had stood behind me for all those years while I was getting better and, you know, offered me what was really an outstanding opportunity to have a job with the company and everything as long as I wanted 'til I was ready to retire and all.

And he [Lucero] said, "Well, this is what we're doing, and you know, we're doing the turbine *Atlas Van Lines* boat," and, uh, gave me the opportunity to get involved as the engine builder if I wanted to do that. I went and talked with Dave about it. And honestly, at that point in time Dave and Jim were not very good friends anymore.

**Oh.**

I think Dave was concerned about

Fran and Chip and different things and Dave told me that all he wanted was for me to be happy. He said, "If you want to go racing again, I'll support you 100 percent in whatever you want to do, and if it doesn't work out and I still have any say-so in this company, you've got a job here." And I said, "All right, with that I will do this," and we shook hands and went on my way.

As it turns out, the turbine schooling thing was a deal that I did kind of online with Lycoming, with Jim's help and by taking the manuals home and just start studying and reading and I had some idea how they worked and that from the *Pay 'N Pak* days, but this was a different engine. This was the T55-L-11, and even though they work on the same principle and all, there were some differences to the accessories and how the stuff worked, and an extra turbine wheel and then some things that made them special. So, yeah, it was kind of a self-taught thing, but it wasn't an official Lycoming ground school or anything like that. It was more of a, "Here are the books, go read 'em for a week and see if you really want to do this."

**The '82 *Atlas*, when they built that, and Lucero built it, did you work on that hull at all?**

Afterwards. It was still painted in *Atlas* colors and everything when I was able to go to the shop and take a look at some of the stuff there. The boat that when I went back to work with Fran and Jim and everybody, it was on the '84 turbine *Atlas* that later became the *Miller American*.

**Yeah, OK.**

So, I mean, I worked on the '82 boat a bit. Not much. It was being built in our shop. It was after the '81 Acapulco thing where Bill had the fatal accident there. Mr. Frisbie and Fran and everybody with *Atlas* said, you know, Bill would want us to continue and so, we started building a new boat. And yes indeed, I did work on that one a little bit and we built a second *Pay 'N Pak* that was very similar. The '82 *Atlas* was very similar to the second *Pay*

'*n Pak* boat that we built. And I remember that boat, for Chip, came out of the box just fast.

**Yeah.**

And I so desperately...we had one just like it sitting on the floor at home, let's run that one. And I remember having the conversation with Jim, and Jim, I think, let his pride get in the way a little bit and he made the comment that if we pull that boat out it'll look like we couldn't fix this one. Honestly, I didn't care.

**Yeah.**

Dave Heerensperger didn't care, he just wanted to win races. That boat was done to the point that, in a day or two, we could've run it. I mean, it went in the Torchlight Parade here one year and the same type of thing, after the accident and everything and all the equipment was sold to Steve Woomer, uh, Steve Reynolds hopped in the thing and was running 144-mile-an-hour laps with the thing right out of the box. Won a World Championship with it. I guess I felt a little bit frustrated that, you know, I thought we had a boat that could've put us in the winner's circle, and we didn't get to run it.

**OK.**

So, yeah, I did work on the '82 *Atlas* a little bit. My brother, Gary, worked on it quite a bit and some of the *Atlas* guys came out to the shop and worked on it some, too.

**OK, well, thank you very much. ❖**

*We hope that at some time in the future we can talk again with John Walters about the many boats he has worked on as a crew chief or engine technician, as well his work now in the H1 tech truck. Meanwhile, for those who want to know more about his life in racing, Walters is working on a book that should be available soon and will cover his career.*

# Mahogany & Merlot



Lon Erickson

This has been a year of disappointment on many levels. Not only was the entire H1 Unlimited Racing Series canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic—along with restrictions on such things as going to a restaurant, attending a movie theater, or watching other sporting events—the annual gathering of classic hydroplanes in Chelan, Washington, also became a victim. So, while we can't report on what happened at Mahogany & Merlot this fall, we can instead reflect on how the event has evolved over the years, thanks to contributions from two people who have been intimately involved in its development.

BY DAVID WILLIAMS  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, HYDROPLANE AND RACEBOAT MUSEUM

## The picturesque town of Chelan Washington, in the apple and wine region of Eastern Washington, has had two love affairs with Unlimited racing. The first was brief and passionate but only lasted four years. The second one is

still going strong after 27 years.

Chelan's first go around with Unlimited racing was called the Apple Cup and started in 1957 when a number of Seattle-based teams, disappointed by what they felt was the unfriendly treatment they had received during the 1956 Gold Cup in Detroit, went looking for new locations to hold races on the West Coast. They settled on Chelan.

On May 5, 1957, nine boats battled it out on Lake Chelan for the first annual Apple Cup. The race was a tremendous success with tens of thousands of fans driving over from Seattle to see Bill Stead drive William Waggoner's *Maverick* to claim the trophy. The following year, Chelan native, Norm Evans electrified his hometown when he drove the brand-new *Miss Bardahl* to victory.

In 1959, Chuck Hickling won in the *Miss Pay 'n Save*. By 1960 costs were growing and revenues were shrinking; the handwriting was on the wall. When Bill Muncey and the *Miss Thriftway* left the racecourse after winning the 1960 Apple Cup, it would be more than 30



Jim Latimer

The event on Lake Chelan began in 1992 with test runs by the U-102 *Coors Dry*.

years before the next time an Unlimited would run on Lake Chelan in a sanctioned APBA event.

The event that we have come to know and love as Mahogany & Merlot, was born when Mitch and Mark Evans invited Ron Jones, Jr., to bring his U-102 *Coors Dry* turbine hydro to Chelan in late October 1992. Mitch had driven the boat at its debut race in Seattle earlier that summer and in San Diego the

next month, a rookie driver named Dave Villwock drove the *Coors Dry* to victory in his first race. Following that race, the boat was shipped to Hawaii for the Outrigger Hydrofest.

Because his boat had been in two back-to-back saltwater races and had spent a few weeks on board a steamship, Jones was concerned that leftover salt water in the hull could cause damage, so the decision was made to run the boat on the clear, fresh water of Lake Chelan.

It was a relaxed, casual test session with the boat making several runs. The highlight of the weekend was when Mitch Evans took 83-year-old Ted Jones, the "father" of the modern three-point prop riders, out for his first (and only) ride in a turbine Unlimited. A few minutes later, Mitch took Ted's great-grandson Ron Jones III out for a ride, too.

The friendly low-key nature of the event appealed to us and when Mitch invited the museum to bring over a few of its boats in 1993 to help out with the expenses, we jumped at the chance. That first year, we brought over the *Hawaii Kai* replica, the *Slo-mo-shun V*, and the



Chris Denslow

The 1959 *Miss Thriftway* was one of the boats that the Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum took to Chelan in the early days of the event to reward hard-working volunteers.

1959 *Miss Thriftway*. We pitted from the parking lot of Chelan Airways, which was very close to the original 1957 Apple Cup pits.

All three of the boats that we brought had participated in the one or more of the original Apple Cups, although not necessarily under names they were wearing in 1993. We used the event as a crew day, rewarding hard-working volunteers with a chance to go for a ride in a real Unlimited. The emotional highpoint of the weekend came when long-time museum board member and restoration master Roger Newton got a chance to run a lap in the *Slo-mo-shun V*.

For the next several years the event was put together in Chelan by the Evans brothers, along with John Walcker, owner of the Caravel Resort.

We maintained the low-key, casual style of the event, trading rides with the fire department for an ambulance and EMTs and taking the crane operator's adult son out in a boat instead of paying cash for the crane.

Turbine boats still showed up from time to time. Mitch brought out the *Appian Jeronimo* one year, another time Ken Muscatel came by with his U-25. The event didn't happen every year; we skipped it in 2000 when the museum was knee deep in filming the Madison movie, but we came back in 2001 with the audio team from the production company to record a lot of the boat and crane sound effects that were used in the final version of the film.

Eventually we outgrew the parking lot at Chelan Airways and moved across the lake to straddle the line between Campbell's Resort and Don Morse City Park. Campbell's has been a great partner and a huge part of the event ever since.

About the same time we crossed the lake, we realized that we needed to step up and become a fully sanctioned (and insured) APBA event. With an APBA sanction came officials, rescue divers, security, and a lot more expenses. Luckily for the museum, Jon Courtright, who had been a friend of mine since we had worked together on Bill Wurster's *Oh Boy, Oberlo* back in 1980, was serving on our board of directors.

Jon and his talented wife, Chris, had spent 10 years developing a very successful event on Lake Sammamish called *Tastin' n Racin'* that included car shows and food booths and all sorts of great

**We used the event as a crew day, rewarding hard-working volunteers with a chance to go for a ride in a real Unlimited.**

**LEFT:** Some of the classic boats on display at the annual Mahogany and Merlot event.  
**BELOW:** The 1955 *Miss Thriftway* passes the 1974 *Oh Boy! Oberlo* as it returns from a run on Lake Chelan.



Lon Erickson



Lon Erickson

activities. Jon and Chris and I talked, they explained some of their ideas, and I told them about a few of our own.

The Courtright's were moving to Chelan and agreed to take over the event for us and start generating some revenue. They had an amazing impact on the event, and it skyrocketed to a whole new level. [See the story by Jon Courtright on the next page.]

We now had a name: We called ourselves Mahogany and Merlot. We had a beer garden, live music, limited hydros and an in-the-water boat show from the Antique and Classic Boat Society. We added a car show, craft fair, and an awards banquet.

Jon Walcker continued to stay heavily involved working side by side with the Courtright's, lining up much of the local logistical support. Ness Crane and Tyler Ulsh worked to get us free cranes while Region 10 Rescue continued to provide us with the best rescue personal around.

Eventually the Courtright's moved on to other projects, but M&M now had momentum. It took on a life of its own and continued to grow through the last half of the decade.

In 2018 we had so many vintage Unlimiteds that we couldn't fit them in the Campbell's/Don Morse City Park pits, so we took on a second crane pits back on the south side of the lake in the Three



Lon Erickson



Chris Denslow

**TOP:** Doug Brow, the son of the late Bill Brow, a well-known Unlimited driver of the early 1960s, found his dad's former 7-litre boat the H-10 *Miss Vitamilk* in a warehouse, had it restored, and now drives it at vintage boat events in the Pacific Northwest. **ABOVE:** The 1962 *Miss Bardahl* makes a run on Lake Chelan.

Fingers area. For 2019 we partnered with the Lake Chelan Chamber of Commerce, expanding the live music options and adding fireworks and an admission charge.

Even before COVID-19 hit we were looking to do something different with M&M in 2020. We had made plans to do away with the admission charge and curtail much of the two-passenger, driver-school activity. We had also been in contact with a couple of turbine teams, and if the sanction and insurance issues could have been worked out, we might have returned to our roots and run a few turbine boats between vintage Unlimited heats.

The 2021 event is still a year away and no one knows exactly what post-COVID boat racing is going to look like, but we are already working on M&M 2021 and I can guarantee that it is going to be something that you won't want to miss. ❖



Lon Erickson

Among the vintage limited-class competitors making exhibition runs at Mahogany and Merlot was Gordy Cole of Seattle and his E-66 *JB & Water*.

BY JON COURTRIGHT

## My involvement began back in October 2009. I had retired that August, we'd built a new home in Chelan, and moved over permanently.

### I've been a life-long hydroplane nut, first growing up across from Jett's

Marina in Rainier Beach (Lake Shore Apartments) during the hay-day of the sport and when Northwest teams tested out of the marina. I sneaked under the fence at Stan Sayres Pits just to get thrown back out again. Worked on in-board and Unlimiteds in the '70s, '80s and '90s.

In 2009, I was on the Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum (HARM) board and knew about HARM and some of the privately owned boats going over to Chelan. I'd never been over there to watch, and so 2009 was a first. But, geez, after seeing three, sometimes four, Unlimited hydroplanes and hearing their V-12s running at full song, with the noise bouncing off the hills, it was totally incredible!

And, there wasn't another sole on the beach to watch!

Later in the day I talked to David [Williams] and a couple of members from the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the Antique & Classic Boat Society (ACBS). We all agreed about how unique the running of the boats on Lake Chelan was, and the fact that nobody was there

to witness any of this.

One thing led to another and we all pop-corned some ideas. Could it be built up into something so others could enjoy it? How about bringing over some of the antique and classic runabouts from the golden age of boating for an in-the-water display? Invite the Inland Empire ACBS group to attend.

The APBA Vintage class was growing by leaps and bounds and incorporat-

ing vintage inboard hydroplanes was also on the list. Make it more into a show, an event that could maybe draw a crowd to see and witness it.

I was a member of ACBS, HARM, and APBA Vintage and knew a few of the folks from each group. Drawing on what we'd learn from 10 or 12 years at that time of producing Tastin' n Racin' at Lake Sammamish State Park, we thought about how to incorporate some of those



Lon Erickson



Lon Erickson

**TOP:** The gorgeously restored U-17 *My Sweetie John Francis*, which was campaigned by Horace Dodge in 1954 and 1955.  
**ABOVE:** The "Winged Wonder," the 1973 *Pay 'n Pak*, leaves the dock for a run on Lake Chelan.



Lon Erickson

ideas in order to get folks to come over to Chelan and support it.

The plans included the typical things: refreshments, beer garden, food, HARM store, actually selling pit passes (income), PA system, etc., all the while with the intention to help offset some of the costs to HARM in staging it. The crane fee, the rescue group, APBA sanction and insurance, gas to get over to Chelan, gas for the boats, rooms for volunteers and officials, etc.

The City of Chelan was very accommodating to the running of the boats on the lake. After Labor Day they basically say, “There’s the lake, go have fun.” You couldn’t ask for better support from a city. You could never pull this off in Seattle with all the restrictions that are imposed, plus getting both the real estate and a lake donated for the use of an event is a huge deal.

The name Mahogany & Merlot came about because Chelan was at that time trying to reinvent itself as a winery destination (now at 31 wineries, I believe). The name Mahogany



Lon Erickson

**TOP:** Waiting at the dock are, from the front, the 1957 *Miss Wahoo*, the 1974 *Oh Boy! Oberto*, the 1962 *Miss Bardahl*, and the 1973 *Pay 'n Pak*. **ABOVE:** The 1974 *Oh Boy! Oberto* roars onto the lake.

& Merlot sort of rolled off the tongue easily and nicely, paying homage to both the color of the mahogany boats and the color of Merlot—in a glass. But getting the word out and not having any sort of advertising budget was a hurdle.

Thanks to volunteer illustrators for posters and all the boating groups involved getting the word out, we got the crowd from the west side of the state coming over for it. And, about

the third year, M&M totally packed Chelan, which included all the hotels and rental homes, along with the RV park. Not a room or a space to be had.

Next was to focus on getting the day trippers on the east side of the state to come to Mahogany & Merlot. Dave Herald of Wenatchee’s radio station, Sunny FM KCSY, is from Bellevue and has always loved hydroplanes. He put together a great advertising package as in-kind sponsorship to Mahogany & Merlot, and did so every year.

Year after year, the event has grown with more Unlimiteds, more vintage inboards and mahogany runabouts, and more and more fans. The Courtright’s stayed involved for the first six years, then it was turned over to HARM to run as their own event. ❖

# RC hydros do something the big boats can't ... they race.

## ERCU sets the standard for COVID response to RC racing in the Pacific Northwest

SPECIAL REPORT FROM ERCU

**E**ven in May, the Electric Radio-Controlled Unlimited (ERCU) board of directors was resisting the urge to quickly cancel events because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but instead worked on a Safe Start plan to rebuild a shattered schedule. Based on the state of Washington's phased approach to reopening business and modifying physical distance requirements, ERCU targeted June 27 at Longview or July 11 at Lacey, depending on whether those counties had yet reached Phase 3.

Other clubs recognized the work that ERCU had put in and reached out for a copy of the ERCU plan so they could

adapt for their own uses. "In boat racing, whether it's the Unlimiteds or the RCs, we help one another," said ERCU board chair Nelson Holmberg. "So, when we were asked if we would share our plan, we didn't even hesitate to send it off."

Among the points in the two-page ERCU plan included sequestering the pits to ERCU members only, making up races that were missed in May and June by rescheduling them to best fit them all in, offering free entry fees to each member's first race of the year as a loyalty reward for the patience they had during the shutdown, and, of course, practicing physical distancing, masking, and hand sanitation.

"We had a couple of opportunities to potentially race on private property,

or in a public park without restrooms or hand-washing opportunities," Holmberg said. "But that didn't make sense. We ultimately decided that it was not possible to run a race without proper facilities."

The plan worked at the two races the club was able to run in mid-July. Sadly, however, the state's response to COVID-19 tightened as new cases continued to spike across the state. As a result, ERCU elected to suspend racing through August in order to be sure its members are safe, and in hopes that the virus could be contained to a point that we can resume racing in September.

### First race of 2020 finally in the books!

When we were finally able to get back to the beach at Lacey, Washington, and have the first ERCU race of the season, the day could not have been better. So much fun. No controversy. No bad accidents. No jumped starts. A lot of great racing.

It's exactly what we all waited for. And when all of the roostertails settled, it was Nelson Holmberg who took home the Diamond Cup trophies for the vintage and modern classes and Gerry Bordon who added his name (again) to the record book with the first-ever classic division win in the history of ERCU.

"It was so much fun to finally get out on the racecourse and compete against some good friends," Bordon said, "and



Ben Keller

The little plastic man in the cockpit of the 1957 Hawaii Kai III hangs on tight as his boat catches some air.



Ben Keller

Nelson Holmberg's 2018 *Oberto Beef Jerky* made it to the final heat of the Champion Spark Plug Regatta, but the boat blew over at the end of the first lap.

it was a great day of racing. No jumped starts, no serious accidents, and quality racing and friendship.”

Holmberg had good fortune in the vintage final, as two boats were out after a mix-up in the first turn just after the start. No significant damage was done to either boat, but it quickly cut the field in half. The 1975 *Oberto* had a good enough start that it was fortunate to be in a position to take the lead down the backstretch and hold on to it despite strong challenges from Ron Daum's 1957 *Miss U.S.*

Bordon clearly had the fastest classic boat all day, in the form of his 1974 *Miss U.S.* He proved it in the final. He also avenged his only second-place finish of the day by beating the 1987 *Oh Boy! Oberto*, which was able to hold off the *U.S.* in classic Heat 1A. Holmberg was second in the final, followed by Bill Mowatt driving the *Miss Houston*, and Jerry Dunlap in his 1986 *Boat*.

Despite a wind that swept across Woodland Creek Park and onto Long's Pond most of the day, Holmberg piloted the 2018 *Oberto* to a perfect day, winning all three preliminary heats and the modern final. Looks like he's finally got that thing figured out, after a rough year in 2019.

It's the second straight year Nellie has won the Diamond Cup. Ron Daum

had an awesome day with the 2009 *Grandview on the Lake* scoring two firsts and two seconds, including the runner up spot in the modern final. Mick Shutt, driving Jim Bakke's 2013 *Graham Trucking* took third. Mick enjoyed a great day with the boat scoring 1,050 points.

Saturday's race also kicked off the new ERCU Triple Crown Challenge. The first of three modern events was held with the Diamond Cup. Paul Dunlap drove the 2015 *Dalton Industries* to the fastest time in time trials but struggles

through the day led to a withdrawal for the *Dalton* team. Additionally, Len Taylor 2012 *Spirit of Qatar*, which was the second-fastest in time trials, missed the Triple Crown heat due to technical difficulties that forced withdrawal from the race.

So, it came down to Holmberg driving the 2013 *Graham Trucking* and Daum with the *Turbinator*. While the two-boat heat was filled with good racing, it ended on an ironic twist when both boats blew over, Daum's in the back stretch, and Nellie's seconds later while entering the front stretch. None of the boats finished, so Paul Dunlap was given 100 points for his time trial finish and the early lead in the three-race modern series.

### Daum takes a bath, then claims first-ever RC race win

When Ron Daum woke up on Sunday morning for the ERCU Champion Spark Plug Regatta at Lacey, he probably never would have imagined how his day would evolve.

It ended on a very high (and wet) note.

Normally in boat racing, when a driver wins his first race, he or she gets



Ben Keller

Gerry Bordon's 1970 *Parco's O-Ring Miss* suffers a minor mishap as the driver brings it back to the shore.

tossed in the lake by fellow competitors. Daum took care of that on his own when he accidentally fell out of the chase boat while picking up his 1957 *Miss U.S.*, which failed to finish Heat 3A. He was OK. That's why we wear a life jacket when we go out in the boat. Even better, though, the pond is only about four feet deep, so he was able to walk back ashore pulling the chase boat behind him.

"I leaned over to pick up the *U.S.*, which was full of water. Dunny's [Jerry Dunlap's] little boat heeled over and water started to come over the rail," Daum said. "I straightened up to try and recover, but my rear slid to the rail and all was lost. I bailed to save Dunny's boat. As my thoughts went to the old Boy Scout cap-sized-boat drill, my feet hit the bottom. It was really mucky. Fortunately, I had my boots on, so I just walked to shore."

The Champion Spark Plug Regatta was the second of two races in one weekend. It drew a smaller crowd but put us one race closer to being caught up on the events we missed due to the COVID crisis. Originally scheduled to have run back in May, this year's race was a points race, with 10 boats in attendance.

And again, the new classic class turned out to be a success. After 18 boats (six vintage, six classic, and six modern) turned out for the Diamond Cup on Saturday, three vintage, four classic, and three modern were at the Sunday race.

As a points race, consistency and finishing heats was more important than simply winning the final. In the modern class, Daum did that, where Nelson Holmberg and Len Taylor didn't. Taylor, driving the 2013 *Graham Trucking* owned by Jim Bakke, started the mill for the fourth flight, only to see the drive dog slip and not be able to start.

This left the final to Nelson Holmberg's 2018 *Oberto Beef Jerky* and Daum's 2009 *Grandview on the Lake*. Consistency came into play when Nellie blew over the *Oberto* at the start-finish line just after the end of lap one. Chief referee Jerry Dunlap told Ron to run three clean laps



Ben Keller

The 1957 *Hawaii Kai III* leads the 1975 *Oh Boy! Oberto* and the 1957 *Miss U.S.* in vintage hydro action.

and bring it in and he'd be the winner. That was done, and the smile on Ron's face was huge.

"After always being a bridesmaid, finally the bride," the victor said afterward.

The classic class came down to a tie, which went to the rulebook to break. Both Dunlap and Holmberg finished the four heats with 1,169 points.

The ERCU rules have always said that ties are broken by accumulated season points. In this case, that was just Saturday's race, and Nellie had scored 100 more points in classic the day before than Dunny did, so the 1987 *Oh Boy! Oberto* was declared the winner. Second place went to Jerry Dunlap's 1985 *Boat*, third to Bill Mowatt with the 1986 *Miss Houston*, and fourth to Brandon Sano with the 1974 *Weisfields Jewelers*.

Dunlap also had an almost-perfect day in vintage, driving the 1957 *Hawaii Kai III*. As a result, 1,300 points was enough to win the 2020 Champion Spark Plug Regatta vintage championship. Holmberg's 1975 *Oh Boy! Oberto* was second, and Daum's 1957 *Miss U.S.* was third.

Finally, to round out the day, and the weekend, Holmberg's 1975 *Oh Boy! Oberto* claimed the Vintage Triple Crown event, posting a fastest time of 19.34 seconds in the time trials, and winning the heat after Dunny grabbed defeat from the jaws of victory. The *Hawaii Kai III* was the second fastest in time trials (19.79) and Daum's 1957 *Miss U.S.* was

third fastest, just .06 behind the *Kai*.

For the second straight day, a lot of fun was had by all, and the day was filled with great racing.

## Season Suspended as quickly as it started

Less than a week after its wildly successful season-opening weekend, the ERCU board of directors voted to suspend the 2020 racing season through August.

"While the restrictions and guidelines from the governor made it pretty clear we just can't go racing, it is always a hard decision to stop the passion of our members in its tracks by canceling or suspending racing," said ERCU Board Chair Nelson Holmberg. "No one WANTS to suspend racing, especially after just getting the season started with two great races, but it clearly is the smart thing to do."

Just days after the successful completion of the Diamond Cup and the Champion Spark Plug Regatta at Woodland Creek Community Park in Lacey, Governor Jay Inslee ordered that all Phase 3 counties (which includes Thurston and Lewis, where ERCU has race sites), are limited to outdoor gatherings of no more than 10. The limit had previously been 50.

The governor also ordered that there are to be no indoor or outdoor "live performances" until further notice. This order is even despite the dramatic efforts made by our club and others like us to

wear masks, even outdoors, physically distance and conduct proper hand hygiene all weekend long.

“Those who attended the Diamond Cup and Champion Spark Plug Regatta last weekend were awesome in their response and adherence to the health and safety guidelines put in place by the club and by the state,” Holmberg said. “And, coincidentally, we also had some really great racing and a lot of fun.”

As the board weighed this most recent information, it seemed like there was no choice but to suspend the season. By consensus of the board, effective immediately, the 2020 ERCU season has been suspended through August 2020.

The board will meet in August to reassess the situation and make a decision about racing in September and into the fall. It is likely—though no formal decision has yet been made—that the races

that will be missed in July and August will not be rescheduled.

“Jerry Dunlap has done such a great job as race coordinator this year,” Holmberg said. “He’s probably built, start-to-finish, five different season schedules for us this year, and he’s been diligent in trying everything to make a racing season possible for us. To ask him to keep doing that during the ever-changing pandemic simply isn’t fair.” ❖

## Remembering a flying legend.

While Brien Wygle was known in hydroplane circles as the driver of the *Thriftway Too* in 1957 and ‘58 and for his brief stint in the cockpit of the *Hawaii Ka’i III* in 1959, he was best known as a legend of aviation. Wygle passed away on September 15 at the age of 96.

Born in Seattle but raised on a farm near Calgary, Alberta, Wygle served in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II, piloting C-47s over the “Hump” between India, China, and Burma. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for valor.

After graduating with a degree in mechanical engineering from the University of British Columbia, he joined the Boeing Company in 1951, where he would spend the next 39 years and gain fame as a test pilot.

Wygle tested the B-47 bomber, taught Howard Hughes how to fly the 707 airliner, piloted the maiden flight of the 727 in 1967, and was co-pilot on the first flight of the 747 in 1969. He retired from Boeing as the company’s vice president of flight operations.

He took up hydroplane racing in 1957, but his bosses at Boeing weren’t thrilled with the idea. “I enjoyed it,” he once told *Aloft* magazine, “but I’m glad I quit when I did. I had a young family and it was very dangerous.”

You’ll learn more about his remarkable career in an issue of the *Unlimited NewsJournal* that is coming soon. ❖



Bob Carver

## Builder Don Kelson passes away.

Don Kelson hydroplanes have been among the best known and most coveted boats in the world of limited inboard racing throughout the country. The man who built that tradition, Don Kelson, died on August 24 at 89 years old.

Born in Seattle in 1931 and a graduate of West Seattle High School, Kelson went to work at Olympic Foundry after a brief career in the Army, and then worked at Coolidge Propeller. During this time he took up the challenge of building hydroplanes and in 1957 built a 280-class inboard in his garage from plans drawn by Norm Christiansen. Later, he and a partner purchased a company named Modern Pattern Works and went into the business full time.

Through the years, Kelson built many successful hydroplanes. Among them was a craft that Steve David used

to set a kilo record and a 7-litre hydro that was driven by Scott Pierce. He also employed many technicians that would go on to make a mark in Unlimited racing, such as John Walters, Mike Hanson, and Jeff Richards.

His only Unlimited-class boat was the second *Hallmark Homes* (Hull #7132), which he built in only 21 days in 1971. The boat later saw action as *Miss Van’s P-X* in 1972 and as *Red Man* in 1973. Kelson would later comment that he never left his shop during the 21 days the boat was being built.

Kelson was named boat builder of the year by the American Power Boat Association in 2011 and was inducted into the APBA Honor Squadron in 2015. ❖

# HYDROFILE

## Race Team News by Lon Erickson



As we pass the annual date of the traditional season-ending event in San Diego, we will continue to monitor and check in with teams, owners, drivers, sponsors, and other related personnel to bring you news as it becomes available. For the most part, things have been very quiet and little news has been shared.

### HomeStreet Racing

The *Miss HomeStreet* display hull was out in the Seattle area last month to help promote Seafair. It's now gone to Madison, Indiana, where it was on display, along with the Madison Regatta display boat, for the 2020 Madison Vintage Thunder in memory of Jean Johnson event September 19 and 20.



Kirk Duncan

### Go3 Racing

Some basic off-season maintenance has been going on at the Go3 Racing shop in Evansville, Indiana. Robert Grossman gave both the uprights and Allison valve covers a fresh coat of Go3 red. In the engine shop, maintaining the Allison V-12s is an ongoing task year-round.



Go3 Racing

### Bucket List Racing 99.9/440

The team continues to put the final pieces together for the U-99.9 race boat. In the photo immediately below, Dave Villwock and crew chief Taylor Evans hard at work. Hardware is in the hull, strut and shaft alignment done, gearbox is in, and a recent systems check was completed. A full engine test is forthcoming. Watch for more news coming from the Bucket List Racing team in the coming weeks.



Photos from Bucket List Racing

# MY \$0.02 WORTH

## Editorial Comment by Andy Muntz



**O**n Page 2 of this issue, John Walters says something that is greatly significant about the sport of Unlimited hydroplane racing. In relating the story about Dave Heerensperger assembling the team that created the first successful turbine-powered hydro, Walters tells us of the critical role that Bill Muncey played.

While perhaps I'm biased about Muncey, having written his biography in my book *At the Ragged Edge*, I'm confident that most of you also would agree that he was one of the greatest drivers this sport has ever seen. He had tremendous driving skill and was a keen student of his craft; he knew the tendencies of his opponents better than they probably knew themselves.

But, another aspect of his success was his relationship with the sport itself. He grew up surrounded by marketing, his dad was a very successful auto dealer in Detroit, and he studied marketing in college. He was very good at it and, with that knowledge, clearly understood the

role that Unlimited racing played in society.

He knew that the sport existed primarily as a source of entertainment. It was show business in its purest form, he would say.

Muncey once talked about the 1978 event in Miami—a race that he won—as one of most embarrassing moments in his life. His concern was that when it came time to get the final heat underway, his was the only boat to cross the starting line. “I have worked damned hard for a very long time to get the public’s attention on our sport,” he later wrote in his *Powerboat* magazine column. “This had to be the blistering worst.”

So, less than a year later, Muncey was confronted with the prospect of his crew chief, Jim Lucero, a man he once said was the best in the history of the sport, moving to Heerensperger’s team to create the new *Pay ‘n Pak*. Not only that, he also wanted to take one of his most talented crew members with him.

Now, remember what’s going on at

the time. Muncey has had two very

successful seasons with the *Atlas Van Lines*, but he knows that Bernie Little will be hot on his tail in 1979 because he is building a new *Miss Budweiser* that will be powered by the massive Rolls-Royce Griffon engine.

Nevertheless, Muncey gave his blessings to the plan because he knew that would be best for the sport. Lucero and Walters stayed with the *Atlas Van Lines* during the 1979 season while also getting the new *Pay ‘n Pak* team up and running, then left Muncey’s team at a time when some were saying the Blue Blaster was showing signs of wear.

Muncey agreed to the plan because he knew that his personal success wasn’t the most important thing. He knew that Unlimited-class racing is in the entertainment business and he understood that no matter what else, the most important thing is to attract fans.

In the end, it was all about marketing. ❖

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Letters are welcome, but may be edited for clarity and space.

**PLEASE JOIN US AT THE NEXT MEETING OF UNLIMITEDS UNANIMOUS**

The October meeting has been canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Check our website for more information.