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Hydro legend Vanden Berg dies

By [Dwight Perry](#)
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Leo Vanden Berg, the crew chief of the Miss Bardahl hydroplane whose three-year run of Gold Cups in the mid-1960s marked the end of a Seattle sports era, died Sunday after an extended illness at age 87.

"He was an extremely conscientious, meticulous mechanic, and a good racer," said Dixon Smith, who joined the Bardahl crew as a 19-year-old in 1962 and, having retired as an airline pilot last year, is refurbishing the race boat. "In the racing business, you have to have the boat in the water. You can't be 10 minutes late.



Leo Vanden Berg

"It takes a real talent to know what's good enough to get the boat running, how much time you have, to prioritize, to make sure the important stuff gets done. Leo was good at that."

From 1962 to 1965, Ole Bardahl's boats won 12 races and three national championships, setting competition speed records in San Diego in 1965.

Most impressive, in 1965, a tired Bardahl boat held together by Vanden Berg's young crew became the first unlimited since the Great Depression to win three consecutive Gold Cups, the sport's most prized race.

Bardahl driver Ron Musson never got a chance to make it four. In the second race of the 1966 season, Musson and two other drivers were killed on the Potomac River. Vanden Berg walked away from the sport for nearly two decades.

The next year, 1967, the NBA's SuperSonics became Seattle's first major-league sports franchise, and the city's sports landscape was in for a dramatic change. Baseball's Pilots and Mariners and the NFL's Seahawks followed.

By the time Vanden Berg returned to the sport as a volunteer crewman on the Squire Shop and Budweiser teams in the 1980s, Seattle's days as minor-league town were long gone.

Vanden Berg, born in South Park and the son of a mechanic, got his first crew work on the Maverick. He was named Bardahl crew chief in 1962 and won with perhaps the youngest crew on the circuit — and a personality that belied the roar of the airplane engines powering his boats.

"He was quiet, unassuming, modest, and he had to have patience like you wouldn't believe," Smith said. "He had guys like me, 19 to 23, for a crew, and he rode herd on us. He was very even-tempered, patient and very fair, one of the most honest people I've ever met in my life."

But he insisted that things be done a certain way — his way.

"Yes, his famous checklist," Smith said. "He had a checklist on race day, and when you did something, you sign it off. At the time it was a real pain. Later on in my airline career, I learned how important stuff like that was.

"He was a great advocate of checking other people's work. That's what gave us the ability to win races. We didn't make as many mistakes as other people."

Vanden Berg is survived by his wife Elsie of Seattle; son Melvin Vanden Berg of Ames, Iowa; daughter Teresa Cain of Crescent Bar; eight grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren.

At his request, there will be no services. The family asks memorials be made to the Unlimited Hydroplane Hall of Fame, of which he is a member.

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