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Ballard's own Miss Bardahl commemorates 50 years at Lake Chelan

By Shane Harms

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Dixon Smith coaches son Ryan on driving Miss Bardahl. At the rear are David Smith, Skip Schott, and Roger Kruse, All Original 1965 crew members with Dixon. Ryan is a third generation Smith to drive a hydroplane. Seconds after this shot, the boat circled Lake Chelan at 140 mph. Photo by Jon Osterberg

The Mahogany and Merlot Vintage Boat and Car Event attracts a certain breed of people with a penchant for design, nostalgia and high octane adrenaline. There is an endless array of cars and boats from many eras at the event. Among them is the champion hydroplane racer of the 1960s, Miss Bardahl, and she ripped up Lake Chelan over the weekend 50 years after her last winning race and retirement.

The whole spectacle in Chelan resembles a time when fans in the Pacific Northwest thronged to the water for hydroplane races instead of to downtown sports stadiums.

Owner and driver of Miss Ballard, Dixon Smith, 72, spoke of the boat's rich history, a history that included him and his passion for her. Their story leaves a wake that spans 50 years.

Miss Bardahl was built by in the 60s by Ole Bardahl, owner of Bardahl Oil Co. in Ballard. Bardahl worked with boat-builder and designer Ted Jones to create the 30-foot green and yellow boat, nicknamed the Green Dragon. Not only did they design and build the boat look like a dragon, but to also fly like one. Well, sort of. In that era, WWII P51 fighter planes were being decommissioned. By adopting their 3,000 horsepower engines, hydroplane racing was born and created a culture of speed and adrenaline. Bardahl and Jones were no exception, and the Green Dragon was outfitted with a Rolls Royce Packard built V-12 aircraft engine. She weights 7100 pounds (with fuel) and reaches speeds over 165 miles-per-hour.

Miss Bardahl was the third of five boats built by Bardahl and was first launched in 1962. She quickly became a champion, racing from 1962 through 1965. Piloted by Ron Musson, Bardahl won three consecutive Gold Cups, which was the first boat in 30 years to do so. It wasn't her speed but more so her agility that made her a winner. According to Smith, Miss Bardahl was fastest around the corners, and she gleaned ahead of the otherwise faster boats. She also ran a record 57 consecutive heats without a single mechanical failure.

Smith was in the Bardahl pit as a crew member during her winning spree; he worked the summers to pay for college. "I needed a job to pay for college, and I was lucky enough to get hired by Bardahl," said Smith.

Smith studied Math and Physics at the University of Washington and went on to be a commercial airline pilot for United Airlines. He retired after 25 years. He currently works for Boeing.

After Miss Ballard was retired in 1965, she was used for promotional display by Bardahl Chemical Corporation, and was shipped to Boston where the company had a plant. Later they closed the plant and while it was being liquidated, Miss Bardahl was mistakenly sold for \$1,500.

The boat was basically out of the public eye until a longtime fan of Miss Bardahl, Jon Osterberg, started searching for her in 1979. He finally found her three years later. After changing hands a few times and not being maintained, the boat was unfit for the water. The owner initially said he would sell her to Osterberg for \$20,000, but Osterberg convinced him to donate Miss Bardahl to Seattle's Hydroplane Museum in 1982 for \$1. He later wrote a book about his experience and the hey-day of hydroplane racing called "Dragon Days And The 1960s Kids Who Loved Hydros."

In 2000, Smith and his brother, David, bought the boat with the goal of refurbishing her completely to eventually run in exhibitions. Today only 30 percent of the boat is from the original Green Dagon. The boat was finally re-launched in Lake Washington on July 7, 2007.

Smith now pilots Bardahl at a few exhibition events in the region each year. Working with Smith to bring Miss Bardahl to fans is the originally racing crew: David Smith (Bellevue, Wash.), Skip Schott (Maltby, Wash.) and Roger Kruse (Portland, Ore.).

Ryan Smith, Dixon's son, is the third generation of his family to work on Miss Bardahl.

"My son does some driving, so at some point when someone decides to take the keys from me someone else will do the driving."

Osterberg also made his way out to Chelan and not to watch the exhibition, but to work in the pits as a crewmember.

Smith blasted Miss Bardahl across slightly choppy waters on Oct. 3. Smith said that they don't run the boats when the wind is blowing because of the danger of an accident. At 165 miles-per-hour the disk-like crafts only touch the water at three points.

"We are not trying to get anyone killed. ... I'm 72 so I don't heal up so good, so I don't drive it hard enough hurt me or the boat."

Despite “taking it easy,” the Green Dragon tore up Lake Chelan like she did back in the 60s, veering around corners at breakneck speeds and ripping up the water.

For more information visit <https://www.facebook.com/MissBardahl>.



It takes a crane to move the 7000 pound boat into Lake Chelan.