

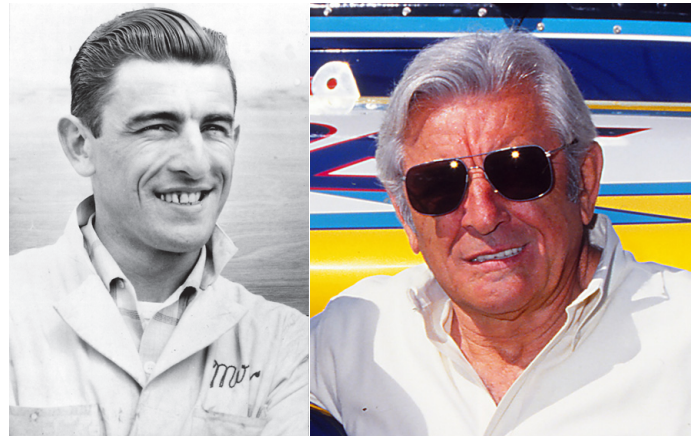
APRIL 2015



# Mira Slovak; Part One

by Craig Fjarlie

A handful of unlimited hydroplane drivers rise above the roostertails and achieve a special place in the hearts of fans. Chip Hanauer accomplished that, so did Steve David. In earlier years, Danny Foster, Chuck Thompson, Bill Muncey, and Jack Regas stood apart from the crowd. Another driver in that unique category is Mira Slovak. He led a life of excitement and challenge by escaping from Czechoslovakia during the early years of the Cold War, driving hydroplanes, flying in the Reno Air Races, performing in movies as a stunt pilot, working as a personal pilot for William Boeing, Jr., and as a commercial pilot for Continental Air Lines.



At left Mira Slovak in 1956. At right Mira in 1994 at Seattle.  
~ H&RM Collection photos

Slovak was born October 25, 1929, in Cifer, Czechoslovakia. He passed away on June 16, 2014, in Fallbrook, California. He last visited Seattle during Seafair, 2011, when he drove the replica *Miss Wahoo*. The following interview with Slovak was conducted in the Seafair Press Room on August 5, 2011, by Craig Fjarlie. Readers may wish to note the conversation sometimes wanders from chronological order.

**Your escape from Czechoslovakia was documented before, in the 1959 Gold Cup program.**

That was in 1953.

**Can you tell us a little bit about your early life, your background?**

Well, that was so many years ago now. 1929, born in Czechoslovakia. Of course, the Second World War came in. We had a period of freedom for a while. In 1938 the Germans pulled in, the occupation. In 1945 the war was over. We had freedom for three years. In 1948 the communists moved in. In 1946 I joined the Czechoslovakian Air Force; gliders in '47 and the air force for four years. I was transferred to normal squadron. I was on the twin engine bombers and transport. From there I went to Czechoslovakian Air Lines. They didn't have enough pilots because all the westerners who used to fly in the second war in England were being thrown out by the communists. They needed

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new blood. I was the new blood. They said they could trust us. Well, they trust me for a while but I didn't trust them. I flew for the airline for one-and-a-half years. I escaped with flying a DC-3 from Prague that was heading east. We overpowered the co-pilot, another kid that used to fly for the U.S. Air Force. Four crewmembers overpowered him. Then we flew close to the ground to run away from radar screen and we landed in Frankfurt, in Germany. Then I worked for the CIA for while. For my reward, I had been allowed to come to America, to Washington, D.C. And then I was a free man, so the CIA found me a job in the northwest, a city by the name of Yakima. I'd never heard of it, of course. So I came to Yakima, had a crop dusting job. I was crop dusting for three years all over the Northwest. I was fortunate to get a job with Mr. Boeing, as his personal pilot.

**How did you meet Bill Boeing, Jr?**

Uh, through the C.I.A. The C.I.A. gentleman knew him. He said, "Listen, I have Mrs. Boeing with a Czechoslovakian background..."

**Oh.**

So I managed to get an interview with Mr. Boeing, to become a pilot for Mr. Boeing. It was a big change. I was working, crop dusting, went all the way to Mexico and then back. I applied for United Air Lines, but my English wasn't very good, so Mr. Boeing was good enough to give me a job, then *Miss Wahoo*.

**You were his private pilot.**

Right.

**What kind of plane did he have?**

He had a little twin engine, four-to-five passenger Piper. Then he switched to a Commander, and he had a flying boat. I did touch and go right here, practicing, a 12-passenger flying boat, a Grumman Mallard.

**So, when you took the job with him, did you move to Seattle?**

Yes, I was going to the University of Washington for my English.

**OK.**

And then I got the job, I was living in Wenatchee.

**Now, the stories we've always heard is that the first unlimited hydroplane race you saw was the one you drove in, in 1956.**

I saw about the boats in newspapers . . .

**And TV, and . . .**

. . . but that was my first one.

**But you knew about them, anyway.**

I was very fortunate because at that time there weren't very many professionals. There was Bill Muncey, and he drove, like, a couple of years. Most of us . . . Russ Schlee was an amateur, Bill Stead was an amateur, I was an amateur. And the rest of the guys, mostly amateurs. It was very easy to sneak in. Not like today, when an unknown person wouldn't be in it.

**So, how did Bill Boeing approach you about driving the boat?**

There's a story about that, a very true story. We made a business trip to Canada. He had a business association up there. I flew him up there. Mr. Boeing was a very low key gentleman. And he always – and I'd wait for him – managed to get his friends close to the airport and we had lunch. And he was talking, kind of interesting, and he looked over at me and he said, "I just bought a hydroplane." I know what a hydroplane is from the newspapers. Then he started talking about speed and what

they were going to do, and then he looks at me and says, "Hey, Mira, you're single, you have no children, would you be interested in driving the boat?" I said, "Mr. Boeing, I've never been close to one." He said, "You're going to see one next week. It's coming from Les Staudacher, in Detroit. Ted Jones designed it and Les Staudacher built it. It may be on the way already. You'll get a chance to see it." He said, "Oh, did you drive any boats before?" I said, "Yeah, I drove boats, we had a river going down the hills, little boats with paddles down the water." He said, "Well the boat I have in mind has a bit more horsepower than that." He started laughing. Then the boat



came in and the crew started working at Mr. Boeing's hangar. I was kind of snooping around, getting involved in it, and the next thing I was driving. I remember there was a boat ramp down by, north of Renton. I don't know the name of it. I guess they took the boat first time. Junie Cech and the crew chief Les Hayden, they drove it to Mr. Boeing's, which is north of the floating bridge. He had a house up there and they built a boat house. So they just turned it right into the boat house. They lift it up. The crewmembers worked on it right there, they didn't work on it at Boeing field. And then my turn came the next day and I drove it. I looked around, my mind was working, I said, "I don't think I'm made for it." Really, too full in my head. I came back, we changed things. Mr. Boeing says, "Well, how you like it?" I said, "Mr. Boeing, I don't know if I had . . ." ~ Tommy Hill photo

### **Now, this was just testing?**

No, just running around before Seafair, just a few days away from Seafair. But we were low on time. I said, "You know, I don't know . . ." He said, "Well, you let me know, I'm not going to push you. A lot of guys are interested" I said, "Let me cool off." I did, and I tried again. I started getting to know it and the next day I said, "I like it." He said, "OK, you'll drive." So we entered the race, I think we finished second or third.

### **You were fifth in the '56 Seafair race.**

Was it fifth? OK.

### **Yeah, but that was your first time.**

First time, yeah. I think we got second in a heat.

### **Yeah.**

It was unusual, they were really excited. But it was the first time.

### **The boat didn't go back east, but you went to the Sahara Cup.**

Sahara Cup? Yeah.



Above from left, Mira Slovak, designer Les Staudacher, and Bill Boeing, Jr., and Boeing rep. in the pits at Seattle~ H&RM Collection photo

**You were sixth in that.**

Uh huh.

**So you only raced it twice that first year.**

The first year. I think '57 was a little better.

**Yeah.**

We went to the Gold Cup, and Tahoe, Lake Tahoe.

**You won that.**

Yeah.

**At Chelan you were second. They had a lot of breakdowns. Didn't have a real big turnout.**

Was that the year I had the fight with Bill Muncey? Or '59?

**Well, '57, that was the year Maverick won. You were second.**

I had a big fight with Bill. Was it '57?

**It was later when that happened (1960 - Ed.).**

'59. '59, because Bill was, I remember, there's a story about it written by, uh, Watson wrote it, guy from . . .

**Oh, Emmett Watson?**

Yeah, I remember it. There's a fight break out. Shake their hands, say, "Good luck Billy," and "Good luck . . ." He called me Slim. "Good luck, Slim. See you when we come back, I hope." And the next thing, "Billy." I mean, he really goofed up the first time. That was Muncey. "I never goofed up." He was always driving with his head. But this time he was a little bit back. He was inside and I was strong and I was aiming for the buoy, and I chop him off. And God help me even today, I didn't realize. Oh, he got furious. He got so mad at me. He called me names, he's on the TV. Mr. Boeing says, "What the heck is wrong with him?" He said, "Where'd you chop him off?" I said, "Well, you know, everybody shoot for the first . . . And I looked left and there was nobody, he was far behind. I went there and he went through." He didn't conk out but he started and finished it. So I knew next heat, again against him, I jumped the gun. So I was really ahead. And then he was inside and I was outside going in the second turn. He was looking over his shoulder. So I slacked back, he was pushing me away. So I knew there was room between him and the buoys. So I increase the speed. I was right here (gestures), Billy was here, and Billy's going right where I am. And I ran in front of him. And that, after my 'tail against him, one more war shot! He went through the roostertail, I went straight. I gave him dirty water and by an inch he cleared, because I punished him so hard. (Laughs.) So that was the big fight between him and me. But it was really, mostly on the dock.

**Yeah, yeah.**

It's written very well, Emmett wrote it real well, if you get a chance to look at it.

**Well, let's talk a little bit about '57 Tahoe, when you won. Some other people jumped the gun in the final heat. There were a lot of problems with the gun, the clock, and the start.**



Yeah, I'm going back and the memory doesn't serve me anymore. I remember who was really hot at that time was the *Shanty*. *Shanty* and the *Maverick*. And then our guys, it might be I'm goofed up with the years, it might be, but I think it was at Lake Tahoe when one cylinder gave up and the guys cut the rocker arms off so I was running on 11 cylinders. And I don't know, maybe it was there or it was Lake Mead (Lake Mead in 1959 - Ed.). But anyway, we won the race and I remember it was the *Maverick*, "What the hell is wrong with you guys?" We heard it, "First class engine and here's a refugee from some country and he beats the pants off you." It was Mr. Waggoner's statement. (Laughter.)

**Let's see, you did go back east in 1957.**

We raced in Washington.

**Yeah, that was the year you went to the President's Cup, you were third, and you were second in the Rogers Memorial.**

On the way back we went to Madison. And Madison, Bill Muncey exploded.

**Yeah, what do you remember about that incident?**

He was playing hard. He was ahead of me. And the boat, something went wrong with the boat. Came apart. Made a U-turn, backed in and threw him out. And I remember, he wasn't badly hurt, but he was hurt. ~ Associated Grocers photo

**Yeah.**

I stayed there for a couple days with him after the race. And then I flew him in a little twin engine airplane from Madison to Chicago O'Hare. Those days they wait for us; it was a Stratocruiser, Northwest

Airlines. And I parked it, taxied right under the wings. They removed Bill, they put him in first class. They had a safety back-up. They had quarters for him, specially made. And so we flew to Seattle from Chicago. There must've been hundreds of people waiting for him. But he was hurt, just all on the inside.

**After Madison you went down to the Sahara Cup.**

Yeah. But you see, the trouble was with *Miss Wahoo*, our situation was, how should I drive? He (Boeing) says, "You drive the way you want to drive. Go out and have fun." I said, "Mr. Boeing, that's big words that you say. But if you mean it, I will do it." I was always foot down, no way finishing in the back. It was a strategy. And Mr. Boeing, not even once, and I made a lot of booboos and mistakes, not even once said harsh words or said, "Hey, don't do that, don't do that." So it was a privilege looking



Clyde Cassidy photo



Associated Grocers photo

back now, to drive. Mr. Boeing, there was no pressure. *Tahoe Miss*, I drove *Tahoe Miss*, never pressure. I drove *Bardahl*, I didn't have any pressure. *Exide* the same thing. No pressure. So I was very fortunate because some drivers they had, "You go and get it and if you don't I'm going to get you."

### **Yeah.**

I have heard some statements, no names mentioned, before the President's Cup one time. But I don't like that because then you are under pressure. Mr. Boeing said, "You go out and have fun, enjoy, be safe, don't get hurt, come back, and who cares about the engine." It was a different feeling. See, Bill Muncey was the expert of the experts because it was his living. The hydroplane was his life and he had to produce. Mentally he trained so he doesn't believe in second. He has to be in front and that's it. He doesn't believe . . . if you tried to help somebody, next thing you know he's beating the pants off you, but so what? I don't believe it. But he was a special individual, which I don't think there's been, or ever will be, a guy like him. Dedication and everything else to the sport, but his ego – everybody had an ego driving the boats – but from his point of view he doesn't know what second is. To me, it didn't bother me. I was racing here, was it '59 or '60, I don't remember, and the boat was untouchable. I felt so comfortable in the boat and later when I thought about it, too much confidence. Everything was, I was just strong. I had the Gold Cup already, where am I going to put it? I could smell gas. I could smell more and more. Next thing, the engine quit. And this water below, three or four laps to go, I had everything closed up in the pocket. I looked down, there's a screen, fuel screen. I said, "Oh, my God." Got the screen out, dried it out, put it back, threw it out, put a boost pump on, the engine start, here I went again. But I was disqualified because I was too late.



H&RM Collection photo

### **You finished the race.**

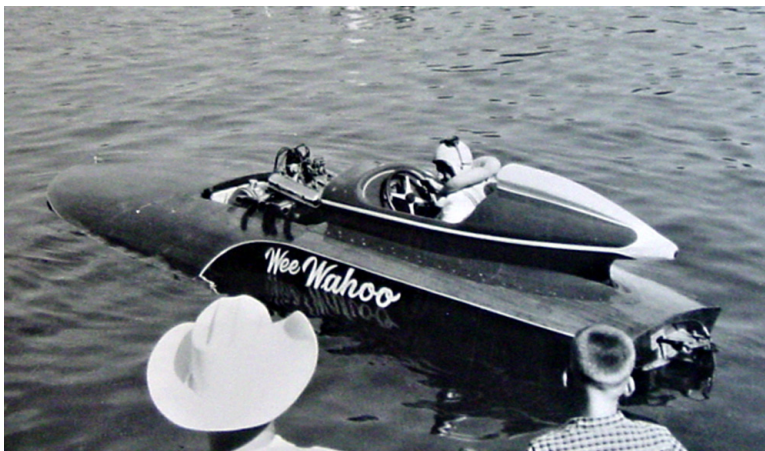
Yeah, I finished the race. I probably finished maybe second or third, but I was . . . So then I brought the boat in, everybody says, "What in the heck happened when you pitched the screen out?" The crew chief, Les Eide, looked at me. "Mira, I checked the boat this morning. Forgot to look under. There was a safety wire, they'd been working on it, they didn't put the safety wire on." The vibration got it, fell off. "We just lost the Gold Cup." He said, "Which one?" That was the attitude we had. I tried to, oh, the crew, but Mr. Boeing, if you win it's great but if you lose, so what? For him (Muncey) that was unacceptable. And that's what made him great.

### **Wahoo took the '58 season off . . .**

Yeah, Mr. Boeing . . .

### **. . . and converted from Allison to Rolls for '59. Did they use the whole year to do that?**

Well, no, no. Mr. Boeing at that time, the main reason I think, was it's time to try to take it easy. I don't know, maybe business or whatever it was. I'm sure it wasn't the finances. No problem there. Let's go watch what's going to happen. And he gave me the little *Wee Wahoo*, the 280 class, to play with. At right Mira get ready to take off in the *We Wahoo*. ~ H&RM collection photo



H&RM Collection photo

**Yeah.**

So anyway, Bill Muncey got a bigger boat so we raced in different lakes all around. But the reason, Mr. Boeing, the main reason, he said, "Let's take one year off." And then we came back in '59. The Rolls Royce engine was the big switch.

**At Chelan in '58 you drove *Miss Burien*.**

Yeah, I think that's true because *Burien*, they had an injury and didn't have a driver. I think I drove it only for one race.

**Yeah, the '58 Apple Cup.**

Because then Mr. Bardahl offered me to drive his boat. At right the U-4 *Miss Burien* on the crane at Lake Chelan. ~ Tony Bugeja Collection photo

**Now, how did that boat (*Burien*) feel compared to *Wahoo*?**

There was no comparison . . .

**It was a smaller boat.**

Yeah, and didn't, I didn't know the boat. It was only for one race and they'd get somebody else driving it. I don't know what else. They were very nice people. Very, uh, money-wise very . . .

**Didn't have anything to work with.**

No. I mean, it was as much a community, socializing. An effort . . .

**Then you drove *Miss Bardahl* in '58.**

'58, and . . .

**Now, they had Norm Evans drive it at Chelan.**

There was some problem . . .

**Then they hired you.**

. . . whatever reason. It was a discrepancy between him, Mr. Bardahl and Norm. I liked Norm. Norm was a real, going, getting. And I told him, I asked him, I said, "Listen, I've been asked to drive the boat. They offered me to drive while I'm gone from Mr. Boeing." "Oh, go ahead." "And the next year they're going to Rolls." He said, "Fine."

**So he knew it was just one year . . .**

One year.

**. . . to drive.**

Yeah. And I drove and with the help of Norm because he won at Chelan, we won some more races and got the championship.

**Yeah. You got second at Tahoe. You used a lot of engines to qualify for the Gold Cup.**



H&RM Collection photo



Kirk Pagel photo

*Bardahl?*

**Yeah, in '58.**

Yeah, *Bardahl* was a heavy boat. We didn't finish, I remember that.

**Yeah, the Gold Cup didn't go well for you.**

Yeah.

**How did that boat handle compared to *Wahoo*?**

There was never going to be a boat like *Miss Wahoo*.

**Yeah.**

But I remember, the *Bardahl* was . . . the worst boat was the *Exide*. That was the worst one. It was unstable, rough. They had the power. They had the *Slo-mo* guys on the crew. Gave us power, so much power I didn't know what to do with it. But when you reached the high speeds it was just completely, I was a passenger.

**This was the *Exide*.**

This was the Gold Cup in Detroit in '63. I'm telling you, I never got so much beating in my life. We got second or third out of it, I don't remember. Do you have it in the record? (5th - Ed.)

**Uh . . .**

*Exide*, it was '63. ~ Steven Bett photo

**Yeah.**

It was a pretty rough ride. They tried to balance it, they tried to fix it, but the story is the guy who built it, uh, he put staples, with a staple gun, stapled it.

**Instead of screws.**

Yeah. So when Bill Muncey was pushing me at Coeur d'Alene, I opened it up a little bit more than I should. It exploded.

**The wrecked boat was on display here during Seafair weekend.**

Yeah, half the bow missing. I went through the windshield.

**You got hurt.**

160 stitches later. I still don't feel it (points to his lower jaw). ~ H&RM Collection photo

**You had a broken foot, or something.**

Broken foot, yeah.

**Your jaw . . .**



Steven C. Betts photo



H&RM Collection photo

K&P Page 1 Photo



It was plastic surgery these days, yeah. All the way around here (points to lower jaw).

**Wow. Well, if we can get back to *Miss Bardahl* for a little bit. You won at Buffalo.**

Yeah, win Buffalo, and in the capitol, something . . .

**There was a famous photo of *Bardahl* and *Wildroot Charlie* just a half-boat length apart at the finish of one heat.**

Yes. Bob Schroeder was the driver, yeah, I remember that. *Bardahl* took the water much easier than *Wildroot Charlie*. *Bardahl* was a heavier boat. It was rough water there. Buffalo, stuck in the waves. Rough. Nice people, very nice people there.

**Then you won the Rogers Memorial at D.C.**

Yes.

**And you were second in the Sahara Cup. *Miss U.S. 1* was first, but that was enough to give *Bardahl* the National Championship.**

That time we didn't try to overwork the engine; finish, get the points. There was kind of, much more strategy than try to win, because if you were shooting for points, just finish, get enough points is what you want to do.

**Yeah.**

Go out there and blow up. Mr. Boeing, just go have fun. If the engine was flying in pieces, that was the end of it. If we use our head a little bit, but again, it's kind of . . . if they give you carte blanche, go have a good time.

**Did you have to adapt anything with driving the Rolls compared to the Allison?**

Uh, the Allison was kind of sluggish with momentum and, uh, the Rolls was much more responsive.

**Yeah.**

The Rolls was a much better engine.

**Did you have to adapt anything with your style, how soon you could get on the throttle coming out of a turn?**

No, I don't think so. It was just better acceleration, better top speed, and much more responsive in the turn. When you were squeezing the turn, loading up, the Allison starts dying slowly down. The



Rolls was very responsive. And then I went back with *Tahoe Miss* to the Allison again, with the second stage blower, so there was more.



HydroFile  
Lon Erickson



**U-1 *Oh Boy! Oberto*** - The U-1 is at the Milton Street shop in Madison and having updates done to the runners on the bottom of the sponsons. Above, **Larry Hanson** turning *Oh Boy! Oberto* over. ~ U-6 facebook photo; **Tyler Hanson** working on the boat at right. ~ Madison Came Running website photo



**U-5 Porter Racing** - **Ted Porter** announced that **J. Michael Kelly** signed a multi-year agreement to serve as the team's primary driver heading forward and coming off a spectacular 2014 season when he won four races and placed second in H1 Unlimited high point standings. A smiling J. Michael Kelly at Seattle on left. Lon Erickson photo

**U-9 Jones Racing** – The U-9 crew is currently working on hull maintenance to the bottom of the boat, prepping for their upcoming May Tri-Cities testing session. The crew flipping the boat over at the shop on right. ~ U-9 facebook photo



**gbr11 Peters & May** – The gbr11 hull work is done and the boat is being sanded and prepped for new paint. The gbr11 being prepped by a crewmember for painting in the shop at right. ~ gbr11 facebook photo



**U-12 Miss DiJulio/Centurion Racing** – The U-12 hull was recently flipped over and moved inside the shop for updates to lighten the hull, re-working running surfaces, and prep for new paint in 2015. Below left the U-12 *DiJulio* upside down outside shop. At right **Jay Leckrone** mugs for the camera behind the U-12. ~ Centurion Racing facebook photos



Below left the U-12 *DiJulio* in the paint shop and at right the crew preparing it for painting. ~ Centurion Racing photos





**U-27 Wiggins Racing** – Wiggins Racing continues to form their crew, familiarize themselves with their equipment, and build a back stock of parts for the upcoming season. Above left the U-27 with open hatches. Above right some propeller work. At right crewman busy on laminating. Wiggins Racing facebook photos



**U-37 Schumacher Racing** – The boat and equipment is up for sale, according the owner



**Billy Schumacher** when asked at the end of March. On his own facebook page, he said they have no plans to race with H1 in 2015, even if the boat is not sold. He added that *“H1 needs to get rid of a couple people before we have any interest in participating with the sport in the future.”* April 13th the boat was spotted again outside in Tonawanda, NY, the same area it was seen in after the return

shipment from the Doha event. At left is the U-37 on tilt at Tonawanda. ~ Chris Conway photo

**U-96 Spirit of Qatar** – Works continues at the Ballard shop of Ellstrom Racing. The newly configured sponson tips are getting finished up by **Rick Corella** and **Jeff Minor** while **Mike Hanson** works on sponson runners. Also seen are a new skidfin and hardware.

At right is Rick Corella working on sponson. Below left Mike Hanson at work. On right is Jeff Minor working on sponson tip. Bottom left is Rick Corella again working on sponson tip. Bottom right is a new skidfin bracket for the U-96 *Qatar*. ~ Ellstrom facebook photos



**U-100 Leland Racing** – There have been no updates from the Leland team on specific plans for the 2015 season. The *Unlimited NewsJournal* has had some communication with owner **Stacy Briseno** back in February, however recent inquiries have gone unanswered. The U-100 is seen here after its return to the Kirkland shop in February.  
~ Leland Racing facebook photo



Recent news caught an interesting ad for an



unlimited hydroplane for sale, with quite a history. Hull # 9703 affectionately known as “Tubby”. The hull originally built and campaigned as the V-12 Allison powered U-3 Cooper Racing from 1997-2002 then later sold to Webster Racing and converted to turbine power in 2009, it last raced in 2010. The hull in recent years had been acquired by Porter Racing and served as a backup display hull. Asking price starts at \$35,000. Link

to ad listing > <http://www.ebay.com/itm/H1-Unlimited-Hydroplane-Allison-V12-T55L7C-Lycoming-Turbine-Display>

**Coeur d’Alene Silver Cup postponed to 2016** - Organizers of the 2015 Coeur d’Alene Silver Cup unlimited hydroplane race announced they have postponed the event scheduled for July and are now planning a 2016 event instead. **Keith Allen**, vice president and race director, said more time is needed to raise money for the Lake Coeur d’Alene event. To have a successful event next year, he said, organizers would have to raise at least \$300,000. Allen said organizers were crunched for time in gaining sponsorship funds to pay for the event this year, and that was the primary reason this summer’s event was canceled.

The event was planned for July 17-19 and was to be based at Silver Beach. Link to complete story in the CDA Press > Silver Cup Runneth Under [http://www.cdapress.com/news/local\\_news/article\\_713bdd08-82a1-5abc-a41b-8b15d84be839.html](http://www.cdapress.com/news/local_news/article_713bdd08-82a1-5abc-a41b-8b15d84be839.html)



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Preparations for the launch of the new H1Unlimited.com web platform has been a work in progress for quite some time. Over 500 hours of work has been invested already and there will be more added [...]

**The Chairman's Corner**

- Kelly inks multi-year deal with Porter Racing
- World Championship Apparel On Sale
- New V-12 making progress
- Patrick Sankuer, Jr. to pilot 'Miss DJJulio' in '15
- Scott Liddycoat Will Drive U-9

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