

The Miss Bardahl Story
By Fred Farley - APBA Unlimited Historian

Unlimited hydroplane competition has seen a number of racing dynasties over the years. These include the *Slo-mo-shun* boats, the *Miss Thriftway*, the *Pay 'n Pak*, the *Atlas Van Lines*, and the *Miss Budweiser*. All of these teams defined the state of the art in Unlimited racing at one time or another. They represented Thunderboating at its best.

The same can be said of the *Miss Bardahl*, which won more races (24) in the decade of the sixties than any other team. Between 1957 and 1969, *Miss Bardahl* accounted for 27 race victories, five Gold Cups, six National Championships, and was the first to average 116 miles per hour in a heat of competition (in 1965).

The primary force behind the *Miss Bardahl's* success was Ole Bardahl, the Norwegian immigrant, who settled in Seattle, Washington's Ballard community, built a business empire, and put together one of the most competitive teams in Unlimited history.

Bardahl had achieved success in Indianapolis auto racing before joining the Thunderboat ranks. Ole saw his Unlimited hydroplane as the perfect vehicle to promote his world-famous Bardahl Additive Oil.

Musson confidently predicted that the 1962 *Miss Bardahl* would be "one hell of a boat." And he was correct. The new U-40 became the epitome of the all-conquering Jones design. The third *Miss Bardahl* would be to the sixties what *Hawaii Kai III* had been to the fifties.

The fledgling "Green Dragon" did experience some new-boatitis. She spent her first season in the shadow of *Miss Century 21*, which won five races-and 15 heats-in a row during 1962.

Miss Bardahl finished second in National Points and won the Harrah's Tahoe Trophy, which was the only race that year in which *Miss Century 21* failed to finish.

During the 1962-63 off-season, Ron Jones, who had built the 1958 *Miss Bardahl*, was called in to do some fine-tuning on the sponsions of the 1962 hull. This resulted in some additional miles per hour for the boat.

At the outset of 1963, *Miss Bardahl* shaped up as a formidable threat for national honors. Musson drove her to victory in the first race of the season at Guntersville, Alabama. The win would have been more significant if *Miss Century 21* (now renamed *Miss Thriftway* again) had been present. But the Associated Grocers team had not tested during the off-season and would not debut until the second race, which was for the Gold Cup, in Detroit.

The inevitable showdown between the defending champion Muncey and the challenger Musson was as dramatic as it was shocking. *Miss Bardahl* ruled the waves and would not be denied. Ron reeled off three first-place finishes in the preliminary heats and took a safe second to Bill Cantrell and *Gale V* in the Final.

After six years of trying, Ole Bardahl had finally won his first Gold Cup. He would win four more in the next five seasons. This was the start of the *Miss Bardahl's* glory years.

As for *Miss Thriftway*, she finished a dismal sixth in the 1963 Gold Cup. Bill Muncey drove what was arguably the sloppiest race of his career.

Bill won the first heat without too much difficulty. Then he was watered down at the start of Heat 2-A, which was won by *Miss Bardahl*. And it was all down hill for Muncey from there. *Miss Thriftway* ran fifth, fourth, and fifth and finished behind boats that she had dominated the year before. The persimmon-and-white U-60 was unrecognizable as the shining superstar that had won a record seven races in a row during 1961 and 1962.

Miss Bardahl posted the fastest heat of the day at 109.489. This compared to 105.561 for *Gale V*, 104.814 for Chuck Thompson and *Tahoe Miss*, and 102.428 for *Miss Thriftway*. After a depressingly one-sided 1962 season, competition had returned to the Unlimited Class.

The "Green Dragon" also established a Gold Cup lap record of 114.649 on the 3-mile course at Detroit. *Miss Bardahl* crew chief Leo Vanden Berg had clearly done his winter homework well, as the U-40 was now the fastest boat in the fleet.

But *Miss Thriftway* wasn't ready for the bone yard yet. She returned to her winning form at the Diamond Cup. Muncey won all three of his heats and effectively dimmed the memory of his embarrassing performance at Detroit. *Miss Bardahl* experienced mechanical difficulty and scored zero points. But for the rest of her career, the third "Green Dragon" would never again fail to complete a heat. Between Seattle of 1963 and San Diego of 1965, *Miss Bardahl* went the distance in a record 57 consecutive heats.

The 1963 Seafair Regatta represented a turning point in the rivalry between *Miss Thriftway* and *Miss Bardahl*, although the trophy was actually won by *Tahoe Miss*.

A few days prior to the race, Associated Grocers of Washington State announced that the August 11 classic on Lake Washington would be *Miss Thriftway's* last, after nine years of participation. Representative owner Willard Rhodes and driver Muncey were determined to go out a winner. And they nearly pulled it off.

In Heat 1-A, *Miss Thriftway* defeated *Miss Bardahl*, 112.500 to 110.474. Then a heavy storm system set in and threatened cancellation of the remaining heats. Had the storm front prevailed a while longer, *Miss Thriftway* would have been declared the winner on the basis of one completed heat. Unfortunately for the *Thriftway* team, the storm system passed, the sky cleared, and the race was run to its conclusion.

In Heat 2-B, the about-to-be-retired U-60 was decisively beaten by *Miss Bardahl* before going dead in the water. *Miss Thriftway* ended her brilliant career at the end of a tow rope, and the torch was passed to a new racing dynasty.

Bill Muncey's reign as the sport's most prominent driver was over, at least for the time being. Ron Musson now occupied the Unlimited throne.

Musson finished the day in a point tie with Thompson and the *Tahoe Miss*. And even though *Miss Bardahl* won the Final Heat, the victory went to Thompson on the basis of faster total elapsed time for the 45-mile race.

Miss Bardahl went on to claim the 1963 National High Point Championship over second-place *Gale V* and third-place *Tahoe Miss*. It was Ole Bardahl's first championship since 1958. Even a mid-season change of drivers did not derail the team's competitive momentum. Musson fractured some ribs in a test run at Madison, Indiana, and had to relinquish the wheel for the last three races of the season to Don Wilson, who ordinarily drove the *Miss U.S.* boats.

Wilson was especially good at communicating with the crew. Chief Vanden Berg very much appreciated the opportunity of working with Don.

But no matter who was driving her, *Miss Bardahl* kept right on winning and annexed a second straight Harrah's Tahoe Trophy on the last day of the season at Stateline, Nevada.

The 1964 campaign produced some outstanding competition for the fans. A couple of other boats were faster than *Miss Bardahl*, but the "Green Dragon" won another High Point Championship on the basis of being more consistent. Musson won four out of nine races, which included another Gold Cup at Detroit.

On two occasions—at Detroit and Seattle—during 1964, the "Gray Ghost" *Tahoe Miss* ran impressively in the preliminary heats but just plain "blew it" in the Final.

At Detroit, a mechanical problem developed just before the one-minute gun that the crew was unable to correct. At Seattle, driver Thompson unwisely charged for the lead and was watered down by *Miss Exide*, when he could have run a conservative second and won the race on points.

At both Detroit and Seattle, the beneficiary of the *Tahoe Miss* team's errors was the *Miss Bardahl*.

For 1965, Ole Bardahl ordered a radically designed cabover hull from the drawing board of Ron Jones. Ron's father Ted had retired from Unlimited racing. And the younger Jones had a concept for a forward-cockpit boat that had worked very well in the smaller classes. Ron was anxious to try the new design in the Unlimited ranks. And Bardahl was willing to give it a try.

But when the gearbox didn't arrive in time to start the 1965 season, Bardahl brought the 1962 hull back for a final curtain call.

"My tired, weary old boat," as Musson described her, didn't run at Guntersville. And she was ill-prepared for Coeur d'Alene, where the "Green Dragon" finished third behind Brow in *Miss Exide* and Manchester in *Notre Dame*.

But at Seattle, *Miss Bardahl* was her old competitive self again and won a third consecutive Gold Cup. This hadn't happened since George Reis made it three-in-a-row in 1933-34-35 with *El Lagarto*.

Between *El Lagarto* and Miss Bardahl, only *My Sin / Tempo VI* (in 1939-41-46) and *Slo-mo-shun IV* (in 1950-52-53) had three victories in the race of races.

The only boat to win more than three Gold Cups is the *Atlas Van Lines / Miller American*, which won four in a row, starting in 1984, with Chip Hanauer as driver.

Following her Gold Cup triumph, *Miss Bardahl* won three races and *Tahoe Miss* won two. Musson had apparently won at Madison but was penalized an extra lap after a disputed call.

At the final race of the year in San Diego, the *Miss Bardahl* crew pulled out all of the stops. Ron held nothing back and set long-standing world records for the 3-mile, 15-mile, and 45-mile distances with speeds of 117.130, 116.079, and 115.056 respectively on the salt waters of Mission Bay.

In the words of hydroplane historian David Greene, "It became clear that no boat in history could run at the same competitive speed as the *Miss Bardahl*. She raised the heat record almost four miles per hour faster than any other boat had ever recorded.

"In addition, the *Bardahl* ran up fourteen victories during her career, which was the top for any boat that had ever competed for the Gold Cup" up until that time.

Following the greatest race of her career, the third *Miss Bardahl* entered retirement and vanished forever from the Unlimited scene. She never ran in competition again. Although for a time, the *Bardahl* people considered the possibility of campaigning two "Green Dragons." (The new boat would be the U-40 with Musson as driver, while the 1962 hull would be the U-1 with young Billy Schumacher in the cockpit.)

But as the 1966 season neared, Leo Vanden Berg and his crew focused all of their energies on the cabover hull, while the defending National Champion remained in mothballs.

Ole Bardahl's team was one of the very first in Unlimited history to represent a corporate sponsor on a truly national scale. Miss Bardahl's tremendous popularity proved that the

public would indeed support boats that were intended more for advertising than as a rich man's hobby.

The success of *Miss Bardahl* and other commercially sponsored hydroplanes of yesteryear helped to transform Unlimited racing from an amateur endeavor to the professional status that it enjoys today.

The 1962 hull is currently in the possession of a member of the Antique and Classic Boat Society. In the not too distant future, the legendary "Green Dragon" may take to the water once again and demonstrate her classic form to a new generation of Unlimited hydroplane fans. May that day come soon!

NOTE: David Greene, the Associate Unlimited Historian, contributed to this article.

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