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Smith brothers get legendary Miss Bardahl back on water

By Katie Dorsey, Tri-City Herald

KENNEWICK -- When people stand in front of the U-40 Miss Bardahl at the Lamb Weston Columbia Cup this weekend, they are standing in front of greatness.

The green-and-yellow beauty, participating in the running exhibition sponsored by the Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum in Kent, won national titles from 1963-65 with driver Ron Musson.

After the 1965 San Diego race, Miss Bardahl entered retirement and eventually ended up on the East Coast, bouncing among several owners. The boat even endured a harsh New England winter with the deck off.

Back on the West Coast, brothers and original crew members Dixon and David Smith got a hankering to find Miss Bardahl, which eventually returned to Washington and became part of the Unlimited Hydroplane Museum and Hall of Fame. In the spring of 2000, the Smiths bought the boat from Curt Erickson, who had acquired it when the museum sold its assets.

So began the quest to restore the famed Miss Bardahl and get it running again. The hope, Dixon Smith said, was to retain 50 percent of the original boat. But by the time the five-year project was complete, the Smith brothers and a four-person crew that included Dixon's son, Ryan, had managed to salvage just 30 percent, including the inside frames and one side of the boat.

"We underestimated how much work it would be," said Dixon Smith, an Issaquah resident who initially worked on the boat during summer breaks from the University of Washington, where he studied math and physics.

"It took a lot more time than we thought, but we knew how the boat worked and its history, and we knew why it was the way it was."

Miss Bardahl's motor was worthless, he said, but with some work, the restoration crew was able to install the same kind of motor -- a Rolls-Royce Merlin, a World War II fighter engine.

"The last time the parts were manufactured was 1945," Dixon Smith said.

After returning to working order, Miss Bardahl was part of a six-month exhibit at the Museum of Flight. Now, Dixon Smith drives it in vintage heats much like the ones in the Tri-Cities, giving fans a taste of the hydroplanes of yore.

Though going 150-160 mph is well within Miss Bardahl's capabilities, Smith, a 67-year-old retired United Airlines pilot, says he doesn't push his luck on the water.

"The boat is capable of running faster, but I'm not."

If seeing the revamped Miss Bardahl in person is not enough, hydroplane fans can visit www.missbardahl.com to read about and view pictures of the restoration process.

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