

Vintage Memories

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By Eric Schwartz, Herald staff writer

Before the Seattle Mariners, before the Seahawks and before the SuperSonics, there was still a sport that captured the hearts and minds of Washington sports fans.

That sport was unlimited hydroplane racing.

Enthusiasts from the days of the roaring, piston-pumping boats of the 1960s got a glimpse of the past Friday as five vintage hydroplanes took to the Columbia River for an exhibition heat at the Lamb Weston Columbia Cup.

The boats -- which included the 1960 U-4 Miss Burién, the 1975 U-8 Oh Boy! Oberto, the 1956 U-8 Hawaii Kai, the 1956 Miss Thriftway and the 1962 Miss Bardahl -- didn't hit the speeds they reached in their prime, but the loud, distinctive sound of the boats were enough to send many down memory lane.

"It's the beautiful, soul-shaking, rattling noise that everybody loves," said Lakeridge Paving U-48 driver David Williams, who is also the director of the museum that refurbished the boats. "If you grew up watching these races in the Tri-Cities, you probably love these boats."

Fans of the vintage boats will have two more chances to catch them in action. The vintage boats will take part in two more exhibition heats, at 2:25 p.m. today and 10:40 a.m. Sunday.

One man was given an up-close-and-personal experience with the 1962 Miss Bardahl Friday. Team historian Jon Osterberg rode in the cockpit of Miss Bardahl with driver Dixon Smith during a test run.

The ride, in a way, was a finders' fee. Osterberg spent four years making phone calls and searching the areas surrounding hydroplane tracks in search of Miss Bardahl when she was "missing" in the 1970s and early 1980s.

"I became a Bardahl fan very early," said Osterberg, who grew up in Bellevue. "I think I am a sentimentalist at heart. It really bothered me that my favorite boat had disappeared."

As it turned out, the boat accidentally had been liquidated for the unbelievable price of \$1,500 by Bardahl after years of serving as a promotional item for the company in Boston. The classic boat changed hands twice until Osterberg finally tracked it down in New Hampshire in May 1982. After a year, the owner was finally willing to donate it to the Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum in Seattle.

In 2000, the boat returned to Smith and the original crew and the time, money and patience Osterberg had used in retrieving the boat was rewarded Friday.

Osterberg said he can't explain why all fans love the loud, roaring engines. But he guesses that baby-boomers love them because for a while they were the only big-league sport in Seattle.

One certainty is that the old gems are still loved, and the loud roars from the Columbia Cup grandstands reflect that.

"It's that throaty roar that sounds nothing like what they have today," Osterberg said. "It's just thrilling."

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