

Kelly and HomeStreet team end 2021 season as champs.



Chris Denslow

The Bill Muncey Trophy gets hoisted high in the air by the Miss Tri-Cities team as they celebrate their victory in the HomeStreet Bank San Diego Bayfair race and J. Michael Kelly's first national championship. The Miss Madison Race Team also celebrated by clinching their seventh national title in the past 10 seasons.

Although J. Michael Kelly led the national title race for drivers through the entire 2021 season, the final outcome wasn't settled until the checkered flag had dropped for the last heat of the year. And, it was also by the narrowest of margins and was made possible only by a fraction-of-a-second miscue by Jimmy Shane. But, it counts just the same, and will go in the record books as Kelly's first national title.

As for the boat title, that was a bit more clear cut. Shane clinched that honor for his team when he won Heat 2B during the first day of racing on Mission Bay in San Diego.

The final standings are on page 12. Watch for a full report of all the action that occurred during the 2021 HomeStreet Bank San Diego Bayfair event in the next issue of the *Unlimited NewsJournal*.

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FROM THE UNJ VAULT:

Remembering James G. Thompson

Canadian competitors have played a significant role in the sport of unlimited hydroplane racing, especially during the 1950s and early '60s when J. Gordon Thompson and his son James campaigned their *Miss Supertest* entries. The pair won five races during those years, including the last three Harmsworth Trophy races held for unlimiteds, set a straightaway speed record, and were among the first to use the Rolls-Royce Griffon engine in a hydroplane.

James G. Thompson passed away in London, Ontario, on May 13 at the age of 94. He leaves behind his wife of 71 years, Beverly, five children, 15 grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.

Thompson was born in London, Ontario, attended Ridley College as well as the Royal Canadian Naval College, earned a degree in engineering from the University of Toronto and a business degree from the University of Western Ontario, and from 1960 to 1971 served as president of Supertest Petroleum, a company co-founded by his father. He was a champion trap shooter and enjoyed a wide variety of hobbies that included piloting small aircraft, sailing, golfing, machining and gunsmithing, assembling electronics, boat building, and crafting furniture.



Robert F. Peters

Soft-spoken, known as a modest gentleman with a ready chuckle and an ever-present pipe in his mouth, Thompson designed the *Miss Supertest III*, a boat that won every race that it entered, and because of his achievements in the sport was inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, the Canadian Motorsports Hall of Fame, and the London Sports Hall of Fame.

The following interview was conducted in June 1980 by Craig Fjarlie and Bill Osborne as they met with Thompson at the yacht club in Sarnia, Ontario. The interview first appeared in the *Unlimited News-Journal* in February and March 1981.

UNJ: How did you get interested in boat racing?

Thompson: Well, after the '50 Harmsworth, the Wilsons retired. We thought we'd like to see Canada carry on the effort. It was 1951 that we acquired the boats—both *Miss Canada III* and *Miss Canada IV*.

Did you know the Wilsons?

I didn't myself. My father knew Mr. Wilson, Sr.

Did he have anything to do with working on the boats when the Wilsons owned them?

No. They decided to retire and there was everything—whatever they had—for sale “as was.” Basically, we started from scratch.

When you first started campaigning the former *Miss Canada IV*, you called it *Miss Supertest*. What kind of engines were you running? Wilson had used both the Merlin and the Griffon.

The first year or so we just ran the Merlins. That's all we could get our hands on at that particular time. Of course, for the Harmsworth attempts, they'd had the Rolls-Royce Griffon on loan from Rolls-Royce.

So you didn't get any Griffons with the deal?



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

TOP: In 1951, the Thompsons purchased two boats from fellow Canadian Ernest Wilson. One was *Miss Canada III*, which was built in 1938 and, with Harold Wilson driving, was the winner of the 1939 President's Cup. The boat last saw action in 1948, when it won the Silver Cup. **MIDDLE:** The other boat purchased in 1951 was *Miss Canada IV*, which was built in 1949 and represented Canada in the 1950 Harmsworth Race. **ABOVE:** *Miss Canada IV* was renamed *Miss Supertest* in 1952 and was entered in two races that year and in the 1953 Silver Cup



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

Miss Supertest II was powered with a Rolls-Royce Griffon engine. It first entered competition in 1954 with Bill Braden at the wheel. He drove the boat to victory in the 1956 Prince Edward Trophy in Picton, Ontario.

“Well, actually, what we wanted to do was get the name Miss Canada. We looked at it as a Canadian effort, really. ...we tried to get the name from them [Wilson family]. But they felt with all the effort they’d put into it, they wanted to retain the name.”

No. They had a pair of [Griffon] engines that were loaned to them, and of course they had to return them.

Do you happen to know what series they were?

Fifty-sevens. The only way they were available was either from the British Air Ministry or Rolls-Royce itself.

How about the Merlins you were running? Do you recall what model numbers you had?

Oh, I think they were 225s, 224s. That’s a single-stage. Basically, Lancaster bomber engines, I’d say.

How did you come up with Griffons? You acquired them during your second season, right?

There were some that became surplus through the Canadian Navy from War Assets. They were Griffon 6s, which is quite a different animal from the Griffon 57. They’re a much earlier version, but basically the same...

Single-stage?

Yeah, they were single-stage. 2s, 3s, 4s, 6s, and 12s were all that single-stage series. These were ones used in the Seafire carrier-based version of the Spitfire.

Did you have complete control of them?

As soon as we were able to buy the Griffon 61s, we could do what we liked, the same as anybody else. Now, one year, Rolls did loan us a Griffon 57. That was in the *Supertest II*, I’m pretty sure.

Did you ever run a 74?

Yeah, we had 74s, but we changed ‘em.

We’re jumping ahead, but what did you do to them?

Well, basically modified them to Griffon 65s.

Did you do much reworking of the engine parts to beef them up? Miss Budweiser, for example, re-does rod bolts, machines new supercharger gears, and so on. Did you go through all that?

Well, we were never concerned with the rod bolts. But we were well aware that Rolls had strength in the rod bolts in certain points. We had some Griffon 65s, and if we ran a 74 block, then we changed the supercharger gearing and so on to the 65.

Did you go to the point of having to machine new gears to make the equipment live?

No. Availability—they weren’t that readily available. Everybody had spring-drive troubles and quill shafts.

Will you tell us a little about the organization of your team? Were you running things? Was your father involved?

Well, I was responsible. I was basically running it now. He was very much interested and helped where he could.

Did you look at it as an advertising thing for your company, or as a hobby?

Well, actually, what we wanted to do was get the name Miss Canada. We looked at it as a Canadian effort, really. The Wilson... I was just looking back the other day, after you called me, and two or three times we tried to get the name from them [Wilson family]. But they felt with all the effort they’d put into it, they wanted to retain the name. Of course, by that time the *Supertest II* was starting to become a bit known, so it was carried on.

How did you go about selecting your personnel?

Well, some things just seemed to fall in place.

As far as driver is concerned, that was Bill Braden. We knew of him. He'd done a lot of racing in smaller boats—primarily 266 class. But actually, his uncle was Harry Greening. He used to run the *Rainbow* boats. A large part of what he was interested in were these endurance records and things. Turning in 12-, 24-hour stuff. Did a lot of that. That's going back a long way, though.

At what point were you starting to plan for the *Miss Supertest II*? Were you convinced that the three-pointer was the way to go?

Slo-mo-shun IV was the crossover. It took a couple of years for it to sink in.

What can you tell us about the construction of the *Miss Supertest II*? Les Staudacher did a lot of work on the boat.

Yeah. It was built here in Sarnia, but he certainly was involved in it. We didn't know that much about, shall we say, the construction at that point in time. Certainly, in my mind, there was no question in those days it was about the best boat there was. Beautiful job on it.

It had a reputation for being heavy and difficult to handle.

I have a tendency in my own mind to want to compare it to the *Miss Supertest III*. They were both about the same boat as far as size goes. The *Two* was a little longer but narrower than the *Three*. Weight-wise, I don't think there was a heckuva lot of difference. But, there was quite a difference as far as design goes. It [*Supertest II*] certainly didn't handle as well. If conditions were ideal, there was no question she'd go, but as they say, there's no such thing as ideal conditions.

Now, was *Supertest II* built with the Griffon engine in mind?

Yeah. She was built right around the Griffon. The spacing of the engine barriers, that's the big difference. Yet, they go in the same aircraft. It's just the way they did it that made it awkward in the boat.

The first time *Miss Supertest II* came to race was at the 1954 Silver Cup. It didn't qualify. Just how ready was the boat? Did you do much testing?

Obviously, not enough! It certainly took a while to get the machinery going.

In '55, you had a good showing in the Maple Leaf race and won the final heat. Had you made many changes to the boat since '54?

Well, we were always trying to improve.

Did you do much testing in the wintertime?

We did none in the winter. Of course, we used to run, actually right down here in Sarnia Bay, which is not a very ideal spot. It's a bit like Detroit, with the freighter traffic and so on. But with ice and everything, there was no possibility to run in the wintertime.

The *Miss Supertest II* changed configurations a number of times. It started off with a flush deck, later it had dropped sponsons. For a while it had a tail fin, then it didn't, then it had one again. What brought on all the changes?

I suppose you might call it "fad" a bit. I never could figure out what the tail fin did other than being a nice billboard—you know, making the boat a little more visible. As far as the dropped

sponsons were concerned, actually in my way of thinking, for the construction in those days, it was a means of making it a little bit stronger.

That's the dropped sponsons?

Dropped sponsons. Now, they were dropped about five or six inches on *Miss Supertest II*. On *Miss Supertest III*, I think it was about an inch and a half. That was strictly structural, that one.

Whose idea was it to make those modifications on the *Two*?

[Pause] That's a long time ago...

Did Les Staudacher consult with you once the boat was built?

Oh, we used to see him quite often, sure. Talked with him, see what he was up to. He'd see what we were up to. In the meantime, running something with the Griffon, you're running a completely different set of circumstances than anybody else.

In 1956, you won the race at Picton. What can you recall about that race?

Well, down there at Picton it was very good water. The boat obviously was running well. We were starting to get to the point where the machinery wasn't



Art Asbury (left) drove *Miss Supertest II* in 1957 and won the Buffalo Launch Club Regatta in Buffalo, New York. He is pictured here with J. Gordon Thompson, James Thompson's father.



The *Miss Supertest II* with a tail fin and dropped sponsons.

causing problems. We were getting to know pretty well what we could do and what we couldn't do. She ran very well that day. That was good fun. That was a good race. I think everybody enjoyed it.

In relation to the race at Picton, where was the Maple Leaf race held?

That used to be down at Windsor. This one at Picton was good water. Then again, it was a different spot from where the Harmsworth was run, which was even better, three or four miles away. There was a large bay. It [Picton] was run in the bay and was well protected on the one side. It's on the Bay of Quinte off Lake Ontario. The Harmsworth was run in the channel. That's the best-protected racecourse I've ever seen. Nice sloping beaches. No boats around the sides of the course. They'd be at the end.

In '56 you also challenged for the Harmsworth. How serious was that challenge, compared to the ones in 1959, '60, and '61?

Well, the challenge itself was serious, but obviously...

Your effort, your preparation...

Well, as well as we were able to do at the time. But, then, it was entirely serious. No thought of being frivolous or anything like that. A lot of people involved and hard work by committees and so on. We were just plain beat.

Was winning the Harmsworth a long-range goal for you?

Yeah, um hum.

Was this, in a sense, just getting your feet wet?

No, we thought we...

Thought you had a good shot at it?

Sure. Obviously, we didn't.

We've heard you had two engines, one called "The Queen's Engine" and one that was a practice engine.

That's something somebody invented. We always had two engines completely set up, other than gearbox. We only had one gearbox for the three-pointers. That same gearbox ran from the *Supertest II* right through the whole piece.

Following the Harmsworth, you went to the Gold Cup but didn't qualify.

It may have been time. May have had more work to do, or something.

Danny Foster was helping out by this time. Bill Braden was no longer your driver.

Bill was a businessman. He didn't have the time. I guess he felt he couldn't give as much time as he felt he had to.

You did try a mile record with Braden. When was that and how did it go?

Well, that was early on, I know that. I forget just when. That would be at Picton, that beautiful water. Spectators weren't a problem, particularly in the off-season.

Did he come close to the *Slo-mo's* 178 mph record?

He wasn't close to it, I'm sure. We did set a record with Art Asbury at 184 and a half.

Foster attempted a record in between and was injured. Same weekend as the Silver Cup.

Yeah. I remember that one well, other than the date. This was a case of: I never saw a boat going so fast in my

life. Some boat, one of the police boats or something, moved. He was on his way. Took off over the wake. Came down and the sponson collapsed on him, and that was it. Fortunately, it wasn't more serious than that.

In the '56 President's Cup, you had hull damage. It was right after that when the boat was rebuilt with the dropped sponsons. Did the hull damage have anything to do with rebuilding it with dropped sponsons?

Specifically, I don't remember, because you have damage every now and again. To sort which one out from which, I don't know. But I can certainly remember down there that it was just like trying to run in the Strait of Juan de Fuca! So, you know what that would be like. That was a rough course, with all the breakwaters and everything. Waves slopping back and forth. Great place to watch a race, but...

In that time period, 1955 through '57, did you have any thoughts of coming out west to Seattle? Challenging for the Gold Cup?

Well, we had the boat out there one time [1958]. Then, we were out in Las Vegas one time, too.

Was your desire more toward the Harmsworth?

Yeah, Harmsworth. That's why we were so careful to try to do things the way we did.

In 1957, Art Asbury was the driver. Who was he? How did he fit in?

Well, he was a small-boat racer. How we got to know him I don't recall.

Did Foster leave because of the accident?

No, he helped us out for a fair length of time. Danny's ideas were a fair bit different from other people. Go back to old *Tempo VII*, he had a fantastic record with that boat. It wasn't a fast boat, but he could get around a racecourse in a hurry.

Did he offer much input on changes to make on your boat? Suggestions?

Oh, yeah. We tried some of 'em. Again, he was quite interesting. His atti-

tude in a race was: It isn't how fast you're going, it's how short a length of time it takes to start here and get back to where you started from, which is really the fact of the matter. A lot of people overlook this. He was very much tuned toward that approach. So, we certainly tried quite a few of his thoughts. I suppose, finally, we ended up with sort of a combination, you might say.

By late 1957, were you making any plans for the *Supertest III*, or was that still down the road a ways?

I think we were definitely starting to think about another boat by that time. Definitely by '58, because that's when I drew it up. We built it over the winter of '58-'59.

You drew it up?

Oh, yeah. All my idea, that one.

In early November 1957, you set a kilometer mark with Art Asbury driving. How do you recall that one?

Well, you sort of take your time.

You're looking for top speed, you're not looking for how quick do you get back around the corner. It's just, work out the best combination of propeller, gear ratio.

Did you have a special propeller or gear ratio set up for that?

I forget which ones we used, but certainly we did our best to get the best combination for that job. As you know, you're not interested in acceleration, particularly. Still interested in handling. You have to be.

Following the 1957 season, Bob Hayward became your driver. How did it happen that Asbury was out and Hayward was in?

I don't remember, really, at the time. Actually, Bob started with us as a mechanic. How we got to know Bob was through Bruce Wells, who had a little foundry and machine shop and used to do all our machine work for us. He was a very interesting character. Absolutely tops with machinery and could make

anything. Bob used to come in to the foundry and so on. I guess he'd done a little racing in outboards. Bruce's son used to race them. Bob came with us as a mechanic, a darn good mechanic, and next thing you know ... just liked the way he handled himself and everything. "How'd you like to have a go at it?" So, he started to drive down here during the testing. I used to do most of that myself, at one stage. Then Bob and I used to do it together and compare notes and impressions.

At any time did you have a desire to go out and race?

No.

In 1958 you won a three-heat sweep at St. Clair.

She was running well that day, for sure. Again, that's mountain goat water down there, too.

You made a trip to Seattle that year for the Gold Cup. The engine didn't run well and you didn't finish any heats.

I remember getting there well ahead and had engine trouble the whole time through. We only had two engines with us and we built either three or four out of the two while we were there, taking bits and pieces apart to get enough so that everything would go in the same direction the same time. Those things don't work. Either you're ready or you're not, barring a complete breakdown or something. You shouldn't have to be messing around before a race. That's supposed to be done ahead of time.

I imagine it hasn't changed too much. So many times people drop the boat in the water and nothing would happen. It's so unfortunate. And this applies to what could or should be some pretty darn good boats, too. And good crews. ❖

That concludes the first half of our interview with James G. Thompson. In next month's issue of the Unlimited NewsJournal, Thompson will talk about racing Miss Supertest III, his three Harmsworth victories, and his decision to leave racing in 1961.



Tony Bugeja Collection



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

Scenes from the only appearance of *Miss Supertest II* in Seattle. The boat entered only one heat at the 1958 Gold Cup that year and failed to finish it.

Miss Bardahl's "Laughing Gas"

THE REAL STORY ABOUT NITROUS OXIDE DEVELOPMENT FOR UNLIMITED HYDROS

BY DIXON SMITH

Numerous rumors and stories have been circulated over the years about the introduction of nitrous oxide injection in Unlimited hydroplanes. What follows is an accurate, historical account of the development and use of nitrous oxide by one Unlimited team—the *Miss Bardahl*.

Nitrous oxide injection on Rolls-Royce Merlin engines was developed at about the same time and independently by both the *Miss Exide* team and the *Miss Bardahl* team. Both projects were “secret,” so neither team knew anything about the other team’s development efforts. The *Exide* effort was primarily the work of Bernie Van Cleve and the *Bardahl* effort was due to my work.

Before getting into the history, we need to answer the question: “Why nitrous?”

The job of any motor department of any racing team is to get as much horsepower out of the motors as possible. The driver and the crew chief always want MORE!

With any piston engine, there is an optimum mixture of air and fuel, or more properly said, oxygen and fuel. If there is too much air (oxygen), power is reduced and engine damage usually

results. If there is too much fuel, power is reduced and the spark plugs tend to foul.

The best power ratio of fuel to air is about one part of fuel to 12 parts of air, by weight. The limiting factor for engine power is how much air can be forced into the engine. That is why superchargers and turbochargers are found on racing engines. They force more air into the engine so more fuel can be used, thus making more power.

However, there is a limit to how much a supercharger or turbocharger can do. So, when we reach the supercharger’s limit, how do we get more power?

Answer: Add more oxygen, because it is the burning of fuel and oxygen that produces the power in a piston engine. Air is about 21% oxygen; the rest is nitrogen and small amounts of other gasses. But nitrous oxide is about 37% oxygen, and oxygen is what we need! So,



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

The *Miss Bardahl* on the sling at Seattle



Ron Musson

if we can substitute nitrous oxide for air, and add the appropriate additional fuel to use up that extra oxygen, we will get more power.

In the fall of 1963, I was a student at the University of Washington, majoring in physics. Between classes I would spend time in the Engineering Library reading reports on engine development and theory. That's when I came across a wartime report that was written by researchers at NACA (National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, NASA's predecessor) in 1945. The report, which was declassified sometime in the 1950s, is titled "Nitrous Oxide Supercharging of an Aircraft-Engine Cylinder." (For those interested in reading the complete report, do a Google search for "NACA report E5F26.")

After reading the report and doing some calculations, I presented a proposal to Leo Vanden Berg, the crew chief of *Miss Bardahl*, and to the rest of the crew suggesting that they install a nitrous system in the boat. It was not enthusiastically received. In fact, most of the crew did not believe I knew what I was talking about.

After much discussion, Leo agreed to let me build a system and install it on the boat for a test, with the proviso that I was certain that the nitrous system would not damage an engine.

There were several challenges to designing and building the system.

First, nitrous is a liquid in a high-pressure bottle, at about 750 psi. The NACA report also did not discuss nitrous storage, valves to control the nitrous, fuel valves, or how to meter the nitrous. I had to find light, high-pressure tanks that would hold the nitrous in the boat. Also, I had to acquire valves to control the nitrous and additional fuel, and I had to design some way to meter the nitrous and fuel.

There was one more problem I had to address. It is well known that any increase in horsepower in an engine decreases the reliability of the engine. There is an old saying in racing: "You have to finish to win." My initial approach to the reliability problem was to limit the time nitrous could be used. More on that later.

The tanks I used were lightweight, high-pressure aircraft oxygen bottles. I found a surplus aircraft high-pressure hydraulic valve to use for controlling the nitrous, and a surplus aircraft fuel valve for controlling the fuel. Metering orifices for controlling the nitrous and fuel flows were constructed based on my calculations.

The next problem was buying nitrous oxide. At the time, the only use for nitrous was as an anesthetic—used primarily by dentists. When I tried to

buy a bottle of nitrous, the first question asked was: Where was my prescription?

After several discussions with the supplier, they finally let me purchase a bottle containing 50 pounds of nitrous. The bottle was over five feet tall and weighed over 125 pounds. Next problem: transferring the nitrous from that large bottle to the small bottles for the boat. That took a garbage can full of ice, a scale, and transfer hoses.

Now I was ready to put the system together, check the nitrous and fuel flows, and install the nozzles for nitrous and fuel on the engine. A button on the steering wheel controlled the nitrous system.

The next spring (1964) we had a test session. We had several things to test, including the nitrous system. Before the run to test the nitrous, I talked to the driver, Ron Musson, about how the system worked. I told him that the system was limited to 10 seconds of use. An electronic timing circuit limited the 10 seconds.

Ron's comment was, "No problem, I will just release the button after 10 seconds and immediately push it again." I was really ahead of him, because I explained the electronic timing circuit did not reset until it had been off for the amount of time it had just been on. So,



Dixon Smith Collection

Miss Bardahl racing side by side with *Miss Exide* in 1965. Look closely, right in front of the *Bardahl's* engine are the two red bottles that contained the nitrous oxide.

Dixon Smith Collection



Sandy Ross Collection



TOP: Puffs of black smoke shoot from the stacks of both *Bardahl* and *Exide* as their drivers apply nitrous oxide to the engines. **ABOVE:** *Miss Bardahl* in Madison, Indiana.

if he held the button on for the full 10 seconds, then the system would hold off for a full 10 seconds, no matter what Ron did with the button. This was to prevent damaging the engine due to making too much power for too long.

During the test run, Ron tried the nitrous several times. The first time he tried, it worked. After the first try, each time he pressed the button all that happened was lots of black smoke from the engine and the boat went slower. His comment was, "Whatever happened the first time, it was great, lots of power. After that, the motor got sick every time I pushed the button."

That was the start of a long process of discovering what caused the lack of power and lots of black smoke.

What I did not understand initially was that when nitrous goes through small passages, such as a control valve, it gets very cold. When Ron pushed the nitrous button the first time, the nitrous

and fuel valves worked as planned. But, when the nitrous valve closed, the cold caused it to become frozen in the closed position. As a result, the next time he pushed the nitrous button, the nitrous valve wouldn't open but the fuel valve opened normally. This was discovered after significant testing of the system in the *Bardahl* shop.

Now to find a suitable valve!

My salvation came from George Woolf at Spencer Aircraft. I explained to George that I needed a valve that would handle the 750 psi pressure, the flow volume of nitrous, and could not have any small passages internally. George found a valve manufactured by the Barksdale Company that was perfect. In 1964 the valve cost \$125. Today that valve would cost about \$875.

We did not run nitrous in competition in 1964. I was busy building Merlin engines and going to school, so I could not devote much time to the

nitrous system development. We did use the nitrous system during the 1965 season, though.

If you look closely at pictures of the *Miss Bardahl* from 1965, and in particular at the front of the engine compartment, some pictures have two red bottles showing. Those are the nitrous bottles.

Also, there are some pictures of the *Bardahl* and *Exide* racing where both boats are making large clouds of black smoke out of the engine exhaust stacks. The black smoke is a result of the excess fuel injected into the engine to help protect the engine while making the extra horsepower from nitrous.

By the last race of the 1965 season, San Diego, we really had the nitrous system working very well. Musson said he'd be next to another boat during the race, look over at the other driver, smile, push the nitrous button, and just drive away from the other boat. During that race we set lap, heat, and race records that stood for many years. When we finished the race, we had completed 57 consecutive heats without an engine failure.

Later, we determined that a timer was not required, so the driver could use nitrous as much as he wanted. Also, with further testing, we determined that all the excess fuel was not required for engine protection. With the elimination of the excess fuel, a boat did not create the cloud of black smoke, so it was much harder to tell when a driver was using nitrous.

The nitrous system that was developed on the *Miss Bardahl* in 1964 was used on many other boats. These include *Eagle Electric*, *Notre Dame*, *Atlas Van Lines*, *Pay 'n Pak*, and my favorite, the *Griffon Budweiser*.

To my knowledge, the only Unlimited that has a working nitrous system currently is the restored 1965 *Miss Bardahl*. It is installed, and believe me, it works! ❖

HYDROFILE

Race Team News by Lon Erickson



As we pass the 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.

HomeStreet Racing U-1

After having the *Miss HomeStreet* display hull out in the Seattle area last month to help promote Seafair community events, the display boat headed to San Diego (below) in advance of the H1 fleet. The hull went on display at HomeStreet Bank branches around the Mission Bay area and in San Diego County.



San Diego Bayfair

Detroit Unlimited Racing U-7, U-10, and U-2

Detroit Unlimited Racing LLC is already solidifying plans for the 2022 hydroplane racing season. The team hopes to race with two hulls: the U-7 (below) driven by Bert Henderson and the U-10 (top of next column) driven by Patrick Haworth. Both drivers are Canadian, and the closed border due to the pandemic prevented both of them, as well as many team members, from racing this summer on the H1 tour.

In preparation for the 2022 season, a new addition was added to the team. Brent Hall (right), who has raced in the



Lon Erickson



Lon Erickson

Grand Prix class since 2012 for Hopp Racing Grand Prix Hydroplane, has been named backup driver for both the U-7 and the U-10, with a goal of being qualified as an Unlimited driver during the season. He also will be stepping into the new role of director of marketing for Detroit Unlimited Racing LLC.

Hopeful for 2022? The U-2, former *Trendwest* hull, is at owner Dave Bartush's shop in downtown Detroit. A lot of weight has been taken out and modifications have been made to the hull by Henderson Hydroplanes—specifically, the sponsons, after being obtained by Bartush. The former *Trendwest* hull could be in play for 2022 with the amount of work done since it last competed.



Julie Sparrowgrove

Graham Trucking U-12

The U-12 (below) suffered damage during the final heat of the Tri-Cities race. Once the team got the boat back to their shop and inspected the damage more closely, they determined that the needed repairs were going to be more extensive and time consuming than they originally thought and that it would prevent them from making the trip and competing at Bayfair. They plan more extensive repairs and remodeling to the U-12 hull and plan to move all of their race operations to a new facility in Kent, Washington. The *Graham Trucking* team is looking ahead and is committed to challenge for the national championship in 2022.



H1 Unlimited

Bucket List Racing U-40/440

With the U-12 not able to compete at Bayfair, Sharon and Kelly Stocklin's Bucket List Racing team chose to race both the U-40 and 440 in San Diego to fill out the six-boat field. Regular 440 driver Dustin Echols had prior commitments for the weekend of Bayfair so owner Kelly Stocklin was back in the driver's seat of the boat in San Diego.

Potential H1 event opportunity

There were positive discussions in the works with organizations in the Camas/Vancouver, Washington, area to hold an exhibition on the Columbia River the week after the San Diego Bayfair event. The event was planned to lay the groundwork for a future race and also provide the teams with the opportunity to run their boats in fresh water, after competing in the salt water of Mission Bay the previous weekend. The event had to be postponed because of delays in getting approval from governmental agencies involved. Though the event did not take place this fall, H1 Unlimited is hopeful that a future exhibition will happen sometime in 2022. ❖

THE FINAL 2021 NATIONAL STANDINGS

DRIVERS:

J. Michael Kelly.....	5,605
Jimmy Shane	5,425
Corey Peabody.....	4,273
Andrew Tate	3,380
Dave Villwock.....	3,199
Jamie Nilsen.....	2,667
Jeff Bernard.....	1,029
Jimmy King	790
Dustin Echols.....	649

RACE TEAMS:

U-1 Miss HomeStreet	6,454
U-8 Miss Tri-Cities	5,605
U-9 Pinnacle Peak Consulting	4,273
U-12 Graham Trucking.....	3,380
U-40 Miss Beacon Plumbing.....	3,199
U-11 J&D's.....	2,667
U-3 Griggs presents Miss Ace Hardware.....	790
U-400 Bucket List Racing.....	649

MY \$0.02 WORTH

Editorial Comment by Andy Muntz



FORTY YEARS AGO...

I remember vividly when I got the news. It was on a Sunday evening 40 years ago when the phone rang at my home in Edmonds, Washington. Wil Muncey was calling.

Wil and I had become friends, working together to get *Boatracng Magazine* off the ground. We had been meeting every Tuesday night for a couple of years at this point, planning what to put in the next issue, discussing who we might get to write the stories, deciding where the photos would come from, and that kind of thing.

In between the business of publishing a magazine, we'd also talk about many other topics, including hydroplanes. Sometimes his famous dad would even stop by when he happened to be in town. We'd chat and he'd tell stories about his experiences.

That was mighty heady stuff. As a kid who idolized the hydroplane drivers of the 1950s and '60s, I never would have dreamed it possible that I'd one day get the opportunity to visit informally like that with the great Bill Muncey. It's also what helped inspire me to write his biography some 30 years later.

When I answered the phone on that Sunday evening in October 1981 and learned that it was Wil (this was before caller ID), I immediately sensed a tension in his voice. He'd heard a rumor that something had happened to his dad down in Acapulco. Had I heard anything, he asked? No, I hadn't, I answered, and I promised I'd find out what I could.

The search didn't take long. By simply turning on the radio, I soon heard the news bulletins that the rumors were true. Bill Muncey had been killed.



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

In those days, unfortunately, getting killed driving an Unlimited hydroplane was not unusual. But even though 10 drivers had lost their lives during the previous 20 years, I couldn't imagine that the same fate would ever happen to Muncey. Somehow, he seemed immortal. Yet, there it was—Muncey was human, too.

WHEN HE first became known to the race fans of the Pacific Northwest in 1955, Bill Muncey was the unlikeliest of Seattle hydroplane heroes. It was a time when hydroplane racing was the biggest

thing in Seattle sports, and a key feature of that passion was a deep rivalry between the boats that represented Seattle and those that came from Detroit.

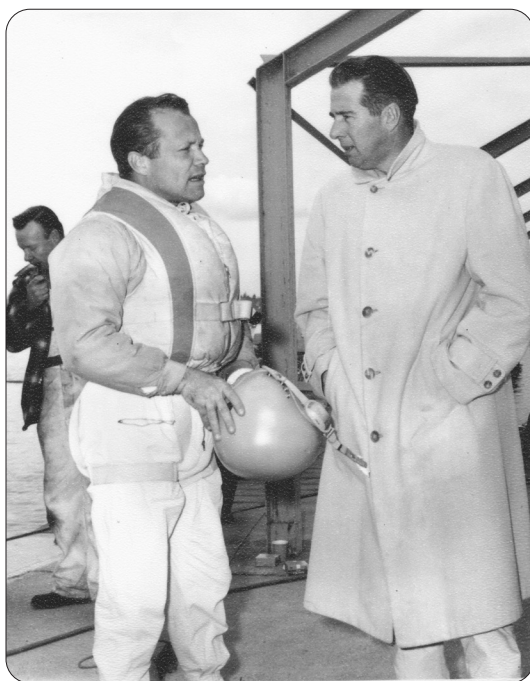
Until that year, the fortunes of the Seattle interests rested entirely on Stan Sayres and his *Slo-mo-shun IV* and *Slo-mo-shun V*—two boats that had won the prestigious Gold Cup five years in a row. Then, early in 1955, there came word that a new Seattle boat would race as *Miss Thriftway*, and three weeks before that summer's Gold Cup, its driver was announced.

His name was "Bill Muncy," accord-



Bob Carver

ABOVE: The first *Miss Thriftway*, Muncey's first competitive ride.
RIGHT: Muncey visits with Ted Jones, the man who hired him to drive for *Thriftway* in 1955.



Bob Carver

ing to the headline on the front page of the *Seattle Daily Times*. Ted Jones, himself a hero in Seattle for designing the *Slo-mo* boats and driving *Slo-mo IV* to victory in the 1950 Gold Cup, was the team manager for the new *Thriftway* team and assured us that he had full confidence in Muncey's driving ability and would bring out all of the potential of the new boat.

But, there was something that was particularly hard for Seattle fans to swallow about this guy—Muncey was from Detroit. He had grown up in that rival city. His first experience in an Unlimited had been at the controls of one of his hometown boats, an adversary named *Miss Great Lakes*.

He quickly won our hearts, however. We thought he had won the race, in fact, and only because of some flimflam carried out by the Detroit teams, and something called bonus points, the trophy was taken away from him and handed to Lee Schoenith of the Motor City. We were appalled, Schoenith became our enemy, and Muncey was our heroic victim.

Sensing a good thing for the sport, Muncey and Schoenith milked those intense feelings for all their worth during the next several years. Though they were actually best friends, that's not how we saw it. The two bickered in the press—our guy against that evil driver from Detroit—and we came to the shore of Lake Washington in droves to see them battle.

Then Muncey moved his family to Seattle and became one of us. He made personal appearances everywhere he could—Dad's Night at the Latona Preschool, the University District Rotary Club, the Father-Son Banquet at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, the Blanchet High School Parents Club, and on, and on. He was named admiral of the Boat Show, played a saxophone at a Seattle Symphony fundraiser, shot the first ball at the annual West Seattle Kiwanis Hole-in-One Tournament, and had his own daily program on KING Radio. He quickly became the area's biggest celebrity.

When he won the Gold Cup at Detroit in 1956, his victory was challenged by that cursed Motor City crowd and the haggling went on for months. When it was finally decided he could take the trophy home, Christmas decorations were already starting to appear in Seattle streets, yet he

was met at the airport by such a huge throng of fans that one police officer remarked, “That guy is more popular than Elvis Presley.”

He also survived harrowing accidents. The first *Miss Thriftway* fell apart under him as he drove the boat at Madison, Indiana, in 1957. Its replacement then had the most memorable accident of all when it lost its steering at the 1958 Gold Cup in Seattle and plowed into the side of a Coast Guard patrol boat. Both accidents sent Muncey to the hospital, but he emerged each time determined to continue racing.



Bob Carver

Muncey driving the third *Miss Thriftway*, among the most successful boats in history.

A third *Miss Thriftway* was introduced in 1959 and it proved to be one of the best in the sport’s history—in large part because of its skilled driver. From 1960 to 1963 he dominated the sport by winning a total of 14 races and three national championships.

The *Thriftway* team was disbanded after the 1963 season, Muncey spent the next several years driving boats such as *Notre Dame* and *Miss U.S.*, then he

did something in 1970 that would have been unthinkable in the 1950s—he joined Lee Schoenith’s team from Detroit. In 1972 he dominated again, driving *Atlas Van Lines* to victory in all but one race, but his fortunes then fell on harder times and Schoenith finally quit after the 1975 season.

By this time, Muncey was 47 years old and many felt it was time for him to retire, but he felt otherwise. He said that he’d be the world’s worst retired driver, so when given the opportunity to purchase the *Pay ‘n Pak* race team from Dave Heerensperger before the 1976 season, he accepted the proposal and started a new phase of his career as both an owner and driver.

The biggest prize in the purchase of Heerensperger’s team was a new boat that was being built in Norm Berg’s



Pete Kinch



Randy Hall

ABOVE LEFT: Muncey with Lee Schoenith. We imagined them as mortal enemies in the 1950s, but they were actually best friends. Muncey started driving for Schoenith in 1970. **ABOVE:** Muncey dominated the 1972 season in *Atlas Van Lines*, winning all but one race.

shop in Tacoma—a craft that featured the latest design innovations of the talented Jim Lucero. It was also a cabover, the driver sat in the bow, which was something that Muncey found highly uncomfortable at first. But he adapted and turned the boat into another of the sport's most successful.

From 1977 through 1981, the *Atlas Van Lines*, which became known as the Blue Blaster, won 24 races. As it came time for the final race of the 1981 season, the World's Championship in Acapulco, Mexico, Bill Muncey had amassed seven national titles and a total of 62 race victories, by far the most the sport had ever seen in its history.

THE FACILITIES in Acapulco could best be described as primitive. Wild hogs foraged amongst the boats that were parked in the pits on the shore of Laguna de Coyuca, a shallow fresh-water lagoon surrounded by white sand and palm trees about 10 miles north of the resort city. The water was so shallow that the crews had to push the boats onto the lake, wading up to their waists to get into water deep enough to start the engines.

Muncey's biggest opponent that year was Dean Chenoweth and the Griffon-powered *Miss Budweiser*, the winners of five of the seven races held so far that



Randy Hall

The last boat Muncey drove for Schoenith was the *Atlas Van Lines*, shown here at the Tri-Cities in 1975, the team's final season.

season; they'd already clinched the national title. Chenoweth had qualified at over 139 mph while Muncey was second fastest at nearly 137 mph. Then, Chenoweth won his first two preliminary heats while Muncey finished second and fourth. Yet it wasn't over for Muncey. There still was the winner-take-all final.

When the engines were started for the final, it was approaching half past three in the afternoon, which meant the setting sun would be shining right into the drivers' eyes as they sped down the

backstretch. Making that worse, Muncey had lost a lens in his dark sports goggles the heat before. "I'll just have to rely on the old reliables," he said as he pointed to his uncovered eyes and climbed into the cockpit.

The start was classic Bill Muncey. He had decided to take the outside lane as the boats jockeyed for position and remained far outside the others as the fleet rounded the turn and began to pick up speed for their run to the starting line. Then, Muncey noticed that there was some space between the buoys and the *Budweiser*, the boat farthest to the inside.

He immediately wrestled his steering wheel hard to the left, cut behind all the other boats as he hit the throttle, squeezed his Blue Blaster between *Budweiser* and the line of buoys, and roared past everybody across the starting line. He led the field around the first turn, then was gone down the backstretch toward the setting sun. It had been one of the best starts of his career.

Then it happened.

Perhaps Muncey was going too fast to make the next turn? Perhaps he couldn't see it? Whatever the reason, a camera operator who was filming the race from the shore saw the event unfold



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

Muncey became a boat owner in 1976 and the following season introduced the Blue Blaster, a boat he drove to tremendous success for five seasons.



in his viewfinder.

First, *Atlas Van Lines* began to dance from sponson to sponson as it screamed down the backstretch. As it neared the turn, the bow slowly climbed toward the clouds until it was pointed straight up, the transom quickly swung forward until the boat was flying through the air upside-down and backwards, and then gravity pulled it back to earth—where it landed with a huge splash.

A few hydroplanes had flipped over backwards like this before, but they usually hit the water in such a way that the driver was catapulted from the cockpit and clear of the accident. But, *Atlas Van Lines* was less forgiving than those other boats. Instead, it smashed into the waters of Laguna de Coyuca directly on top of the cockpit and its helpless driver, who

still sat upside-down in his seat clinging with all his strength to the steering wheel.

Everything quickly grew quiet along the shore and in the pit area. As out-board-powered patrol boats raced toward the wrecked hydroplane, stunned spectators and race officials gazed silently toward the accident scene, praying that Muncey had somehow escaped serious injury.

The rescuers soon saw otherwise. They pulled Muncey from the water and immediately realized that he had suffered a severe head injury and was in grave condition. They tried to revive him, but he wasn't responding. He had no pulse and his pupils were dilated.

They hustled him to the shore and loaded him onto a waiting ambulance, which took him to an airport where doctors tried to strengthen his pulse and prepare him for a flight aboard a light airplane to the Mexican Navy Hospital in Acapulco, then later to Social Security Hospital across town. His heart stopped three times during the trip and each time doctors injected drugs to get it going again. But, it was no use; he wasn't breathing.

Muncey's spinal cord was severed between the third and fourth vertebrae. "If it would have happened in front of the University of Michigan Hospital, we couldn't have saved him," one doctor said at the scene.

About 15 minutes before nine



Muncey stands on the deck as his crew pushes the *Atlas Van Lines* to the shore through the shallow waters of Laguna de Coyuca at Acapulco during the fateful race there in 1981.

o'clock on Sunday night, October 18, 1981, the medication finally wore off. Some three weeks short of his 53rd birthday, hydroplane racing's greatest champion quietly passed away.

ON MONDAY morning a week later, a crowd of about 600 people dressed in dark suits and black dresses assembled on the white-sand shore of Mission Bay's East Vacation Island. Nearly all of them had been to this place about a month before, when the Unlimited hydroplanes were in town to compete in the Circus Circus Thunderboat Regatta. Now, the atmosphere was much different. They were there to remember Bill Muncey.

Jim Hendrick, the voice of the sport's radio broadcasts, stood beside the coffin, draped with an American flag and resting under a canopy not far from where the hydroplanes had been launched during the race and where a memorial to Bill Muncey still stands today. "If we believe in life after death," he told the crowd about his dear friend, "there must be a great race going on somewhere."

Similar groups gathered in Detroit and in Seattle. At Stan Sayres Memorial Park on Lake Washington, almost a thousand people remembered Muncey in hushed tones. A floral wreath and bouquets of flowers were tossed onto the racecourse as rain fell from gray skies. His beloved old *Miss Thriftway* sat perched on a trailer nearby as a Navy chaplain offered a memorial prayer: "A man of courage, a man of skill, but above all, a friend," he said. "We are grateful to you for permitting his life to touch ours in a very special way. But now for him the last race is over, the thunder has faded, the boat is secure. The final victory is his. The trophy is in his hands."

Once the service was completed in San Diego, a procession took Muncey's body across town to Glen Abbey Memorial

Park. There, with full military honors, the most famous race boat driver in the world was laid to rest 40 years ago this month on a grassy hillside that overlooks the city. ❖



Andy Muntz

A memorial to Bill Muncey stands on East Vacation Island in San Diego, adjacent to the pit area that is used for today's Unlimited races.

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