

2009 ATCHAFALAYA WORLD
INBOARD POWERBOAT
CHAMPIONSHIP – OCTOBER
17TH TO 18TH, 2009



An Introduction to Hydroplane Racing



Having dropped our dog Humphrey off at Paws Inn Paradise, his Boarding Kennel and Doggy Day Care (I know, I know – his weekend accommodation cost more than our stay at the Days Inn), John and I hitched up the hydroplane to the Dodge Ram and left a cloudy St. Petersburg at about 8.30 a.m. on Friday, October 16th.

This was my first experience of John's latest racing addiction as previously, when he had been up to Ohio, I had been left at home nursing two elderly dogs. Humphrey, who will be three next month, is young and healthy enough to look after himself, so I get to travel again.

I was looking forward to the whole experience, yet felt a little apprehensive, as the sole crew member – what would that entail?

We were headed for the 2009 Atchafalaya (ah-CHA-fa-LIE-ah, a Native American word meaning long river) World Inboard Powerboat Championship, where the vintage hydros were welcomed to “show off” on the lake in between races. This is the first time this prestigious event had come to Morgan City and, I must say, they did us proud.



Apart from hitting some “business rush hour” traffic in New Orleans, we made good time and arrived at Lake Palourde, Morgan City, Louisiana at 6.30 p.m. (Central time). We eventually found our way in to registration, having gone in the wrong entrance and had to gingerly pick our way through a crowd of vacationers in their tents and RVs. We were met at the gateway by a man on a small tractor, who told us to unhitch the boat and he would park it with the other vintage racers. He said it was so muddy that the Dodge Ram would just get stuck.

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We squelched our way through and found the elevated Registration office. I went up first, while John followed 'tractor guy' to see where he went. "Wife or crew", I was asked. "Which line is the shortest?" I replied. Got my crew bracelet and joined John in the much longer driver's line.

It was getting dark and we got to the motel, dropped off our stuff and headed for Café JoJo's, Front Street, Historic Morgan City, where we had been told we could get a decent meal and hear some live Cajun music in the streets.

Saturday morning (after a Waffle House breakfast – John's favorite), we got down to the lake at about 7.45 a.m. to find that there were about nine fellow vintage hydros lined up next to us. I was introduced around and then assigned squeedgee duty, removing all the condensation from "L'eau Reves".



I was later asked by a hydro Mom what “L’eau Reves” meant and not being too sure of etiquette/senses of humor, I advised that Reves was French for Dreams and L’eau meant Water – so “Water Dreams” – she thought that was “so cute”. I decided against the translation that John and I prefer!

There was a 9 a.m. drivers briefing up in the registration building, which I tagged along to. Very similar to the motor racing drivers briefings I have attended, a lot of time spent telling entrants to “behave, otherwise you will be pulled”. We looked out across the lake and John commented on the white caps on the waves. I had been watching the flags waving in the wind and voiced the opinion that it “might be a little rough”. The vintage crowd seemed to agree, although the World Nationals entrants would obviously go out in any conditions as there were points to be won. I had learned that there were over 14 classes of powerboats competing for top honors.



We descended in search of coffee and then everyone stood around their boats generally “harrumphing” and deciding what to do (well that’s what it looked like to me – I was sitting in the warmth of the truck at this point).

At about 11 a.m. it was announced that some of the largest powerboats were going out for qualifying. At the same time, the tractors came around again and asked the vintage guys if they wanted to go out. A lot of “humming” and “hawing” and then this was it, I was on.

John quickly and confusingly (I thought) told me what would be expected of me. I think I was in shock as I watched the HUGE cranes swinging the boats out over the crowds and onto the lake. The crews were guiding the boats, turning them round to face the right direction and signalling to the crane driver when to stop/start, where to go, etc. The boats were then lowered into the lake and you had to keep them off the side of the dock, while the drivers got in and unfastened the tethers attached to the hook, ball and chain of the crane.

So John and I walked over to the lake and watched “Happy Go Lucky” the first boat out and my first ever sight of one of these amazing machines out on the water. It was incredible and my photos don’t do it justice but it is only an iPhone.



F. Pierce Williams was also there, out on the dock, doing his thing and taking some great shots of the action. He set up the camera for me to take a look through and take a shot of the boat coming in. I couldn't see a thing! Okay, actually I was so worried about what I was meant to be doing in the next few minutes that I couldn't think straight – sorry Pierce but thanks for the opportunity.





















We watched “Happy Go Lucky” come back in and once again I watched what everyone did, cringing about the fact that this was expected of me and hoping desperately that there would be someone there to help me when it was our turn. The next boat went out and then John said “come on, the tractor is ready to bring us over”. I walked back over with John, trying to look like I knew what I was doing, trying to look casual and experienced at the same time. We followed the tractor and trailer over to the lakeside and then John was up on the boat hooking the tethers up to the crane. He had handed me the boat pole and advised, “you’ll need this”.

Very, very fortunately, unbeknownst to me, on the way over Greg (my new hero) had wandered over to John to say “Hi” and ask if he needed any help. John mentioned that I was new to all this and that would be greatly appreciated, so I wandered out on to the dock with my new best friend and he talked me through what would be happening. All went well and John was off. I watched him take a couple of laps round the lake and then he started to come in again. It was a bit too rough and, as this was only a

demonstration and we had the Roar 'N Soar at Fantasy of Flight coming up at the beginning of November, he had decided not to risk any damage.



All action dockside: Greg and I waited for John to come in (a little too quickly John told me later) and I clutched my pole and kept my eyes on the boat. Greg got down and sat on the dock, using his feet to stop the boat. All looked good, then I heard “oh no” (or words to that effect) coming from Greg and he (rather gracefully I thought) slid off the dock and down into the water between dockside and boat. He came up spluttering and managed to throw his sunglasses and wallet on to the dock; down again and then up with his cell phone. We lost sight of him for a bit but he had managed to swim under the dock and over to the rocks at the lakeside so that he could climb back onto dry land. (Greg, thank you – that was a very valuable lesson and one I will try to remember!) Three more heroes sprang into action and helped me get John secured dockside (okay they did all the work, I just sort of timidly poked the boat a bit with the pole). What must I have looked like? I was still wearing my purse, all I needed was a pair of stilleto heels

and I would have looked a complete idiot! The hook was lowered and attached again and then John got out and started to walk over to Greg to make sure he was okay. I narrowly escaped a soaking as the water drained (gushed) out of the pontoons. (John later told me that in future it would be a better idea to signal to the crane operator to tip the boat slightly before raising it too high out of the water, as the weight of the water could crack the pontoons – What?! He thinks I'm going to do this again!! Only joking, I had a great time.)



The boat was lowered back onto the trailer with John directing and then we were towed back to our spot with the rest of the vintage boats. It was decided that we wouldn't be going out again that day as the wind was picking up. John and I ventured out into the public area and sampled some of the southern delights – funnel cake, etc. What a great bunch of people, very friendly and welcoming. Everyone was so excited to see the boats. The New Orleans Power Boat Association had actually collected money and gave us \$100 for entering the event – wow, you can get paid for this!



Dinner was served by the Morgan City Power Boat Association that evening at the Pit Party: Fresh fried catfish; chicken, sausage jambalaya; spicy boiled potatoes & corn; fresh hot French bread and beer – deelicious. We ate our meal talking to Bruce Broussard, MCPBA Treasurer and his wife, Ellen. Ellen had some very interesting stories about some of the storms she had lived through in the area.

We slept very well that night and the next morning I arose to discover that I had “raccoon eyes” and chapped skin – still peeling as I type this four days later. Breakfast was at the diner over the street from the motel. We spotted a group of policemen with coffee and donuts and thought that was a good sign, as they usually eat at the best places.