



UNLIMITED NEWSJOURNAL

A Chronicle of Speed

An in-depth conversation with champion Billy Schumacher.

Billy Schumacher ranks among the top drivers in unlimited hydroplane racing history. He won the Gold Cup twice and earned the national high-point championship twice. Decades later he won the Gold Cup again as an owner. Schumacher's involvement in boat racing spans his lifetime. He started as a child in outboards, where he learned how to win. Some of his most memorable experiences were as a participant in the legendary Sammamish Slough

races held northeast of Seattle, where the racers covered the 13-mile distance down the Sammamish River from Redmond on Lake Sammamish to Kenmore on the shores of Lake Washington.

He moved on to limited inboards, driving in a variety of classes. He received his first opportunity to handle an unlimited when he was still a teenager and holds the record as the youngest driver to win the Gold Cup. He took time away from unlimiteds to participate in tunnel outboard marathon races, where he continued his winning ways. He returned to driving unlimiteds then retired from the cockpit in 1976. In 2006, he renewed his involvement with racing by becoming an owner.

Schumacher was born in Seattle in October 1942 and racing boats almost



A young Billy Schumacher poses with his boat racing trophies in his family's backyard.

Bob Carver

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immediately became an integral part of his life, an interest that was inspired by his father's enthusiasm for water skiing. The following interview is the first of a four-part series we will continue in the *Unlimited NewsJournal* during the months ahead. In this segment, conducted by Craig Fjarlie on May 29, 2019, Schumacher recounts the beginning of his career of racing on the water.

UNJ: What was your first involvement with boats?

Schumacher: I got started at a pretty young age, 1948, when I started running around in water-ski boats. It all started from puttzin' around with my father and his group's water-ski boats and canoes and anything else they had that would float. I was interested in it. When he asked me if I wanted a race boat I agreed, naturally, and he bought one that could be converted to a larger class also. He bought me that boat. It was on top of a car—it



Bob Carver

Billy Schumacher driving his Christmas present, his first outboard runabout.

was yellow and red—from Al Benson; Don Benson and Jim Benson's dad.

OK, yeah.

Then he bought a five-horsepower Mercury from Al Molson, and I was so happy with all of that. It was Christ-

mas. He said, "You have to walk down the street and look on top of Benson's car." So, I walked down and there that yellow boat was. I was pretty excited about that. Then, when I got back to the house, he had a five-horse Mercury sitting there. He said, "This is also yours. It goes on that boat." I was so happy with that motor that I slept with it for about a week. It was in my bed with me. I never did race the boat for...it was probably at least six months, I think, before the season really started. And during that time, they had a Slough race up the Sammamish Slough.

Yeah.

We lived right on Lake Washington, down on Riviera Place. My father and two of his other water-ski buddies bought what they call a B Runabout. It was a 10-horsepower Mercury that would go on the same boat I was going to run the JU with, a five Mercury. He ran it up the Slough in the race and didn't make a corner, went up on the bank, and hit a tree. He didn't get hurt, but the boat did. He was not only embarrassed, but he said, "You know what? I'm gonna leave the boat racing up to you. I'm going to stay with the water skiing."

I was actually really happy with that. Well, the boat wasn't the same after it was rebuilt. It was and it wasn't. I mean,



From Billy Schumacher's personal collection

Schumacher competing in the 1955 Sammamish Slough race.

it was really a big enough boat for that 10-horsepower motor, a little too big for the five, really. It wasn't that fast. So, Benson had another boat being built, that he was having built for his son Don. My father walked in and saw it. Ed Karelsen was building it. This was at Benson's shop on Lake City Way. He sold outboards and boats there. Anyway, dad bought that boat. It kind of upset Don because it was being built for him, but he got another one shortly afterwards. It just turned out that, unfortunately for Don, this happened to be a really good boat.

OK.

I didn't think it was gonna be as good as it was. It had a warp in the bottom which wasn't normal. I think it taught Ed a few lessons on building runabouts. What it turned out to be was concave in the bottom. When it got up to a higher speed it rode on, I would call it a "U" shape on the bottom. So, it was very little drag, and the boat was fast. I'm not sure that Jim and Don even know that. We did. My father and I did, but nobody else did. Anyway, I won so many races with it in JU and then we bought a seven-horsepower—dad did—and I ran AU with it, A Utility. I won everything with that. Same boat. We ran the two classes and I'd win almost every time.

Do you know when your first season was, what year you started?

I was eight years old when I first

raced. I raced the yellow boat in that race and that was my first race on Green Lake. Very first race and I won it. You're supposed to be nine, but we didn't tell the truth on that one. I was big for my age.

You're not the only one who has done that.

Yeah, I'm sure. Anyway, there was myself and my father and at that age, you know, they told me how to start the race and do all this kind of stuff and I wasn't really sure if I knew how to do what they were talking about. But I did it and I soon learned that the inside lane was the best because a lot of the other kids, even at eight years old, or nine years old, that's what they were, they didn't know how to corner their boats very well, so if you started outside of them you got pushed way out. So, I decided the inside lane was where I was going from now on, 'cause my intention was to win the race.

It all worked out well for me. Then one of my father's friends, Lin Ivey, who raced bigger outboards back then, he used to tow my father up the Slough in water-ski races. They'd win quite often; whenever that 460 he had started, they would win. Often times they started behind everybody but passed 'em before they got up to Sammamish. On the way back they usually led from the beginning to the end.

So Lin told me, when I talked to him about racing, he said, "Start on the inside if you can, because it's not only the short-

est way around but you can kind of leave the rest of the field behind you, what you want them to do." I always remembered that. And he said, "When you start your race, once you're committed to that start line, stay on it. Don't change your mind half-way there." You know, a lot of guys did that. They thought, "Oh, I'm early," and they'd back off. Well, as soon as they did that, you had 'em.

Yeah.

Between him and Al Benson, I got pretty good at making the starting line on time.

Yeah.

We raced that particular boat for, I don't know, must've been at least five years. Won a lot. And then I did the hydros. My father bought an A Hydro and I raced that. It was a Karelsen boat also. It was copied after a Swift. Swift made hydros back then and they were pretty fast. The one I had wasn't quite as fast. The motor I had was good so we were able to keep up with most of 'em and with my starting on the inside and on the line all the time, I was able to win a lot of races with that, even though it wasn't that good of a boat itself.

Chuck Lyford back then raced A Hydro. His dad had a Jacobsen built for him. Jacobsen had a marina in Ballard [a district in Seattle—Ed.]. They built that hydro and Chuck would win a lot of races 'cause that boat was really fast. He and I would battle constantly.

Some records in *Propeller* magazine show you and Chuck were back and forth, either you or he were first or second in a lot of races.

I tried to find some of the photographs for you. One of 'em was Lyford flippin' me off. (Laughter.) I was ahead of him and he couldn't catch me. One of the reasons, in that photograph, my throttle was completely shut and I'm looking back at him kinda laughing. You can see him flipping me off and I noticed his throttle was only half open. He must've hit a wave or something and it scared him somewhat. We were still pretty young, I think, 10 or 11 back then.



Bob Carver

Schumacher at the controls of a B Stock Hydro.



Bob Carver

Driving *Lil' Bill* in the Sammamish Slough event.

"We painted the front white because my father wanted to see that white nose come out of the turn first all the time. And it did, normally."

One boat we wanted to ask about, you had an AU called *Lil' Bill*. That's the one you were talking about, the Karelsen?

That was the Karelsen boat.

You were first in the Slough in '55.

Yeah. I was winning the year before that. That boat was so fast that they tried to disqualify it because it was two inches too short per the rules. So Karelsen opened the bow up on it and extended it two inches. Actually, I think he put four inches on it and brought it back together. So, if you know what the bow of a Fountain offshore boat looks like, the very front of it bows out a little bit and extrudes forward. I don't know if he got that idea from this boat or not. It was a weird shape.

We painted the front white because my father wanted to see that white nose come out of the turn first all the time. And it did, normally. But that year you were talking about in the Slough, that was with the boat with the white nose. Before that they wouldn't let me run it for a while because it was too short. So, we made it long enough and everything was fine.

Wouldn't let you run it in the Slough?

I had run a year before, or two years before, I don't remember, with the shorter version and I was leading. Screaming seven-horsepower motor. It had a very small non-trip on that boat, and in the Slough you have to turn left and right...

Yeah.

...and I made a corner and the non-trip caught and it rolled upside down. I was inside

the boat because my leg got stuck underneath the deck. Being young, you know, you get scared and with that situation I just ripped my leg out. It tore part of the boat out. But I got out that way and I was, you know, like everybody else, you're afraid of drowning.

Sure.

When I got out people were coming after me and they helped pull the boat up on the beach. But that year I would have won the race easily, but the problem I had with that whole thing was that the motor was full throttle when it went upside down and it got a gulp of water and it split the crankcase in half. So that was the end of that engine, and that was such a fast engine. I mean, it was better than anybody's.

Who was doing your engine work?

It was a stock motor. It just happened to be one the factory-made that was better than the rest. It still had the seal on the side. Mercury did that back then so you knew no one had gotten into it, and it was stock. We got another one and it wasn't as good, and we kept changing cylinders and reeds and every other thing in it, carburetors, you name it. We got it up to within three or four miles an hour of what the other one would do, but that was as good as we could get. But my A Runabout was so good that the engine on that would still win all the races. Unless I personally screwed up, I would win. Then I just graduated from that to bigger boats and faster boats and bigger motors.

There were a couple things we wanted to ask you about. Nationals were at Devil's Lake, Oregon, in '55.

Yeah.

You won the AU class.

JU and AU. And that was with the Karelson boat.

You set a one-mile record in AU.

Yeah, it was 46, I think. It was 46 point something. I almost blew it over backwards, believe it or not, on the straightaway on that run. Had that not happened, it would have been probably 50 miles an hour instead of 46. We didn't try again. I think I ran another straightaway run a year or two later, but I was heavier, the boat was heavier, and we didn't up our mark any. But that stood for a while. I had the competition record in JU and AU as well.

In '56 in the Slough, you ran AU and Chuck Lyford was first and you were second.

In the Slough?

Yeah.

Lyford was probably right in there, yeah. Don Benson was probably right in there, too.

One of the more interesting things is you went to Cambridge, Maryland, in '56 for the Stock Outboard Nationals.

I don't remember who won AU, I thought I did.

It was Dean Chenoweth.

Dean Chenoweth did?

There was a photo in Propeller magazine of all the winners. You and Dean were standing next to each other.

Yeah, I remember that picture. I only had one trophy, that's right.

Did Chenoweth's driving impress you? Could you tell he was going to be a champion driver, too?

Oh, yeah. On the East Coast, Dean was the top-notch guy back then. At Devil's Lake he actually got a better start than I did and when I won the race, I had to go around him. It was the last turn before the finish line and I got up along side of him around the corner and just stayed within three or four inches of

his boat. If he moved out, I moved with him. I just stayed right there. When we got out of the corner, I straightened up immediately and he didn't. So, mine took off when his was a little delayed taking off. I beat him across the line by maybe a boat length.

So, that was at Devil's Lake.

Yeah, that was Devil's Lake. It was the year after where he beat me. He had a very fast boat and, uh, I forget the name who built it. I think it was a Champion boat, but it was fast. I knew he'd be my competition.

At Cambridge you got a one-mile record in AU and a five-mile record in JU.

Yeah, that five-mile would be the competition record.

You and Dean maybe traded heat wins and he won on time, or something.

Could be. I know it was close. I know that same year Chuck Lyford and my family went up to Canada with our boats after Cambridge. I think Chuck won the A Hydro and I won the A Runabout. So, we won Canadian Nationals

as well that year. I don't remember, quite frankly, whether we raced the JU there or not. I do remember the AU win. I came in and my face and helmet were completely covered with bugs. There were these little gnat-like bugs out there and we just got covered with them.

Oh!

Those were fun times back then, in outboard racing. I went through nearly every class of outboard racing in my boat racing career.

Some people have noticed that drivers who ran both hydros and runabouts tended to be some of the best drivers. It wasn't because they liked to do more racing, but because they had to do a different style to handle a runabout compared to a hydro. Did you notice something like that?

Oh, yeah. I definitely think so. The runabout was my favorite boat. I really didn't like the hydros. They just laid on the water, in my opinion. The runabout was trickier to drive. It bounced around a lot more and it moved to your body weight.



The champions at the 1956 National Stock Outboard Nationals in Cambridge, Maryland. The 13-year-old Schumacher is third from the left and on his left is a young Dean Chenoweth.

From Billy Schumacher's personal collection

You paid attention to what you're doing.

Exactly. They were more fun for me and it was a bigger challenge, and I found the competition was a bit easier. You know, I would start occasionally in the B Runabout that I had later, back in the pack at one time or another, either a bad start, I was sleepin', or whatever. It became a real challenge for me to beat everyone from behind a little bit. I had more fun doing that.

We started getting into the C Hydro and D Hydro and all that kind of stuff. I wasn't as thrilled with that. I wanted a runabout. That was just more fun for me. But I knew that if I ever wanted to race limited inboards or even the unlimiteds—and I thought about it back even at those young years—I knew I had to learn how to drive a hydroplane better than anything.

Yeah.

But I think the runabout taught me more about water and wind and all that kind of stuff and I had won so much back then in those days that people would ask me to drive their boats.

This was still in outboards?

Yeah. We only had a couple of different boats, but I ran a lot of different classes, because of other people asking me to drive their boat. One race in Oregon I ran 11 different classes. They had a trophy for the driver that had the most points at the end of the race, regardless of how many classes you ran. So, between all the other classes and everything, I won hands down, needless to say. They had elimination heats, too, so it was like 22 heats or more of racing that I did that day.

Were you too tired to walk?

I wasn't tired at all. I'd bring it in to the inspection area and run back to the next boat. My father would pick me up and carry me to the boat so I wouldn't get my feet wet, because that was an extra few pounds of water.

In the smaller classes especially that really matters.

It made a difference. And so, that was quite an afternoon.

Yeah.

You know, we ran C Hydro and I got flipped out of several boats back in those days. Like the Karelsen AU boat that I had. We tried a B on it. That was a Champion Hot Rod back then. They were light weight and really fast. It was too much power for the boat. I barrel rolled it in Oregon and we decided it wasn't made for that much horsepower. I had a C Hydro that I ran, won a few races with it. It wasn't a great boat, but it was a real pretty boat. I loved the way it looked with a mahogany deck and everything. We tried it with a D on it and it wasn't built for a D. That was too much power for it, too.

Yeah.

I didn't flip that one, but I brought it in, told my father there's no way this boat will handle that motor. But it was fun making all those experiments, seein' what it would do. When I started racing B Runabout, this was a mahogany boat, too, we absolutely loved. They had a Champion Hot Rod on it. You can see it's 1-R because we won more races than anybody with that.

High point.

When I first got that boat, I couldn't drive it. It was different than the Karelsen boat. In the Karelsen boat you leaned to the inside. With this boat you had to lean a very little bit to the right side because

it had non-trips that would go up from both sides. If you leaned on the inside it just slid around the corner. If you leaned slightly to the outside it would bank around the corner.

Catch the non-trip.

I had the worst time learning how to do that. In fact, at one of the races I told my father, "I can't drive this damn thing." (Laughter.) And he said, "Would you be OK if I put one of the other drivers in?" This was built by a guy I think in Oregon that copied the Calkinscraft. I don't know if it was John Sanders or who it was, it might have been Sanders that did it, but he got in it and drove it perfectly. So, my father said, "OK, nothing wrong with the boat." He always said, "It's not the engine, it's the en-gineer." So, if it was Sanders, I talked with him at length about it and he told me how to drive it. I went out and practiced at the race until I could finally get it.

Once I got it, I got it really good. We won a lot of races with that boat. I loved it. The Champion Hot Rod was one of my favorites. It then became my favorite boat because it was even trickier to drive, but once you learned how to do it, you could do all kinds of things. I used to tell my father, "I can make this thing dance." It was really fun for me. And then when I'd get into the hydros, they were boring. (Laughter.)



Bob Carver

Schumacher driving an A Stock Hydro.



Bob Carver

In '58 you were first in the Slough in BU.

Yeah, I don't remember all the years. I knew I had won the Slough a few times.

And then in '59 you were first in the Slough again in BU, and you set course records in A Racing Runabout and B Racing Runabout.

Right. The Champion, we didn't modify it. The carburetor was modified and so we put alcohol through it rather than gasoline. It worked really well with the Champion. We didn't do anything else to it. A lot of the other guys did and what it did was made them unreliable, where mine was pretty reliable. It was a lot faster and it would run really well. The A Hydro that I had that was modified by Al Benson, once it started, if it started, it was fast, too, but I had a heck of a time getting that engine started. It would flood itself out. You couldn't get it going. But once it did, if it ever did, it was fast.

Well, in '59, you had a 280-class inboard, Dough Baby. Was that your first year in inboards?

Yeah, it was. It was Bill Muncey's boat. It was called *Thrifty Chevalier*.

Yeah.

He won a lot of races with a 266 in it. When we bought it, my father decided I should run a 280, 'cause I was new in the limited inboard class.

Not as fast as a 266.

Right. So Muncey put a stock motor in it and it went fast enough to where I was able to win races with it, on the West Coast, anyway. We had built a scoop over the carburetor so that I could run

through roostertails if I needed to without slowin' it way down. People copied that after we did it because it worked really well.

Yeah.

It would run 105. We'd change propellers, we'd change motors, we'd do all kinds of different things. 105. You know, I had an A Hydro that was about the same way. It would run a certain speed and that was it. This 280 seemed to be that same way. We changed the sponsons, we changed everything we could think of changing and it was still 105. Sometimes 104. And, uh, you know, it came natural to me. Well, not bragging or being cocky or anything, it just did.

Well, it was something you wanted to do besides...

Yes. I had run thousands of races in outboards, going across starting lines. I had the starting line pretty much figured out. Even though this boat was faster, and I wasn't accustomed to it, I mean, the other boats seemed just huge to me, because I wasn't accustomed to seeing a boat that big next to me. I was a little bit afraid of it, quite frankly, but after I had driven it for a few races and won a few races it was, you know, if you start out front, beat 'em at the starting line, get to that first turn on the inside first, you're gonna win some races.

Oh, yeah.

And the other guys were a little faster, but not fast enough to catch me, so I would win quite a few times. We raced against Lyford again, and Chuck was pretty fast in his boat. Donnie Benson had another boat he was racing called the *Calypso* and that was a really fast boat. And then Mira

Schumacher in the cockpit of *Dough Baby*, a boat that was previously owned by racing legend Bill Muncey and once named *Thrifty Chevalier*.

"It would run 105. We'd change propellers, we'd change motors, we'd do all kinds of different things. 105. ... We changed the sponsons, we changed everything we could think of changing and it was still 105."



Bob Carver

From the left, Mira Slovak in *Wee Wahoo*, Schumacher in *Dough Baby*, and Chuck Lyford.

Slovak had the *Wee Wahoo*. I had a photograph of Slovak, Lyford, and me at the starting line. We were maybe six inches difference in the starting line position.

It was really fun racing back then with those guys. We didn't win, dad and I didn't win all the races, but we won quite a few. We were national high-point, regional high-point with it a few years. Other people, because I did well with that, they'd ask me to drive their boats and so, that's how I wound up winning in the 136-class and also in the 225-class.

The 136 was a boat called JJ and MM.

Yes, it was a local boat.

And the 225 was *Miss Goodwin*.

Yes, Doug Whitley owned that.

You got helped a little bit in the 136 when Shorty Haggard, driving a boat called *Falcon*, was disqualified in the Inboard Nationals on Green Lake.

We won a race on Green Lake, I think a couple times with that. It was a fast boat. It suited me just fine; it was light in the nose. It was almost like driving an outboard hydro only the engine was in front of you. The *JJ and MM* was a fast boat and we would win a lot of races with it.

Do you remember who built the boat?

I don't know who built it, I really don't. But it was a fast boat. It was light

on its feet, and you had to really watch it so you didn't blow it over. But it was good. I enjoyed driving that boat. *Miss Goodwin* was really fast also. It had a Studebaker.

225s were pretty fast boats.

Yeah, you know, it was faster than I drove it because it had a vibration somewhere in the steering wheel. If you drove it too fast the steering wheel would get about four inches thick, the vibration. That scared me. I didn't like that. Something was about to break, and I didn't want to be in it when it did. When I won the Nationals, I pushed it harder than I normally did. I had to, to get around a guy that was in front of me. The boat was fast enough to do it. He got a better start than I did. I followed him around for a few laps and then when it came close to the end of the race I decided to go ahead and let it go. I only had one straightaway to worry about that way. I just put my foot down and let it happen. The steering wheel got real fat, but we just blew by him. It was that fast.

Wow.

There was a race also in San Diego with that boat and I like to tell this story because I was out testing it and Ron Jones was watching from the shoreline with my father. Ron Jones, Sr.

Yeah.

There was another guy that crossed over the course going slow

and left a big wake. The *Miss Goodwin* would, every once in a while, cut out because it was starving for fuel or something. I was screaming down the straightaway and didn't see that wake. It cut out and slowed down because it ran short on fuel, right before that wake. So, I bounced over it OK. My father told me that Ron Jones said, "Did you see that? He saw that wake and slowed down and made it over that thing." They didn't know that I didn't do that. (Laughter.) I don't know, it could have been a disaster if it didn't cut out on its own.

Yeah.

But that was also a fun boat to drive, because once again it was really light on its feet. My 280 was kinda glued to the water all the time, it just wouldn't get up there and do it. So, those boats were fun for me to drive. Soon, Chuck Lyford asked me to drive his 7-litre. I'm not sure why he did because he was such a good driver with it. He won the Nationals in 1960 also with the 7-litre, beating everyone that had these big, blown Chryslers.

Buddy Byers and several others were out there in their big, blown Chryslers and Chuck had a little drilled-out 405 Chevrolet with carburetors on it and just blew 'em off. And he did it because it was fast, light, and fast around the corners, where theirs would, what you call, hobbyhorse around. They'd go like stink down the straightaway and catch up to him but then they'd get to the turn, he'd blow 'em away again. After a while they just gave up. They couldn't catch him. It was a really good boat. I drove it for him in a few races and did well, because the boat was that good.

Before we get any more into the inboards and the unlimiteds, there were some outboard drivers who were prominent in those years that we'd like to ask you about. One was Chuck Hickling. He was racing a lot of outboards and inboard classes, too. Did he talk to you much, or did you get to know him?

No.

No?

I don't have a lot to say about that because I think for the most part Hickling drove boats that were in different classes than I was racing. So, we never really got together. We did a few times and I didn't, quite frankly, find him that much of a challenge.

A guy who was real good was Hugh Entrop. Did you get to know him?

Hugh Entrop was excellent, and he was a brilliant guy that could make a boat go faster than almost anybody. And he did it, that's documented, just to watch him drive that D Hydro of his...I think it was an F Hydro, it was modified. It was a cabover boat and he sat up in the front of it and he was one of the first guys that tilted his outboard motor in, and we were always tilting them out to get the nose up and get it flying. He tilted it in, and I couldn't figure out why he was doing that. When he would get it up to a certain speed it would lift the back of the boat by being tilted like that, and so the boat was basically just flying in the air. I don't know the speeds they got back then with those F Hydros, but you could see when his boat got airborne in the back that he had about 10 to 15 miles an hour on everybody. He would just blow by 'em.

Wow.

And it was fun to watch. Every time he got in that boat I'd go to the shore and watch. I wanted to see that happen and it was really entertaining back then, and interesting to me how he could do that with an outboard. Most of 'em dragged the back end of the boat and, uh, not that one. It was fun to watch.

I raced against a lot of big names on the East Coast. One of 'em was a guy named Bill Tenney, who had set a lot of records in his boats. He asked me to run his D Runabout at Devil's Lake in the straightaway to set a record. I did set it with his. I don't remember, it was '69 or something like that. It was in the '60s. That was a really quick boat, too, and once again I almost blew it over in the straightaway.

I was proud to drive his boat and to set a record was good, too, but once again it could have been a lot faster if I hadn't screwed up. I had a really great outboard career. In fact, I drove around the country for years with all the boxes of trophies after I moved away from home. My father wanted me to take those with me. I must've had four or five hundred trophies.

When we had the house on the lake,

my father would put 'em on shelves. The top shelf would be first place, and then second place, third place, and so on. He had a lot of 'em at the bakery as well, and people would come in just to see the trophies and then, of course, buy some goodies while they were there. It was a lot of fun for me in the outboard days. It definitely taught me how to drive the bigger boats, the inboards as well, especially at the starting line.

When you got into the inboards, did you drive much of the outboards still, or did you pretty much make a clean break of it?

I would call it a clean break. We had sold most all of our outboard stuff, because in the summer we would go to the inboard races, not the outboard races. We didn't use them, so we sold them, put all of our efforts into the 280s we had.

Talking about outboards again, I had a rather illustrious career also with tunnel boats. It was later. Everybody always said, "You're an unlimited driver, how can you drive a tunnel boat like that?" They didn't know I spent 10, 12 years racing more outboards than anybody else ever did and had been across the starting line, you know, thousands of times.

In tunnel boats you didn't have a starting line like that, but I would call 'em a cross between an outboard runabout and an inboard hydro. It was kind of a cross, 'cause you sat up in the front like a cabover so it was fun for me and also a challenge at the same time. That part of my outboard career was a lot of fun. ❖

Next month, in part two of our interview, Billy Schumacher talks about his first ride in an unlimited, advancement of his career that led to the opportunity to drive Miss Bardahl, and other aspects of his driving career. He also shares some great stories. Be sure to read part two next month.



Bob Carver

Billy Schumacher receives a trophy from the Seafair Queen after an event at Green Lake.

Taking to heart the start.

In response to controversy that occurred last season, the officials at H1 Unlimited are looking at ways to change how unlimited hydroplanes start their races.

In preparation for those discussions, a meeting was held on the day of the sport's annual awards banquet in November where drivers, owners, crew chiefs, and H1 board members got together to share their ideas on how to make the starts better and more understandable for fans. I was invited to begin the meeting with a brief history of how the starting procedure has changed over the years. What follows is an account of the summary that I provided them.

BY ANDY MUNTZ

The method for getting a hydroplane race underway has been controversial since the very earliest days of the sport. When a gun was fired at the clubhouse of New York's Columbia Yacht Club at 3:05 P.M. on Thursday, June 23, 1904, the drivers of *Standard*, *Water Lily*, and *Fiat I* met the call to begin the first Gold Cup race. "The *Standard* almost leaped out of the water as the gun was fired," reported the *New York Times*. "She was practically at rest a second before the signal; yet in a twinkling she was going at full speed, throwing the water from her sides in volumes."

The race called for the entrants to proceed 16 miles up the Hudson River, around the stake boat *Queen Bess* anchored off the long wharf at Piedmont, New Jersey, then back down the river to the finish line that was set where the race had begun. The *Fiat I* was disabled almost as soon as it started when it ran over a floating log, while *Standard* cruised to a comfortable lead. It was six minutes ahead of *Water Lily* by the half-way point then finished an hour, 37 minutes, and 48 seconds after it had started, completing the course with an average speed of 19.63 mph.

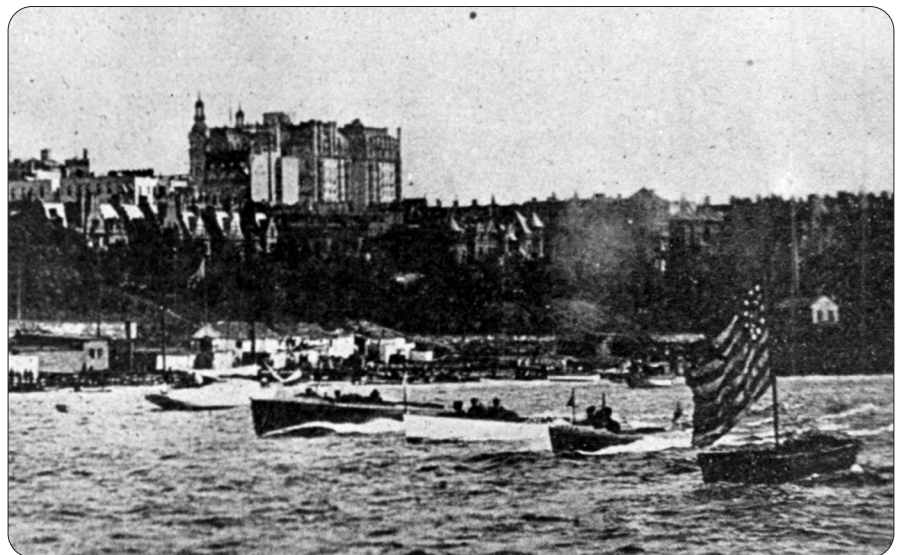
The *Standard* had crossed the finish

line 23 minutes before *Water Lily* but that didn't necessarily mean it was the winner. Because the various boats were so different in size and in the engines that they used, the sport had adopted a complicated rating system to assign the boats a handicap. The area of each boat's pistons, the stroke, the number of cylinders, the mean water-line length, and other factors were entered into a formula that said 17 minutes were to be shaved from *Water Lily's* finishing time.

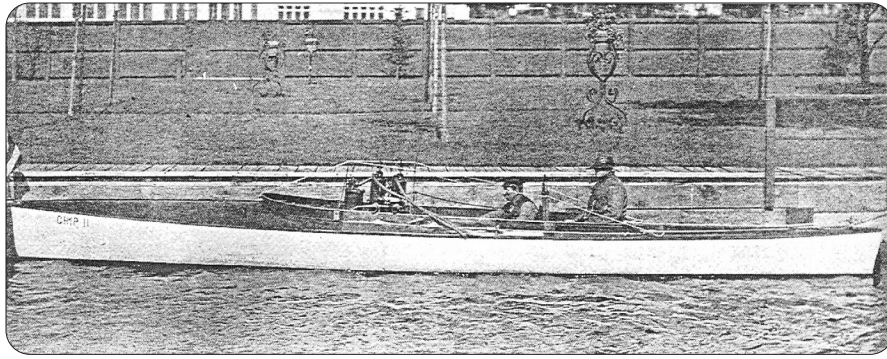
While the boat's handicap still wasn't sufficient to beat *Standard*, the possibility of the eventual winner crossing the finish

line second caused the sport's officials to rethink the way they were doing things. At the second Gold Cup, therefore, the handicap was instead implemented at the start, which meant that the entrants began at different times. The first to start was the *Josephine*, the boat with the lowest rating, then the *Marcirene II*, and so on until the *Vingt-et Un II*, the scratch boat with the highest rating, started almost an hour later.

"The new method of starting the boats proved a great success," reported *Motor Boat Magazine*. "...the spectators were kept at fever heat for an hour at the



The *Standard* takes the lead at the start of the first Gold Cup race in 1904.



The *Chip II* in 1906 with its odd three-cylinder engine.

start. This left only about an hour of interregnum before the first boat loomed into sight.”

It didn't take long for creative minds to take advantage of this method, though. In 1906, Herbert Leighton built the *Chip II*, which was much smaller than the others but featured a unique engine that was built specifically to take full advantage of the rating system. Though it had three cylinders, only two counted into the formula because the third didn't provide power to the propeller shaft. It instead pumped compressed air into the other two cylinders—a crude supercharger. What's more, the two power cylinders had a bore of only four inches and a stroke of a whopping 10 inches to help earn for itself the lowest rating possible.

While the engine was rated at only 16.75 horsepower, it actually produced at least twice that amount. Consequently, as the lowest-rated boat in the field, the *Chip II* was the first to start the Gold Cup that year, yet was fast enough so that the other higher-rated (and supposedly more powerful) boats were unable to catch it.

That spelled the end of the hand-capping system. From that point on, the sport used a flying start, where the drivers made a run for the starting line as the final seconds wound down to the time of the start, making sure they didn't cross the starting line before the clock struck zero and be assessed a penalty for jumping the gun. With a few exceptions, this was the way unlimited hydroplane races were started for the next more than 80 years.

Then, in 1991, there was a dramatic

change.

Before we get into the changes that have occurred during the past 30 years, it would be helpful to discuss the three phases of the starting procedure because the rule changes that have been implemented tend to focus on these components separately. The three areas are:

Clock or Flag?

The entire starting process hinges on how it ends, so we will begin there. Is the start of the race regulated by a clock, or is it initiated by the wave of a flag? The tradition of boat racing had always been to use a clock to regulate the start of races, but that idea changed when race officials became more concerned about attracting new fans. What the sport needed, they felt, was a starting process that fans already understood, a start that was closer to the kind they saw when they watched the Indy 500, the Daytona 500, and most other forms of motor racing.

Regulate speed.

Through most of the period after World War II, the boats were required to remain “on a plane” after the one-minute gun was fired. The rule book defined that as “a speed sufficient to create minimum wake, and at all times shall maintain a planing attitude.” This rule worked with the old shovel-nosed hydroplanes of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, which were slow to accelerate from a stop, but as turbines became more common in the 1980s, transoms got wider, and the area

between the sponsons grew larger, the hulls became better able to accelerate quickly from a slow speed, which made possible a new phenomenon called the park-and-go start.

With the ability to accelerate from a stop quickly, drivers adopted a tactic where they would claim the lane they desired and then slow down dramatically. As the clock reached its last few seconds before the start, the drivers would then accelerate and be at full speed by the time the boat reached the starting line and the clock struck zero. Making this strategy even more attractive to the drivers was the fact that the new hull designs made it more difficult for officials to determine whether a boat was actually on a plane, or not.

But, while this tactic has become an accepted practice among many drivers, it is abhorred by race officials, who feel the fans want to see the boats go fast.

Regulate Lanes.

Are drivers allowed to fight for lanes or are the lanes assigned to them? Another tradition of boat racing is the fight for lanes before the start. Many of those who understand the sport best see the period between the one-minute gun and the start as among the most intriguing because it's during this period that drivers are jockeying for position, trying to outwit the others and grab that lane that will benefit them the most, usually the one closest to the buoys and, therefore, the one with shortest route around the racecourse.

This has always been one of the biggest areas of controversy when it comes to regulating the start of a hydroplane race because some owners and drivers believe that their only hope of winning a race is to get the inside lane. That means they want the opportunity to fight for that advantage, even if it means employing the dreaded park-and-go start to get it.

Yet, there also has been a feeling among race promoters that the process of fighting for lanes is difficult for new



Larry Dong

Five boats side by side at the start of a heat during the 1991 Rainer Cup in Seattle. This is what race officials were looking for when they changed the rules and introduced flag starts that year.

race fans to understand. It's foreign to many spectators because it's simply not seen in other forms of motor sports. That's why there have been rules that predetermined which lane a driver will have at the start.

A big upheaval

The tradition of boat racing was put on its ear after the 1990 season when the officials of the sport realized that fewer people were interested in hydroplane racing. The solution, they felt, was to do things completely different, to make the sport more like the other forms of racing that fans already knew. The result was a new set of rules introduced in 1991 that were perhaps the most extensive the sport has ever seen.

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In an effort to create a flying start that would look better on television, the rules for all races other than the Gold Cup were changed so that the drivers would start from lanes that were assigned to them. The starts would also be controlled so that the race wouldn't get underway until the boats were lined up together as they rounded the final turn and then would roar across the starting line side by side as an official waved a flag.

As for the lanes, they were at first assigned through a random drawing, but the drivers expressed an interest in having a little bit of control over the lanes they would get, so in 1992 they were allowed to select their own lane preference according to a certain sequence. For the first heat, the drivers chose in the order of their qualifying speed; in the second, it was in the order of their finish in the first heat; and in the third and final heats, it was by the points scored. To shake things up in 1995, the sequence of choosing lanes for the second heat was changed to the inverse order of finish in the first heat.

The races also were started with the wave of a flag for seven seasons, from 1991 through 1997, but during that last year the drivers let it be known

that they wanted to return to the tradition of starting against the clock. There was discussion about returning to a clock start before the 1997 season, but the idea wasn't implemented for a very basic reason. The sport didn't have a clock that was large enough to be seen by the drivers, it didn't have the budget to purchase one, and there wasn't a person available to haul the clock to all the races and keep it maintained.

Still, the drivers continued to demand a change, so in 1998 the flag start was dropped and the clock start returned, with one caveat: there wouldn't be a clock on the official tower. The drivers would have to keep track of the time themselves.

Meanwhile, with the return of clock starts, the drivers were again allowed to fight for lanes. According to the rules adopted in 1998, they had to establish their lanes at a point and time that was discussed at the driver's meeting (typically at the entrance buoy to the second turn).

This was also a time when the *Miss Budweiser* team was dominating the sport, so officials introduced various other methods of assigning lanes to help equalize the competition. In 1999, a handicapping system was introduced that prohibited a boat with consecutive race victories to get the inside lane. And, with each additional consecutive win, the boat would be assigned lanes that were farther and farther to the outside. In 2000, an additional handicap of fuel flow restrictions was introduced to help equalize the boats even more.

But, with the elimination of flag starts and assigned lanes, park-and-go starts became more common and there quickly came a cry for them to be eliminated.

Hydro-Prop

The sport itself was purchased in 2001 by Bernie Little, the owner of the *Miss Budweiser* team, and Gary Garbrecht, a veteran in the high-perfor-

mance marine industry. They created an organization called Hydro-Prop, Inc., to run the sport and appointed a group of experts to analyze the rule book from beginning to end and recommend changes. High on their list of priorities was to get rid of the park-and-go starts in order to pump new life and competitiveness into the sport.

As a result of those discussions, Hydro-Prop created the option for flag starts again and the assignment of lanes, but the big difference was that the race format could be changed. Garbrecht was given full authority to manage the races in whatever way he felt would increase parity among the race teams and provide the best experience possible for the fans. And, he did just that.

Sometimes the drivers were allowed to fight for lanes, and sometimes the lanes were assigned. Sometimes they used a flag start, and sometimes they didn't. The racers never knew which format would be used until the drivers' meeting just before the race.

If one looks at the number of different boats that won races each year, the new system seemed to work. There were more different winners per race during the Hydro-Prop period than at any other point in the past 30 years of the sport's history. There were only three different race winners in each season from 1991 to 1998, and only two in both 1999 and 2000, but there were five different winners in six races during the first year of Hydro-Prop in 2001.

The problem was, there were only six races, as compared with 10 races from 1995 to 1998 and 11 races in 1999. Also, the drivers and the owners began to hate the uncertainty of the Hydro-Prop system. Eventually, following the death of Bernie Little in 2003, there came a revolt.

In 2004, several owners and race site promoters created an organization called the American Boat Racing Association (ABRA) and operated three of the seven races held that season. When Budweiser announced later that year that it was going to leave the sport, Hydro-Prop sold its assets and the ABRA became the sole

sanctioning body for the sport.

American Boat Racing Association

One of the first things ABRA did when it took control of the sport was to appease the complaints of the drivers. Their new rules for 2005 eliminated flag starts and let the drivers once again fight for lanes. Except for predetermined lanes during the 2009 and 2010 seasons, the 2011 races in San Diego and Doha, and the 2018 race in San Diego, the drivers have been fighting for lanes ever since.

The area of focus for starting-procedure rules by the ABRA, and by H1 Unlimited after the organization was renamed in 2009, has been on regulating the speed of the boats before the start because park-and-go starts continued to be an issue whenever drivers had the opportunity to use the tactic.

While score-up buoys had been used in the past to establish a point on the course where the boats were required to establish a lane, they became a key component in the effort to regulate speed in 2005. The exit pin of the first turn couldn't be passed until one minute remained until the start, thus forcing the boats to maintain a minimum speed in order to get around the course and to the starting line in that short time.

This solved the problem of park-and-go starts as the boats approached the starting line but created a new issue. The trolling just moved to the other end of the racecourse because the drivers instead slowed to a crawl as they approached the score-up buoy.

Faced with the realization that the score-up buoy hadn't eliminated trolling, race officials got rid of the score-up buoy in 2008 and instead returned to the rule of the past. They dictated that the boats must remain on a plane after the one-minute gun and further defined "on a plane" as the boat having both sponsors and the prop out of the water, as witnessed by the referee on the official tower. A boat that fell off a plane for more than five seconds was given a warning and if the driver did not speed up, he was

assessed a one-lap penalty. What's more, the referee's decision was not disputable.

But the minimum speed proved too difficult to enforce and the park-and-go business continued, so in 2011 the score-up buoy was back in place with one new twist: the boats had to pass the official tower at least once during the warm-up period. That didn't seem to help either, so the following season there was yet another version of the rule.

The score-up buoy remained, but the boats had to also maintain a speed of at least 100 mph. Each team was provided with a GPS transmitter so the speeds could be monitored using computers on the official tower. If a boat dropped below 100 mph for more than five seconds, it was assessed a 15-second penalty. Additional drops in speed netted additional 15-second penalties up to a maximum of one minute.

But there was another problem. It turns out that roostertails cause havoc with GPS systems because the walls of water get in the way of the unit's ability to contact the satellites that are needed to get a fix on its location. It's like going through a tunnel. Also, the referees on the official tower had a devil of a time tracking the speeds of multiple boats at the same time.

The minimum speed was revised to 80 mph in 2014 and determining the speed became a judgment call. Then in 2015, the score-up buoy was eliminated once again. Instead, attached to each boat was a GPS unit that would start flashing a light if the boat dropped below 80 mph. Except for the San Diego races in 2018 and this past season, the same strobe-light system has remained in place up until now.

What's next?

At the conclusion of the H1 Unlimited meeting in November, Kelly Stocklin, the chair of the sport's Competition Committee, promised that his group would study a number of alternatives and come up with recommendations for the H1 Board to consider early in 2020. ❖

MY \$0.02 WORTH

Editorial Comment by Andy Muntz



I was asked recently to give a brief history of the sport's starting procedures at a meeting of drivers, owners, crew chiefs, and board members. It was a prelude to a discussion about possible ways to change rules related to the start.

The history of this issue tells us that during the past three decades, the various people running the sport of unlimited hydroplane racing have continually seen revisions to the starting procedure as a way to stem the tide of diminishing fan interest. But the history of the issue also tells us that those changes have so far done little to increase fan interest.

The problem is, too much assuming has been going on—on both sides of the issue.

Efforts to modify the starting procedures have typically had two themes: the people who run the sport want to make the racing more exciting for race fans, and they assume that park-and-go starts will do the opposite. They've arrived at this conclusion because they hate seeing the boats go slow, and they assume the fans feel the same.

At the same time, changes to the

starts have always been met with strong resistance because many drivers and owners assume the other ways of starting will make it harder for them to win a race. They believe that in order to win, they must get the inside lane at the start, and the best way for them to get there is to employ a park-and-go strategy.

It's easy to see why they might think the inside lane is so crucial. It gives them the shortest way around the course and, with an overlap rule that says you can't complete a pass until you are seven boat lengths ahead, it's difficult to get ahead of a boat that's on the inside.

Yet, the numbers tell a different story. In the 37 heats that were held last season, only 14, or about 38 percent, were won by the boat that had the inside lane at the start. That percentage wasn't a whole lot better, 44 percent, two years ago.

Meanwhile, we also don't know whether a different way to start will attract new fans.

Maybe they've lost interest for other reasons? Maybe it's because the boats aren't as noisy as they once were? Or,

because fans can't see the driver in the cockpit? Or, that the boats are too far away from the spectators? Or, the day of racing takes too much time? Or, maybe it's because there aren't enough boats painted pink?

My point is, the sport doesn't know because it hasn't asked.

Now don't get me wrong, revising the starting procedure is needed. The starts are hard for fans to understand and too difficult for race officials to enforce, which has led to confusion and uncertain outcomes after the racing has ended. It also was clear in the meeting that the sport is seriously concerned about the fan experience, and I applaud that.

But we can't assume that changing starts would be the magic elixir to solving all of the sport's problems.

If the sport's goal is to attract new fans, what it really needs is to ask those people what they like about the sport and what they truly don't. Such a marketing research study will be expensive, but it will give the sport something better to go on than just assumptions. ❖

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EDITOR: Unlimited NewsJournal, 14313 Beverly Edmonds Road, Edmonds, WA 98026.

Email: ajmuntz@icloud.com

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PLEASE JOIN US AT THE NEXT MEETING OF UNLIMITEDS UNANIMOUS.

2 p.m. on Sunday, January 12, 2020

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