

Rare raceboats rev engines once more



DANBURY FAIR SPEEDWAYS
SPEEDBOAT RACES
 ON DANBURY FAIR WATERCOURSE
 THE FIRST WATER SPEEDWAY OF ITS KIND IN UNITED STATES
OPENING NIGHT SATURDAY, MAY 20, 1990
 7 - Thrill-Packed Events - 7
 • Nationally Known Pilots • Specialty Built Speedboats
 ALL SEATS
 CHILDREN (under 12) - \$2.00
 ADULTS - \$5.00
 INCLUDING YOUR CAR - FREE PARKING - FREE RACE PROGRAM

A group of New England enthusiasts have restored several rare speedboats that once raced on a flooded horse track; the speedboat races were promoted as "thrill-packed events" at the now defunct Danbury fairgrounds.

By Elizabeth Ellis
 STAFF WRITER

She's 10 feet, 6 inches with a 25-hp, 4-cylinder inboard engine and can go up to 50 mph. With no clutch, neutral or reverse, she likes the fast life — even at 61 years old.

She goes by No. 38, a Danbury Racer speedboat that is John de Sousa's pride and joy and one of only four remaining seaworthy vessels of her kind.

"This is a piece of Connecticut history that is very, very rare," says de Sousa, of East Granby, Conn., and a member of the Baystate Woodies, a New England Chapter of the Antique and Classic Boat Society. "They were built around 1949 for one purpose — to race in the Danbury Fair in Connecticut."

No. 38 got to run again with some old friends last spring. Fellow members Bo Muller, owner of Muller Boatworks of Sunapee, N.H., brought No. 24, and Robert Harrity, of New Haven, Conn., brought No. 26 to Southwick, Mass., for the Baystate Woodies' annual spring gathering on May 1.

Although No. 38 could not get running that day because of carburetor problems, Nos. 24 and 26 got to race one another on Lake Congamond.

"It's a thrill — you're so close to the water that going 35 mph feels like 60," says Harrity, who bought his in the early 1990s in Bridgeport, Conn. "The boat has a hard chine on it, so when you turn a corner it leans and slides." Harrity, 62, says that, with no neutral and no reverse,

See *Raceboats*, next page

Fire on the water

2 An afternoon cruise on the Connecticut River ended when a suspected engine forced five people, including three children, to abandon the powerboat.



Young and ambitious

4 Sea Scouts from all over the world attended a Safety At Sea Day at Coast Guard Station New London, Conn., where the young mariners practiced life-saving techniques.

An angler's secrets

6 To find the best "spots" that offer a bounty of fish turn to the pros, who spend their down time doing all the dirty work of searching them out.

Waiting for rescue

16 Five boaters floated for more than three hours, some clinging to a cooler, after their skiff capsized. Luckily, a racing sloop heading for home came across them.

DEPARTMENTS

- 8 Sailing
- 12 Book Notes
- 15 Calendar
- 16 Mishaps & Rescues

Engine trouble leads to consuming fire

A 31-foot 2006 Chaparral with twin engines went up in flames about 300 yards offshore from the Connecticut River Museum in Essex, Conn., on a weekday afternoon in late August. Quick thinking by a local marina manager helped save the five people aboard from any injuries.

Essex Island Marina picked up a distress call from the Chaparral via VHF radio at about 1:45 p.m. Aug. 26, according to office manager Cindy Schoch. The marina staff called 911 at 1:47 p.m., and the call was referred to Essex Fire Engine Co. No. 1.

"They were having engine trouble as they were coming up the river and they got into the mooring area and the engine failed," says Steven Olsen, assistant volunteer fire chief. "I'm not sure where they were coming from."

Cy Libby, marina manager for Brewer Dauntless Shipyard and Marina in Essex, says one of his dock workers pointed out the vessel, which had begun pouring out black smoke.

"I don't remember what time it was — I just jumped into our [20-foot]



An afternoon cruise on the Connecticut River ended when a suspected engine fire burned out the hull and forced five people to abandon the powerboat.

launch and got out to them," Libby says. "They were only about 500 yards out from the marina — it only took minutes to get to them."

When Libby arrived, all of the people on board were near the bow. There were two adults and three children, according to Libby. Once they were safely transferred into the

launch, Libby was able to set the Chaparral's anchor from the bow without leaving the safety of his vessel. Just as he began powering back to shore, he looked back and saw that the Chaparral had burst into flames. He dropped the people off at the dock of the marina.

Essex Fire Engine Co. No.1 launched

its fireboat, as well as two fire engines on land, and arrived at the scene shortly before 2 p.m., Olsen says. The Old Saybrook Fire Department's fireboat arrived at the same time and extinguished the fire offshore. The Deep River Volunteer Fire Department was also at the scene with a 24-foot aluminum Munson Packman Landing Craft, Olsen says.

He says Sea Tow of Old Saybrook towed the vessel to the nearby Essex Boat Works. The fire took about 20 minutes to be fully extinguished.

"We got the boat out of the water and went over it, looking for hot spots that might still exist," Olsen says. "It took us a couple of hours."

Olsen says nothing was salvaged from the vessel.

"Thankfully the boat wasn't on the docks — it could've been a whole lot worse," Olsen says. "It was smart to anchor it out there."

The cause of the boat's engine trouble is not known at this time and the boat owner declined to comment.

— Elizabeth Ellis

RACEBOATS from previous page

the boat launches forward the minute it's engaged.

"You pretty much point the boat in the direction you want to go in and go, and the engine is sitting literally between your legs," says Harrity, who keeps No. 26 at his summer home on Squam Lake, N.H.

Old race posters and race documents tell the story of 1950, when the horse track at the Danbury fairgrounds was flooded to create the Aquaway, the nation's first landlocked, oval boat racing speedway.

Harold Kohler, the fair's master carpenter, was commissioned to design and build these vessels. The exact number built is unknown because there is no official recorded history for the racers, but Baystate Woodies member Bob Comstock believes that 21 to 29 were built.

Each vessel was equipped with a tin block 44- or 48-cubic inch inboard Crosley engine that allowed the boats to reach speeds of more than 40 mph. Because of performance problems, many of the tin block engines were replaced with more durable iron block models. De Sousa says No. 38 is one of two made with a fiberglass hull — the other, he believes, was destroyed.

"There is a theory that [Kohler] probably didn't build each vessel himself, but rather had some assembly line process,"

Harrity says. "The numbers on the boats start in the teens because, in racing circles at the time, the single digits were reserved for the national champions."

The track was a quarter-mile long, 30 feet wide and 3 feet deep, according to Comstock, who lives in Madison, Conn. The boats would only race for about a year or so to make way for stock car racing, which proved to be more financially sound, according to de Sousa. The Danbury Racers were stored indoors on the fairgrounds for 30 years, where fair employees regularly oiled them and maintained their engines. On July 30, 1980, 19 of the vessels were put up for auction in Danbury, Conn., and nine were sold for \$2,500 apiece, according to de Sousa. Little seems to be known about what became of the other 10.

There was a brief reunion of five or six of the vessels in the mid-1980s on Lake George, N.Y., but this year was the first Danbury Racer reunion that the Woodies know of since that time, according to Muller.

"John was really the inspiration for this," Harrity says. "He called us, and I remember getting into my car in Connecticut, driving to New Hampshire, getting the boat and then driving to the lake. It was a great day."

De Sousa says he grew up watching and helping his father restore boats in New London, Conn.

"I was just a baby when he was building dinghies," says de Sousa, 65.

A retired electrical engineer, he began to restore a 1956 Chris-Craft 17-foot Deluxe about 15 years ago.

"It was in good shape, but it needed a lot of cosmetic-type work," de Sousa says. "I did a lot of varnishing, rechroming and reupholstering."

However, de Sousa had a passion to find something truly rare — a Danbury Racer that still could cruise on the water. About four years ago, a salesman came to his business with equipment his company needed and saw pictures of antique boats on de Sousa's wall. They started talking about them, and somehow the subject of the Danbury Racers came up.

"He said to me, 'Hey, I used to have one of those. I sold it to a friend, but now he wants to sell it. You interested?'" de Sousa says. "It was pure luck. What were the chances this salesman passing through would know of where to get one?"

De Sousa traveled up to Naples, Maine, that spring and saw that No. 38 was in great shape, with a newly rebuilt original Crosley 4-cylinder iron block engine. De Sousa also owns one of the original Crosley tin block engines.

"I really only had to replace the wooden decks with new mahogany," de Sousa says.

De Sousa says that although it occa-

sionally has carburetion problems, he has powered it up to 50 mph.

Muller, 56, says he bought No. 24 from fellow Baystate Woodies member Lee Heinzman nine years ago as a project that he and his son Joe, then 14, could restore together.

"I call them a Tonka toy boat — they are so minuscule, like driving a go-kart on the water," Muller says. "They are not a smooth, quiet ride, but they are a lot of fun."

Muller says the track the boats raced on was so narrow that the hulls really took a beating. When Muller got No. 24, he and his son did significant outer restoration and replaced the original 1946 tin block engine with a 1949 iron block engine. He still has the tin block in storage because of its value and rarity.

"The boat is my son's now," Muller says. "At 22, he's six-foot-five, so he has a little trouble getting into it, but he can still fit."

At least 11 of the boats are thought to still exist, although Muller believes there are probably more.

"I'm sure they are tucked away in someone's garage somewhere out there," Muller says. "There's one more we know that's still running out in Wisconsin. It would be fun to get all four racing on the water together someday."

For information about the Baystate Woodies, visit www.baystatewoodies.com. ■