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Local history: Hydroplane racer Ron Musson was built for speed

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Akron native Ron Musson (1929-1966) was an international superstar in hydroplane racing. | Beacon Journal file photo

Ron Musson lived for high-octane thrills at maximum velocity.

The hydroplane racer skimmed gracefully over the water like a smooth pebble skipping over a millpond. Musson could pilot just about any speedboat, and was compelled and propelled to master the biggest and fastest crafts in his sport.

He started out small with a rowboat on the Portage Lakes and developed into an international superstar in hydroplane racing.

Born in Akron in 1929, Ronald John Musson was the only son of Glen and Gayle Musson, and grew up on Waterside Drive at East Reservoir in Coventry Township. The family enjoyed fishing, boating and attending regattas.

“I got into racing just watching,” Musson once told an interviewer. “I’d watch them running outboards on the weekends. ... I took our family rowboat and put an outboard engine on it and went out and had my first competition and began to enjoy it.”

Musson lettered in football and basketball at the Ohio Military Institute in Cincinnati, where he graduated in 1948. He studied marketing at Miami University, received his bachelor’s degree in business from Kent State, and joined his family’s business, Dauntless Plumbing & Electric Co., on State Street in downtown Akron.

On sunny weekends, though, Musson could be found at Turkeyfoot Lake, racing motorboats with William Haffner, Jack Force, Don Norton and other buddies. Musson named his outboard boat Dauntless and raced at speeds nearing 50 mph.

"I bought a boat with a more powerful engine and just kept going from there, getting bigger engines, going faster and faster, and then I raced my own limited boat," he recalled.

In the early 1950s, Musson skippered small hydroplanes on the Portage Lakes and became a local racing hero to kids who gawked at the sleek crafts from the shoreline. Musson patiently answered questions when inquisitive children swarmed his docked boat.

Musson worked his way up from local races to regional competitions and captured his first U.S. title in 1953 during the national championships on the Ohio River near Cincinnati. After his boat Dauntless was damaged in a trial run, Musson drove the Stinger, a limited hydroplane owned by Ray Smith of St. Louis, and won the race with an average speed of 66 mph.



Ron Musson's motorboat Dauntless seems to leap from the water as he cruises Turkeyfoot Lake in 1950. His family operated Dauntless Plumbing & Electric in Akron. | Beacon Journal file photo

As Musson later told *Boating* magazine: "I went out there and really poured on the coal. ... I kept my foot down heavy on the throttle and fought like crazy to win."

The Akron racer traveled the country, competing on lakes and rivers in famous boats such as Chromate, Chromium, My Sin III, Hawaii Kai III and Nitrogen Too, and racking up trophies and cash prizes. He experimented with exotic fuel blends, including nitrous oxide (better known as laughing gas), and kept pushing the speed limit, easily topping 120 mph.

He won five Gold Cups from the American Power Boat Association and held seven national championship rankings. Union Internationale Motonautique, the governing body of powerboating in Brussels, named him the world's best driver in 1955.

What was the secret to winning?

“The biggest thing is to get out in front and stay there,” he said.

Musson hit the peak of success in the 1960s when he teamed with Ole Bardahl, owner of an oil company in Ballard, Wash., to pilot the unlimited hydroplane Miss Bardahl.

Nicknamed the “Green Dragon,” the powerful craft topped 150 mph and quickly shattered records for fastest lap, fastest heat and fastest race.

Musson sold his holdings in Dauntless Plumbing and moved to Seattle in 1962 to focus on racing full time. He won three consecutive Gold Cups in 1963, 1964 and 1965, and was even featured in a national ad campaign for Camel cigarettes.

In late 1965, Musson introduced a new \$75,000 Miss Bardahl that was 32 feet long and weighed 6,500 pounds. The 2,500-horsepower engine shifted to the back and the driver’s seat moved near the front — a design that was expected to handle turns better.

“We’ll no doubt have our problems, but if it works like we’ve got it figured on paper, the new boat should average about 4 or 5 miles an hour faster for a race,” Musson said.



Gold Cup winner Ron Musson, an Akron native, pilots the unlimited hydroplane Miss Bardahl on Lake Washington in Seattle in early 1966. | Associated Press file photo

It was Father’s Day on June 19, 1966, when Musson entered the President’s Cup Regatta on the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. Before 40,000 fans including President Lyndon B. Johnson, the hydroplane disintegrated during a 160 mph run.

“Musson had just completed the first lap of an elimination heat when his yellow and green boat took off from the water, flew upward and then crashed down, nose first, in a mountain of spray and debris,” the Beacon Journal reported.

Shock rippled through the crowd. Rescuers rushed to pull the driver from the water. He wore a crash helmet, fireproof suit and life jacket, but it was too late.

Ron Musson, 37, was pronounced dead on arrival at a local hospital, leaving his wife, Betty, and three children: Robert, 18, Josette, 14, and Michelle, 2.

Three hours later, the hydroplanes Notre Dame and Miss Budweiser collided during the final heat, killing pilots Rex Manchester and Don Wilson. Fifty years later, the darkest day in hydroplane history is known as “Black Sunday.”

More than 600 people attended the Seattle funeral of Musson and Manchester, who were friends. They were laid to rest in identical bronze caskets.

Their deaths led to new regulations and improved safety equipment for hydroplane racing. Today’s hydroplanes top 200 mph.

Musson was posthumously inducted into the Summit County Sports Hall of Fame in 1976 and the Motorsports Hall of Fame in 1993.

“You’ve either got to be a racer or you’d better get out, because that one second that you’re sitting there thinking about making a decision, somebody’s going to go by you,” he once told a reporter.

In the sport of hydroplaning, he was unsurpassed.

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