

Monday, June 9, 1997



Maxwell Balmain/Journal

Nick Badolato steers Thunder Valley around the course on Lake Sammamish during yesterday's Tastin' 'n' Racin' festival.

Big roar at Lake Sammamish

Thousands enjoy hydros and fun at taste-race festival

By Doug Margeson
Journal Reporter

ISSAQUAH — Some 20,000 people congregated on the shores of Lake Sammamish this weekend to take in some music, eat a lot of fried food and watch a sport that, its aficionados concede, defies rational explanation.

"It's expensive, it's incredibly time-consuming and the things rarely run right. You could call it an exercise in permanent frustration," said Kelly Stocklin of Issaquah. He's part-owner and a crew member of Thunder Valley, a grand national class limited hydroplane.

So, why do otherwise normal, stable citizens like Stocklin spend a lot of their money and the majority of their spare time racing hydroplanes?

"Because, when they actually run, there is nothing prettier," Stocklin said.

Out on the water, events were proving him right. Six boats, each with an unmuffled, 500-horsepower engine came out of the south turn, hit their accelerators and roared by the starter's flag in an explosion of white foam and ear-lacerating racket — a waterborne stampede of pure power.

The sight was awesome to everyone, perhaps, except Dan De Franco, whose boat wasn't running.

"Ran fine in 12 heats and now this," he said, tinkering with a tiny screw in an incredibly complicated piece of machinery. The boat's starter blew. De Franco's son, Matthew, drove up to De Franco Machine Inc. on the Sammamish Plateau to find another one. But he hadn't returned, so Dan was trying to borrow one. None fit. So he was trying to design an adapter on the spot.

"A lot of people think we're nuts," De



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The beaches at Lake Sammamish State Park were packed for yesterday's hydro races.

Franco said. "Can't say as I blame them."

There are boat races every year on the lake, usually in October to coincide with Salmon Days. This year, organizers decided June's warm weather — along with a beer garden, kids fair, arts and crafts booths, food and plenty of blues, rock and roll and jazz — would draw more people to what they've named the "Tastin' 'n' Racin' Festival."

"It's like the Bite of Seattle with boats," said organizer John O'Brien, an otherwise sober, responsible Issaquah attorney who just happens to have a fixation for very loud, very fast boats.

Organizing the races wasn't easy. O'Brien and the other members of the race committee had to get special permits from the state Parks Department, King County, the Liquor Control Board and the American Power Boat Association.

The weekend result was more than 50 boats racing in 14 categories and, for a change, crowds that consisted of more than just the racers and their families.

"Usually, 200 is considered a good crowd, so we must be doing something right," O'Brien said.

O'Brien also is a part-owner of Thunder Valley. Eventually, it was their turn to race. The crane lifted the boats in the water, the crews waded out waist deep to hold them in place, the drivers were ready and then everybody waited.

And waited and waited. A buoy had broken loose and took a half hour to retrieve. The sky clouded over, the wind picked up and the crewmen in the water took on a bluish tinge.

Then, finally, it was time. The engines blasted to life and the boats sped off. They can't go slow. They ran a couple of laps jockeying for position as the clock ticked down. But they went too fast and had to slow down drastically to avoid jumping the gun. Then they were off — with Thunder Valley on the far outside and in the rear.

And that's where she stayed. Kelly Stocklin shrugged.

"OK, we lost," he said.

"This time."