

The Green Dragon Roars Again

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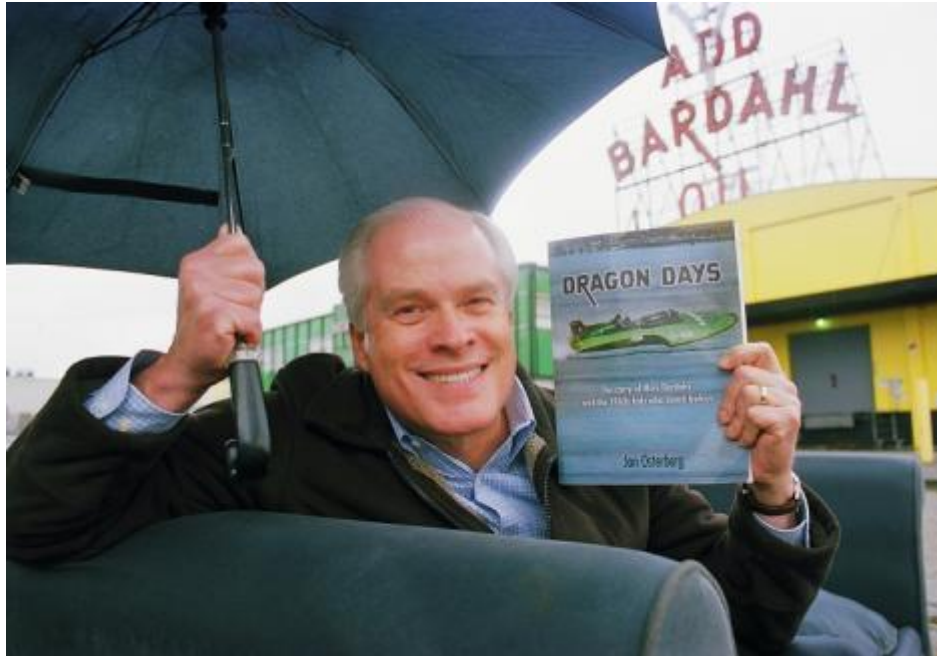


Photo by Jerry Gay

Jon Osterberg, author of "Dragon Days and the 1960s kids who loved hydros," sits out in front of the Bardahl Oil Co. on a rainy day. (SLIDESHOW: to view the rest of the photos, click on the main picture above or the thumbnails below)

A time when there were no Seahawks or Mariners, a fleet of hydroplane boats attracted adrenaline junkies and diehard fans in Seattle.

Though perhaps forgotten, Ballard has a rich hydro history, as the Bardahl Oil Co. once housed these boats for racing. Cruising at up to 200 mph in present day, these flat, spaceship-like crafts 'hover' over the water with only three points touching the surface.

"For Seattle, the only big league sports were Husky football, so it became in the minds of Seattleites, 'We are the kings of this, and it's a professional sport,'" said Jon Osterberg, author of "Dragon Days and the 1960s kids who loved hydros," a historical book about the history of hydroplanes in Seattle and, more specifically, "Miss Bardahl," Ballard's own hydroplane.

"In the 1950s and '60s, hydros were central to the cultural fabric of the Northwest – and definitely to my family," Osterberg said.

Miss Bardahl was the brainchild of Ole Bardahl, owner of Bardahl Oil Co. in Ballard. Bardahl, with the help of designer and builder Ted Jones, created a seemingly indestructible speedster that would leave its mark on hydro-history forever.

Miss Bardahl was the third of five boats that Mr. Bardahl built. She raced from 1962 through 1965, making her the first boat in 30 years to win three consecutive Gold Cups. Whoever wins the Gold Cup hosts the next year's race in their hometown. Osterberg said that Seattle went 'hydro-crazy' and had a keen sense of civic pride in the sport.

Though Miss Bardahl was not necessarily the fastest boat on the water at the time -- she could reach up to 165 mph while others could go 170 or even 180 mph -- she took the corners better and accelerated faster than the other boats, almost guaranteeing her to win every time. Miss Bardahl was the fastest on the corners, Osterberg said, and she averaged 117+ mph for a full lap, while others could only do about 90 mph.

But after undergoing a series of unfortunate events that would damage her hull, Miss Bardahl was nearly separated her ever racing again.

Osterberg's book was published on July 18, 2012 -- exactly 50 years after Miss Bardahl's first launch in 1962. In it, Osterberg narrates the legacy of Miss Bardahl and his experience with hydros in the history-packed narrative.

Osterberg said that some of his earliest memories were walking down 52nd St and passing the Bardahl factory. "I remember getting excited if the big metal roll-up door was open, and inside you could see this big metallic green and yellow boat -- nicknamed the Green Dragon."

Osterberg also said that his family, like most everyone else in Seattle at the time, went to Seafair every year.

The memories would follow Osterberg throughout his life, as he eventually had the opportunity to ride (though not race) in a hydro himself. First in 1999 aboard the Miss Burien on Lake Washington, and then in 2007 on Miss Bardahl in the Tri-Cities -- which was the best ride he had ever been on, he said.

"The smell of exhaust and airplane fuel, the incredible sensation of heat from the engine, the only thing protecting you is the windshield -- it's a cacophony of sensations all at once," Osterberg said of his ride in a hydro. However, he admitted that the windshield was hardly protection.

Akin to a luxury car, Osterberg said that the faster you go, the smoother it gets. Still, he said, when the hydroplane leans around corners, it is a little unsettling.

What started as an interest quickly grew into a passion for Osterberg. It was this love that would drive Osterberg to look for Miss Bardahl. After accidentally being sold for \$1,500 while in storage in Norwood, Boston, Bardahl seemingly vanished.

"By nature, I am sentimental, more nostalgic than most people maybe. I couldn't bear to think that this boat had vanished. So, in 1979, I decided that I was going to find that boat or at least find out what happened to it."

After three years of searching and one year of bargaining with the owner whose offering price was \$20,000, Osterberg convinced the owner to donate Miss Bardahl to Seattle's Hydroplane Museum for one dollar. Here it was cosmetically rebuilt for show purposes. To date, only 30 percent of the boat is from the original craft.

Crewmember Dixon Smith heard of Bardahl's whereabouts and decided to buy it from the museum as a private owner. Smith injected nitrous oxide into Bardahl's World War II Rolls-Merlin engine, redefining the word 'speed.'

"He rebuilt it to run the thing," Osterberg said.

Only 30 percent of the original material was salvaged due to years of corrosion and neglect. Yet after extensive work and the help of an innovative team, Smith and three of Bardahl's original crew, who had taken the boat out of Mission Bay in 1965, re-launched the boat on Lake Washington on July 7, 2007.

Now Miss Bardahl performs in exhibition races every summer and has appeared in Seafair the past two years. Many boats will assume new names over the years, but the name Miss Bardahl never changed.

Smith invited Osterberg to become part of the Miss Bardahl crew as "Keeper of the Dragon."

"Being invited on the crew in 2007 was a dream come true. I've been growing up idolizing this boat," Osterberg said.

Osterberg has followed hydroplanes for years. He was a stringer for the Chelan Mirror, wrote hydro reports for the Coeur d'Alene Press and later wrote for the Wenatchee World. Osterberg's "Dragon Days – the story of Miss Bardahl and the 1960s kids who loved hydros" is available at dragondaysbook.com.

Ballard's own and dripping with history, the legacy of Miss Bardahl lives on in the enormous plume of water spray and deafening roar of its military engine.

"There's a group of people that continues to love hydro boats, and they will continue to love them because they can't deny [that when they see the boats going that fast throwing a 'rooster tail' behind them going for 100 yards long -- it's a spectacle."