

Boys who loved hydros' roar grow up to race own boat

By Doug Merlino

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Whenever the roar of Thunderboats would rumble through Rainier Valley, the boys would peddle down to the pits, wade out to skirt the fence and dodge security guards, and hope for a chance to meet their heroes — hydro drivers Bill Muncey, Ron Musson and Rex Manchester.

Now those same boys are pushing 50, raising families and working in jobs as varied as mechanic, preflight inspector and lawyer, but their love for hydroplanes — sleek boats that make a hellacious racket — has kept them together.

This weekend, they'll be racing their own hydro at Seafair. The 26-foot UL-40 will be among about 15 competing in the unlimited-light category, one step below the unlimited class of big-money boats such as the Miss Budweiser, which are even faster, a few feet longer and about twice as heavy as the unlimited lights.

The smaller hydros — many based in the Seattle area — will alternate heats and races with the unlimiteds as testing starts today at 9 a.m. The unlimited-light final, on Sunday at 4:20 p.m., will be televised.

For the eight old friends who own the UL-40 — and now call themselves the Thunder Valley Racing Team — racing a hydro at Seafair is about as cool as it gets. "It's all we ever wanted to do since we were kids," said co-owner Ken Eng, a former restaurateur.

"It's OK to call us hydro geeks," said fellow co-owner John O'Brien, an Issaquah lawyer.

The team takes time out from their jobs, businesses and families a few times a week to work on their hydro at co-owner Chuck Dow's Subaru repair shop in an Auburn office park.



[enlarge](#)

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Thunder Valley Racing Team is made up of men who lived in South Seattle as boys and loved hydroplanes. They are, from left, Gary Hansen, Ken Eng, John Spears, Kelly Stocklin, Jon Courtright, Chuck Dow and John O'Brien.

Hydroplane facts and figures

Definition: a low-lying boat driven by a propeller with a pontoon on either side of the hull.

First hydro race in Seattle: The 1951 Gold Cup on Lake Washington

Other U.S. cities with hydroplane traditions: San Diego; Detroit; Evansville and Madison in Indiana; and the Tri-Cities in Eastern Washington.

Other countries: New Zealand, Australia, Canada and, occasionally,

On a recent evening, the boat was propped on a trailer, and co-owner Jon Courtright, a Boeing preflight inspector, supervised as the crew went at the left pontoon with an electric saw, the whine of the power tool mixing with the sounds of the Doobie Brothers on the radio.

They are do-it-yourselfers by necessity. "We don't have much money," said co-owner Bob Bryant, an auto mechanic who runs a shop next door to Dow's. Racing hydroplanes is not a cheap hobby. The hulls of the unlimited lights run anywhere from \$40,000 to \$120,000, and the engines — of which two are needed — from \$25,000 to \$40,000,

On top of that, there's the cost of hauling the boat for races on the circuit, to places such as San Diego; Evansville, Ind.; and the Tri-Cities. The team spends about \$5,000 on a weekend of racing, assuming the boat doesn't break down.

Despite sponsorships, including one from Microsoft last year, the Thunder Valley team pays for most expenses out of pocket.

The UL-40 is powered by an engine that is basically a supercharged Chevy big-block 454, similar to one you'd find in an old muscle car or on a drag racer. It tops out at around 165 mph, compared with around 200 mph for an unlimited hydroplane.

The appeal to fans, said co-owner John Spears, proprietor of an auto-body shop in the same complex as Bryant and Dow, is basic: "It's the noise."

It was the same noise that drew the Thunder Valley members to the sport when they were kids growing up in the 1960s in Mount Baker, Rainier Beach and Beacon Hill, flocking to the pits every Seafair week.

"We just wanted to get a glimpse, to touch the boats," Eng said.

As the friends got older, they went to several different high schools — Franklin, Seattle Prep and Rainier Beach. Years passed.

Then, in 1991, Courtright wrote to O'Brien suggesting that they buy a hydro. O'Brien contacted the other guys and set up a dinner at Eng's restaurant in Lynnwood. "I think 10 people were invited that night, and eight committed to doing it." O'Brien said.

Thirteen years later, the UL-40 is the team's fourth boat, and this weekend brings its most important race of the circuit. Thunder Valley is hoping to overcome its unfortunate tradition of blown motors and other mishaps at Seafair.

A low point came last year when the hydro's rudder snapped during a race near Montreal, sending the boat out of control at 130 mph and into a concrete barrier onshore. The driver, co-owner Kelly Stocklin, a retired nuclear-reactor-repair specialist, was slightly injured.

This season, things are looking up. With veteran driver Harold Mills newly behind the wheel, Thunder Valley has finished third twice and fifth once in three races — in Quebec, on Lake Sammamish and in the Tri-Cities.

Mexico.

Unlimited class specifications:

More than 28 feet 6 inches long and weighing about 6,200 pounds. Most use military-surplus helicopter engines. Top speed, around 200 mph.

Unlimited light class

specifications: 20 to 26 feet long and weighing around 2,800 pounds. Run on modified Detroit automobile engines. Top speed, around 165 mph.

Horsepower (unlimited

hydroplane): Around 3,500 hp, more than four times that of the average NASCAR.

Average unlimited hydro crew: 6 to 10

Source: Dave Williams, Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum, Kent

With the unlimited circuit in turmoil — owners are feuding with the sport's governing body, and Budweiser has announced that it will end its sponsorship of the Miss Bud next year — the Thunder Valley team hopes the enthusiasm in the unlimited-light class will help to rejuvenate the sport.

To do that, the Thunder Valley team opens up the cockpit in the pits so that kids can get in and have their pictures taken. "You never know what will create a memory," Bryant said.

This weekend, they'll be racing against competitors with similar hydro obsessions. They include retired electrician Paul Drouillard, 57, an Auburn resident who, along with his team, just finished spending four years building a boat, the stars-and-stripes themed American Eagle.

"I wouldn't recommend that to anybody," Drouillard said.

That he will be on the water at all this weekend is because another team loaned him a spare rudder after he found out the one he had was too small

"Everybody bends over backwards to help each other," he said. "Not all sports have that kind of camaraderie."

According to Gary Hansen of the Thunder Valley team, the goodwill is easy to explain: "It's our dream realized. We're at Seafair racing a hydro."

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