

# A Brief History of the RR Merlin & Boat Racing

*Courtesy of Fred Farley (ABRA Unlimited Historian) & Eric Mann (Unlimited Excitement, LLC.)*

Boat racers began experimenting with Merlin engines in the late 1940's, but it was the Allison engine which became the established Unlimited powerplant in the late 1940's and early 1950's, the Golden Gate III first using an Allison in 1946 and the Miss Peps V winning the 1947 Gold Cup with Allison power.

The first boat to show up at a race with a Merlin was the MISS WINDSOR, a home-built (by Lorne Armstrong) step hydroplane that attended the 1946 Gold Cup at Detroit but failed to start. MISS WINDSOR only started in one heat of competition. This was at the 1948 Maple Leaf Trophy in Windsor, Ontario, where it failed to finish.

The first boat to win a race with a Merlin was MISS CANADA III, which captured the 1948 Silver Cup at Detroit with Harold Wilson driving. The "III" was a very fast boat but was plagued with mechanical difficulties throughout its career. It had a lot of DNFs. The "III's" successor, MISS CANADA IV was the first to use a Rolls-Royce Griffon but never won a race.

Jack Schafer's SUCH CRUST I and SUCH CRUST II (a.k.a. GOLD'N CRUST) used the Merlin in late-1950 and 1951. But Schafer preferred the Allison and switched back to it in 1952.

The feeling in the late-1940s and early-1950s was that the Merlin, while more powerful than the Allison, was more temperamental.

The first team to obtain consistent results with a Merlin was SLO-MO-SHUN V, which decisively won all three 30-mile heats of the 1954 Gold Cup in Seattle with Lou Fageol driving. The following year, a Merlin was installed in SLO-MO-SHUN IV as well.

Ironically, the Merlin engine used in SLO-MO-SHUN V at the 1954 Gold Cup was the very same engine used in the ill-fated QUICKSILVER, which crashed to the bottom of Lake Washington during the 1951 Gold Cup. The sudden chilling did not damage it.

By and large, the Allison was the engine of choice in the Unlimited Class until the late-1950s/early-1960s. Only then did the large-scale transition to the Merlin occur. MISS THRIFTWAY, MISS U.S. I, WAHOO, MISS BARDAHL, and CORAL REEF all changed over to the Merlin at about the same time. The one major team that stayed with the Allison until the late-1960s was the GALE team. They didn't change over to the Merlin until 1969. Then, in 1974, they abandoned the Merlin in favor of the turbo-Allison.

From 1960-1979, the Merlin won 19 of 20 National Championships, and 17 of 20 Gold Cups, Allison's taking the others. In 1962 Roy Doby set the world water speed record for a propeller driven boat with the Merlin powered Miss U.S. I (at 200 MPH). In the first half of the 1980's, Rolls-Royce Merlins and Griffons split Championships and Gold Cups, with the Merlin and Griffon capturing two Gold Cups each, and the Griffon taking three National Championships to the Merlin's two.

An Australian version of the Merlin showed up in a number of Australian Unlimiteds. These included the AGGRESSOR, which won the 1972 Griffith Cup, which is the Australian equivalent of the Gold Cup.

A British version of the Merlin was used in the Karelsen MISS U.S. (the former checkerboard MISS BARDAHL) in 1970 but was unsuccessful.

George Simon's crew attempted to turbocharge a Merlin in the early 1970s. But this concept was never tried in competition.

In 1966, Roy DUBY tried to develop a hybrid of the Allison and the Merlin that he called a Dubenhauser. It was tried in one race at San Diego in the SMIRNOFF. The set-up ran reasonably well but was no world-beater.

The beginning of the end of the Allison/Rolls era occurred in 1984 when the turbine ATLAS VAN LINES made its debut. On its first time around the buoys (at Evansville) it set a world 2-mile lap record that was faster than the 2.5-mile record!

From then on, it was only a matter of time before the Allison, the Rolls-Royce Merlin, and the Rolls-Royce Griffon went the way of the Hispano-Suiza.

In conclusion, the Merlin was generally more temperamental than the Allison, but it did produce more power. The better financed teams generally used Merlins, while those with less money typically used Allison. While it can be argued that the Merlin was more successful than the Allison for various reasons, it is important to recognize a significant reason it was successful was because the top teams adopted it, making it the defacto standard among the leading teams. The mere fact that the top teams were using Merlins was an important factor in its success.

Some of the most significant Merlin-powered Hydroplanes include:

- Slo-mo-shun V (from 1954 on, 1954 Gold Cup winner, first for Merlin power)
- Miss Thriftway (converted in 1957, 1957 Gold Cup winner)
- Hawaii Kai III (1958 Gold Cup and National Champion, first Merlin powered National Championship)
- Miss Thriftway/Miss Century 21 (Gold Cup 1961-1962, National Champion 1960-1962)
- Miss Bardahl (Gold Cup and National Champion 1963-1965, 1967-1968)
- Miss Budweiser (Gold Cup 1969-1970 and 1973, National Champion 1969-1972, 1977)
- Atlas Van Lines (Gold Cup 1972, 1977-1979, 1982-1984, National Champion 1972, 1976, 1978-1979, 1982-1983)
- Pay 'n Pak (Gold Cup 1974-1975, National Champion 1973-1975).