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Restored hydro pays tribute to golden age

By **Bob Condotta**

Seattle Times staff reporter

It might strike some as a high price to pay to recapture a bit of one's youth.

But then, the passion that unlimited hydroplane racing inspired among many Seattleites in the 1950s and 1960s always bordered on the unexplainable, if not simply the irrational.

And when Dixon Smith again laid eyes a few years ago on the Miss Bardahl — the famous Seattle-based Green Dragon that so happily slew all those hated Detroit-area boats from 1962 to 1965 — all the old feelings returned.

Of a time before pro sports hit Seattle, and unlimited hydroplane racing was king.

Of landing a job with the Bardahl team as a college kid and earning enough money to put him through the University of Washington, where he earned degrees in physics and math.

Of sharing a small part of the glory as the boat won 12 of 29 races in those four years, becoming the first to win three straight Gold Cups (1963-65).

"Working on that boat paid for my college," said Smith, a retired airline pilot who kept his foot in unlimited racing in later years as a member of the crew of the Miss Budweiser. "It was really a wonderful experience."



ROBERT HEILMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES, 1965
Miss Bardahl, shown speeding across Lake Washington, was the first hydro to win three straight Gold Cups.



STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES
A restored Miss Bardahl is lowered into Lake Washington, hitting the water for the first time since 1961.

So five years ago, Smith bought the Bardahl with designs not just to restore its hull, but get it to a point that it could run at almost the same speed it did in its prime.

He estimates that he and the team that helped restore the boat — including his brother, David, his son, Ryan, Skip Schott, a close friend and fellow former Bardahl crew member; and former unlimited driver Mike Hanson, who handled much of the woodwork — put in at least 6,000 hours.

But Smith said it will all feel worth it this weekend when the Miss Bardahl will be displayed at the Museum of Flight in an exhibit titled "Boats that fly: Seattle comes of age," set to honor the golden era of hydro racing. The exhibit, which is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, remains up until January 2006.

Other boats in the exhibit are the 1946 Tempo VI and the 1951 Slo-Mo-Shun V, the first boat to win the Gold Cup in Seattle.

The Tempo and the Slo-Mo-Shun are each among the many boats that have been restored by the Hydroplane & Raceboat Museum in Kent.

But the Bardahl was mostly a family affair.

"All of us that worked on it had a personal interest in the boat," Smith said.

Smith got involved in hydro racing through his father, Burns Smith, who helped fix the Slo-Mo V after its famous 1955 back flip. He spent his college summers working on the Bardahl — earning a percentage of the prize money — as it became the favorite boat among many Seattle fans. Its fame was such that it was used in a national ad campaign for Camel cigarettes, and it set several speed records that lasted until the early 1970s.

"It was the kick-ass boat of its era," said Ken Muscatel, unlimited driver and owner. "It was an iconic boat."

The Bardahl's post-racing history, however, is almost as interesting as what it did on the water.

The boat was retired in 1965 at the top of its game. Smith thinks it is the only boat in hydro history that raced under only one name and one color scheme.

Its initial post-retirement use was as a promotional display boat by Bardahl.

About a decade later, after what team historian Jon Osterberg refers to as a "complicated series of events," a comptroller who was liquidating a plant where the boat was being stored accidentally sold it for \$1,500 to a New Hampshire boat collector. It sat there out of view for years until a local racer bought it with plans to refurbish it and race it.

But that never developed, and the boat might have simply vanished had not Osterberg — a Seattle native who searched for the boat for years — finally tracked it down in the mid-'80s. It eventually ended up at the Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum before being sold again in 1989 to Curt Erickson of Eatonville, a museum associate. Smith later approached Erickson about working together to restore the boat before Erickson finally decided to sell it to Smith.

Smith, who lives in Issaquah, estimates the boat still has about 30 percent of its original parts and has been restored to almost exactly as it was when it raced, save for some more modern glues and "a little more modern construction in some areas that aren't visible."

The cockpit has also been altered slightly to allow for two occupants — Smith plans eventually to give rides to family, friends and others after its stay at the Museum of Flight ends.

But not before first giving a ride to himself. He said the boat could probably go as fast as it did 40 years ago, but he plans to keep it in the 150 mph range for safety reasons.

"That was one of my motivations," Smith said, "that, 'Yep, I'm going to drive it.' "

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