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Vintage hydroplanes to thunder on the Columbia

Columbia Cup promises fast, furious, competitive racing

Vintage "thunder" on the Columbia River will be back during the Lamb Weston Columbia Cup July 27-29, when the Tri-Cities Water Follies kicks off the 42nd annual unlimited hydro races and celebration at Columbia Park.

Veteran driver Dave Villwock, who was victorious in last year's race, is off to a great start in 2007 with wins in the initial two ABRA events in Evansville and Madison, Indiana.

The unlimiteds will also race in the Detroit Gold Cup before preparing for the Columbia Cup.

Fifteen of the top turbine-driven unlimiteds are slated to be in Kennewick for the Water Follies. Long-time hydroplane race fans, however, will be treated to exhibitions by four vintage hydros with shovel-nosed hulls, powered by "thundering" V-12 Rolls-Royce and Allison engines.

A replica of Bill Muncey's original 1955 Miss Thriftway will compete with the 1962 Miss Bardahl, the 1960 Miss Burien and 1975 Oh' Boy Oberto in a mock race and heat on Friday, to the delight of fans who remember the teeth-rattling sound and excitement of the piston-driven boats.

Hydroplane racing technology has progressed in 40 years from the driver's seat behind the engine to the cabover design, from shovel-nosed hulls to pickle-fork platforms, and from piston engines to the whispering whine of turbine propulsion.

Thanks to the Hydroplane Raceboat Museum and sponsor Hapo Community Credit Union, the nostalgia of bygone years of vintage unlimited racing will be alive and well again at Columbia Park.

This year's ABRA racing season had an exciting opener as three boats flipped at Evansville's "Thunder on the Ohio" - a first in racing history. Formulaboats.com I and II both flipped, as did Jean Theoret in Miss Beacon Plumbing. No one was injured and Canadian Theoret's U-37 recovered to finish second to Villwock.

At Madison the next week, debris on the Ohio River caused the cancellation of the Saturday race before Villwock in U-16 Ellstrom Elam Plus once again prevailed on Sunday over Steve David in the brand new U-6 Oh' Boy Oberto/Miss Madison. David had won three heats easily and was first across the starting line in the final heat, only to see Villwock pull out the win.

"These are the most evenly matched boats and this is the most competitive race season ever," says ABRA chairman Sam Cole. Speed and competition drive the teams to push their machines, contributing to the danger and excitement. Drivers agree they always have to fight the river conditions, wind and current to stay competitive.

Water Follies director Kathy Powell confirms Formulaboats.com teams look forward to the Tri-City race venue for the course, the access, the fan support and the weather, despite the potential for winds. After the dangerous and difficult conditions in the east, drivers look forward to our Columbia River.

With any one of the unlimited boats capable on a given day to come out victorious, this

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year's unofficial point leader drivers - Villwock U-16 3225, David U-6 2560 and Theoret U-37 2354 - appear to be favorites for the Columbia Cup. It is no surprise that all three drivers are veterans in the sport.

Other Water Follies activities include the air show over the river Saturday and Sunday, the annual Hydro Golf tournament at Canyon Lakes Thursday, and the radio-controlled 1/8-scale hydroplane racing on the Family Fishing Pond at Columbia Park Saturday.

To relieve traffic congestion at the race site, Water Follies director Powell encourages fans to use the convenient and cost-effective Ben Franklin Transit services being offered to and from the Columbia Park throughout the weekend. Call BFT customer service at 735-5100 for schedules and fares.

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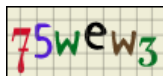
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