

FEATURES

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SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2008



For the love of speed on the sea

Powerboat racing, once dominated by tycoons racing far out at sea beyond view, was refashioned in the 1990s to draw spectators and advertisers. The boats cost about US\$1 million to build and US\$500,000 to take through the annual circuit

BY MICHAEL BRICK

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, KEY WEST, FLORIDA

The rescue boats put in Sunday at dawn. The radio was calling for 1.8m seas. "A lot of people say, 'Yeah, I like it rough,'" said the racing promoter, John Carbonell. "But I raced myself for 10 years, and you say: 'Good Lord, what am I doing out here? Get me back. I'll go to church every Sunday.'"

Under the big white tent, the drivers and the throttle men performed reflex tests. They took deep breaths for the stethoscopes. They stood pelicanlike and touched fingers to noses and they waited for the chief doctor, Jeffrey Frohock.

"Today, you don't want to see me again," Frohock said. "You don't want to hear I've been used."

When the physical examinations were done, the racers in their brightly colored shirts sat on plastic chairs. They drank weak coffee from Styrofoam cups. They bowed their heads. They looked to the preacher. Somebody lighted a cigarette and the preacher made a prayer.

The preacher wore a black shirt that bore his name, Jim Black. He wore a black ballcap, too. He told of how Saul came to be knocked down and how David slew Goliath of Gath when no other man would stand up. He told of the capriciousness of this earthbound life, and he likened it to powerboat racing.

"What is it that causes men's hearts to fail?" Black asked, shouting to be heard above the idling motors. "What is it that makes us draw back?" Then the preacher made a blessing and said amen, and the racers clapped their hands. Two of their number were struck down in the Great South Bay off Long Island in August. Philip Dejana, 62, and Kevin Graff, 48, flipped their 11m catamaran at speeds exceeding 145kph, the police said. The force of the oncoming water crushed their protective canopy. They were memorialized together at St Peter of Alcantara Roman Catholic Church in Port Washington, New York.

After the tributes, the racers returned to the circuit. Through offshore contests held by three sanctioning bodies in places like Morehead City, North Carolina; Panama City Beach, Florida; and Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri, 55 teams qualified to enter the Super Boat International World Championship here.

Their sport, once dominated by tycoons who raced far out to sea beyond view, was refashioned in the 1990s to draw spectators and advertisers. Courses were designed to run laps passing 30m from the shore.

The modern racing vessels were named for their sponsors, Cintron and Lucas Oil and the like. The smallest measured 30m with a single 525-horsepower engine; the largest 15m with twin engines capable of accelerating from a standstill to 305kph in 1.2km. They had no brakes. They burned a gallon [3.8 liters] of ultrahigh-octane fuel per engine per minute. They were piloted by teams of two, a driver to steer and a throttle man to accelerate.

"It's all a guy can do to hold on to the steering wheel at that speed," Carbonell said.

At the world championship, which began Nov. 2 in the Florida Keys, the racers tested themselves against boats of all classes for the title of Top Gun, fastest over all. Along the way, some spun out, choked out, caught fire or barrel-rolled. On alternate days, the crews repaired flooded engines, battered hulls and broken gearboxes.

Few stood a chance against the new turbine boats, capable of speeds exceeding 322kph but prone to immolation.

"If they make a mistake at that speed," said Reggie Fountain, a retired racer, "they're dead."

Of the turbines, the most dominant was *Miss Geico*, sponsored by the insurance company. The Geico team traveled on a fleet of semis with a ground crew, a helicopter, inflatable mascots, a merchandise shop, golf carts, motorcycles and tents. The driver and the throttle man, Marc Granet and Scott Begovich, in their early 40s, had been plucked from the pleasure-boat racing circuit in Florida. Granet was trim and energetic, with a neatly kept goatee. Begovich was a chain smoker with hair past his shoulders.

"Many people have said to me, 'Why do you let him do it?'" said Granet's father, Joe. "I don't know that I could stop him. But he's found his dream."

With the money Geico was spending, Granet and Begovich were expected to win. Their greatest rival was Mike Seebold, 49, from Frontenac, Missouri. His team was sponsored by Anheuser-Busch. Seebold drove a 15m Mercury named *Bud Light* with dual 1,200-horsepower petroleum engines. He had to rely on a steady hand to keep pace with the turbines.

His strategy had worked at the world championships last year. The Geico boat broke down in all three races, leaving the glory to Seebold.

"We went home with our heads hung, and they went home the king," Granet said, "and we've had to live with that all year."

But through the summer season this year, the *Miss Geico* turbine had beaten the *Bud Light* petroleum engine in most races. For Seebold, the pressure was manifest. In July, the directors of Anheuser-Busch accepted a US\$52 billion offer for the company from InBev, a brewing concern based in Belgium. The new owners indicated they did not plan to continue the racing sponsorship. Seebold's team needed to win a new patron.

As the world championship week began, the crews parked here on fields of gravel by old military docks. Boat companies displayed propellers for sale. A video company offered volumes called "Key West Championships 1-7," "Rough Seas 1-6," "Crashes — They Swam Away 1-5" and "Just Bikinis 1-2."

In the first two days of racing, *Bud Light* and *Miss Geico* each took a checkered flag. With the final race approaching, the stage was set for a showdown.

On Sunday morning, as the racers finished their prayer session, the first spectators began unfolding chairs along the piers and sandbars. Beer vendors promised donations to Little League teams. Children sold cookies.

Offshore buoys set a course of 134km — 12 2/3 laps around three turns. The first turn, known as the Wall, marked the treacherous passage between choppy and smooth waters.

"It's probably the most violent race I've ever raced in," said Bob Vesper, the driver for Team Warpaint from Hammon-

ton, New Jersey. "It's like a washing machine." In the harbor, cranes lifted the vessels into the water. Atop *Miss Geico*, Granet cracked the seals of glow sticks attached to the hatch to provide a guiding light to rescue divers. Wearing an F-16 pilot's helmet, he dropped past a St Christopher medallion into a seat molded to the contours of his frame. Begovich slid down to his left, facing 14 gauges and four override buttons.

In the sky, helicopter pilots scanned the waters for endangered turtles and manatees. Along the shore, girls covered their ears. The boats roared into the straits, roiling the clear turquoise waters with rooster tail plumes. In staggered starts, Seebold led the petroleum boats with *Bud Light*, counting on a fire among the approaching turbines.

But no fire came. Granet led the turbines with *Miss Geico*. Through six laps, he passed the petroleum boats one by one, steadily advancing on Seebold. Coming out of the second turn, he closed the distance to about 274m. At the harbor turn, he overtook Seebold and did not look back.

When the race was done, Seebold knew his beer company sponsorship was gone for good.

"For it to be over just like this, it's a little hard to swallow," he said in a hotel parking lot after the awards ceremony. "Life goes on. You've just got to find something American in this American country, which is hard to find."

In the harbor, as the cranes waited to lift the boats ashore, *Miss Geico* floated in a lazy circle beneath the tropical sun, the heat of its turbines making vapor trails that blurred the water and the pier beyond and the grandstands and the portable toilets and the beer vendors and the children and everybody. Granet lifted himself from the cockpit and slapped the boat's yellow Kevlar hull with an open palm.

"Fastest race boat in the world, baby, right here," he called across the harbor. "Fastest. Race boat. In. The. World."

Right: Powerboats that can exceed 322kph race in the Super Boat International World Championship over eight days off Key West, Florida, on Nov. 8, 2008.

Below: The cockpit of a powerboat.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Below: As part of the Super Boat International World Championship, a Powerboat is paraded down Duval Street in Key West, Florida, on Nov. 7, 2008.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

