

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Organizers hope regatta is first of many hydroplane exhibitions

Pia Hallenberg The Spokesman-Review
August 23, 2010



"Miss Bardahl" crew members Skip Schott, left, and Ryan Smith, right, check the oil with a homemade dip stick as original Bardahl crew member Roger Kruse, watches. Schott is originally from Spokane and was a crew member on the 1958 Miss Spokane hydroplane. (J. Bart Rayniak / The Spokesman-Review)

Sunday was an emotional day for David Williams. As a child he spent every summer on Lake Coeur d'Alene, and he always looked forward to the hydroplane races. When the last races were held in 1968, the 11-year-old Williams stood on the shore, dreaming of one day driving one of the roaring boats.

On Sunday, Williams became the first hydroplane driver to take to the lake in 42 years, when he piloted a replica of the original 1957 Miss Wahoo out onto the choppy lake for a couple of rounds during the Diamond Cup Regatta.

"Emotionally, it felt great to be out there, but the water was really crummy," said a beaming Williams after a trial run. He likened his experience to watching the Yankees play as a child and then returning to pitch for them as an adult. "I was here in 1968, and now to be the first one back, it just really feels amazing."

Four vintage boats – Miss Budweiser, Miss Wahoo, Miss Bardahl and Miss Thriftway – were in Coeur d'Alene over the weekend as part of a fundraiser for the Museum of North Idaho. The replica Miss Wahoo was built at the Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum in Kent, Wash.

Twelve hydroplane rides were raffled off at a fundraising dinner Saturday, but come Sunday, the weather wasn't cooperating.

"Every time I tried to really open her up, she just launched into the air," Williams said after his run. "It's just not the best conditions."

The hydroplanes can reach speeds of more than 175 mph, but because of wind and choppy waves, Williams kept Miss Wahoo at 90 mph. By midafternoon, event organizers decided it wasn't safe to give rides and were making plans to award them at a later date.

The Formula One racers of the lake, hydroplanes boast huge engines – like Miss Bardahl's 3,000 horsepower V-12 Rolls-Royce Merlin aircraft engine – and when going full speed they literally fly across the water with only the propeller and two other points on the hull touching the water.

During Sunday's hourlong weather delay, bystanders covered their ears as first Miss Thriftway and then Miss Wahoo test-fired their engines. And then people cheered.

"People in Seattle like the boats, but they are so used to seeing them that they almost seem blasé about it," said Jon Osterberg, part of Miss Bardahl's crew. "Here, we get a standing ovation every time we fire them up."

People crowded the floating dock near the Coeur d'Alene Resort, the beach near North Idaho College and smaller docks at Murphy's Landing to get a glimpse of the sleek boats. It was around 1:30 p.m. when Miss Wahoo finally made her way out, towed by the Kootenai County Sheriff's Department.

When Miss Wahoo fired up with the telltale sputters, flames and bangs of a jet-fueled engine, few people were more excited than event organizer Doug Miller, who was watching up close from a pontoon boat.

"Isn't that something? Look at that, isn't that something? We go from 42 to zero right now," Miller said, referring to the number of years since the last time the hydroplanes hit the lake.

"Wow. Look at that. That's the prettiest boat ever on the water," Miller said before yelling congratulations to Williams after his runs.

The Coeur d'Alene hydroplane races drew huge crowds in the 1950s and '60s, and unruly spectators were the main reason the races were canceled. Several times since then there have been efforts to bring the races back, but none have been successful. In the mid 1990s a ballot initiative banned unlimited hydroplane racing on the lake.

Miller and his supporters are not interested in bringing racing back to the lake, but they would like to see an annual event – similar to Car d'Alene, the classic car show – showcasing hydroplanes and their spot in Coeur d'Alene history, and doing exhibit runs on the lake.

"Next year we are going to do this again, and we are going to bring more boats and have it closer to downtown," Miller said. "And the weather will be perfect."

Source:

<http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2010/aug/23/splashy-comeback/>