

OHIO RIVER, WHEELING, WV – AUGUST 29TH TO 31ST, 2008



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The last two weeks have seen my hydroplane take to the water; a momentous occasion for me as this is the first one I've ever driven, let alone owned. First impressions? Bear in mind that I only managed three laps of the course in two weekends, due to minor teething problems with the engine. Ran just fine after the Stromberg carburetors were re-jetted, then started misfiring; so far John Jenkins has found a distributor full of oil that is causing the problem. Watch this space for further developments. I hope to get out in the boat in a few weeks time, after Silverstone next week.



Having now been to two race boat weekends, one a National meeting (the Governor's Cup in Celina, Ohio) and one a Vintage meeting (Wheeling, West Virginia), I thought that you might like to hear my observations on the Vintage boat racing scene here in

America. I've put lots of photographs on the site accompanying this article so you can see the type of boat that takes part and I'll try and make some observations on them.

But first of all, let me just say that the people who take part are just like the folk who take part in Vintage/Historic car racing. They are keen, helpful and love their boats with a passion. A lot of the older people have raced boats all their life and some are still racing the boats that they drove when they were young!



The boats range from small hydroplanes of some 91 cubic inches and four cylinders to 7-liter supercharged monsters, which are truly awe inspiring. Add to them Jersey Skiffs and flat bottom boats, again with 7-liter big blocks (some developing over a thousand horsepower) and you get the picture. Years seem to run from the dawn of powered boating in the 1900s up to around the 1970s, with the classic, engine in front of the driver being favored over the later, mid-engined “cab over” designs. The old '50s/60s hydroplanes do look and sound wonderful at speed.



The Vintage meetings, I should tell you, don't have races as such yet. They operate as an "exhibition" class within the APBA sanctioning body (American Power Boat Association). This means that each class/category gets fifteen minutes each on the water, about three sessions per day, usually a two day meeting.

The atmosphere at both meetings, Wheeling in particular, is excellent; as a newcomer, I was welcomed in and everyone wants to talk about your boat, their boat and racing boats in general. The camaraderie is akin to that of Vintage car meets in, I'd say, around 1978-82. In other words, it's a small scene (about sixty boats is seen as a good entry) but growing. The boats are (compared to the cars that we know and love) ludicrously cheap and a part of me hopes that it remains that way as it's still affordable to the average Joe, although I don't see "Your average Joe" buying and operating a vintage hydroplane!



At Wheeling, there was an introductory dinner (free!) on the Friday evening followed by several speakers. Some of them were the older drivers who had driven vintage hydroplanes in their day, racing them when it was one of the most dangerous sports around. The coming of the fully enclosed “safety cell”, complete with its own oxygen supply has saved many lives since then.

So what are they like to drive? Take into consideration that I’ve only done the aforementioned three laps at Wheeling and initial impressions are these:



There's no clutch between the engine and the propshaft, so you sit at the quayside, after the crane has lifted you into the water and you've detached the slings. When the signal comes to go, you just turn the starter and the boat immediately goes. No brakes either! My Jones hydroplane has the typical Jones "wet" sponsons, so water collects in those while the boat is idle, then as you accelerate firmly away, the water pours out of the sponsons and the nose rises as she gets on the plane. The steering seems very tactile and the boat reacts instantly to every steering input; the steering itself is by cables, sort of the equivalent of rack and pinion steering in a car, so every steering input is felt immediately.

The moment you get into a left hand turn around the first buoy, the back hangs out, just like an old '50s racecar but a spot of opposite lock corrects it, keeping power on. Once back on the straight, it's foot down again. The second lap, I got passed by a couple of boats that naturally set up a rolling wake. The hydroplane started rocking but seemed quite happy to keep on planing along and, keeping a wary eye on the gauges, which looked fine, I was enjoying the whole new experience until the engine started to misfire and I made my way back to the dock, where I caused initial mayhem as, with the engine problem, I stopped in someone else's slot!



Having gathered that this was not etiquette, I wound the boat back to our slot with the starter motor and then climbed out, re-attached the slings, got off onto the dock and watched as "L'eau Reves" was craned back onto the trailer.



Ah! What I haven't told you is that I used a full face, racecar helmet and that was mistake number one. Mistake number two was borrowing the mandatory flotation jacket instead of buying my own (I'm such a cheapskate!) The flotation jacket came from my good friend Kevin Klosterman, who sold me the hydroplane in the first place and he's a tad smaller than me. End result: I felt that I was in a straitjacket. The jacket also forced my helmet up higher than it should be so, in order to read the all-important temperature and oil pressure gauges, I had to hook two fingers into the eye slot and pull the helmet down in order to see them! I do not recommend this for beginners; I borrowed an open face helmet, with a visor, for the afternoon session and life improved greatly! Next thing is I have to buy my own, less bulky flotation jacket.

So there's a quick summary of Vintage boat racing in America today. It's excellent and I highly recommend it. I don't intend to give up car racing in favor of the boats but it's a great alternative/accompaniment.























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