



LET'S REVIVE A NORTHWEST CLASSIC

What defines a city's culture, that amalgamation of everything that makes it unique?

It is the people, first, but it is also the buildings, the neighborhoods, the food, the music, the streets, the festivals, and yes, the sports.

Even Nick Licata now admits that an event that brings people from all social, geographic, and economic corners of Seattle together in person and via broadcast 82 nights a year does indeed carry cultural significance.

The pilfering of the Sonics by Clay Bennett and the Okie Gang That Couldn't Email Straight has been an agonizing two-year slow death process. The minute Howard Schultz decided to sell the team to Bennett's group was the day (for those using common sense as the coin of the realm) that the Sonics' condition was diagnosed as "terminal". All the rest has been nothing more than waiting for the phone call.

Sadly, there's another part of the Seattle sports cultural scene that is, if not dying, suffering from a lack of vision and creativity that has muted fan interest. What if this event (which predates the

Sonics by nearly two decades) could be revived? Not with a fancy new arena or tax dollars or proposition vote, but with a little effort from the people who run the sport?

We're talking hydros. Thunderboats on Lake Washington. A tradition that dates back to 1950 when the city was trying to figure out how to celebrate its centennial. Through the '50s, '60s, and '70s, hydro race weekend was the high point on the Seattle sports calendar.

"They were the only game in town," remembers International Motor Sports Hall of Famer Chip Hanauer, who won 61 races in a career that began in 1976. "The personalities were the Holmgrens, the Ichiros, the Hasselbecks. In 1976 Jim Zorn was still just a new guy. The hydro guys had been around forever."

Drivers were such a big deal that Seattle held a "Chip Hanauer Day" in 1982 when he won the Gold Cup for the first time.

So what happened? Twenty-six years ago the city held a day to honor a guy who'd won a race in Detroit, yet today 95 percent of Seattle sports fans couldn't tell you who won the 2007 Gold Cup (Auburn's own Dave Villwock).

Part of it is simple timing. The thun-

derboats thrived before the NBA, the NFL, and MLB came to town. As the Sonics, M's, and Hawks arrived and grew, the hydros slowly moved from a place of prominence in the region's sports psyche to one of nostalgia or even quaintness.

The sport has done itself few favors. Whether due to lack of money or creativity, there's little to no interest generated by the APBA, the governing body of hydroplane racing.

Concerned with the hydros' dwindling popularity in Seattle, Hanauer suggested to Seafair organizers last year that they hold a fan fest similar to the ones held by most other sports.

"I was the only driver there," Hanauer remembers before laughing. "How can I be the biggest personality in the sport when I haven't driven for 10 years? When I drove I worked my ass off to make myself totally available. We do a fan fest and none of today's guys can be bothered to show up. They're all 'too busy.'"

Seattle organizers haven't done enough to keep the event vibrant, either. There's still enough interest in hydroplane racing on Lake Washington that KIRO-TV

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originates the longest local broadcast in America each year to cover the entire seven-hour event. So why can't an effort be made to pump a little enthusiasm back into the race itself? At least make an attempt to reach out and give the fans a reason to want to either connect or reconnect with this fun day.

"We've gotten out of showbiz," laments legendary Seattle broadcaster Pat O'Day, who had as much to do as anyone with the success of the sport in Seattle. "We need to take a page out of NASCAR's book. We need to take *several* pages out of NASCAR's book."

O'Day thinks Seafair should inaugurate a Saturday race to complement the Sunday race, similar to NASCAR's Saturday race that precedes the main show on Sunday.

"Stage a special race on Saturday where the top boats don't compete. Give the other boats a chance to win something. You could call it the 'Seattle Cup'. There's a chance for lesser-known drivers to shine. Start the fastest boats on the outside so there's actual racing and have the winner get an automatic qualifying slot into Sunday's Seafair finale."

O'Day also likes the idea of getting the boats and drivers back in the Torchlight parade.

"We had generators to floodlight them

and they looked spectacular," O'Day remembers of the day when the boats were part of the parade. "The crowd would go wild."

A few years ago someone came up with the idea of moving the parade to the week before the race. Hello? Treat the boats and drivers as an afterthought—"we can just have the parade without them"—and fans will do the same.

The boats and drivers are where this festival originally started. Holding a parade without them is the kind of shabby treatment that's led to people not caring about the race.

O'Day also thinks a better effort should be made to explain to the fans who do come out for the race just what in the hell is going on out on the water.

"Build a sound barge in the middle of the lake. Get an entire concert system on the barge with a sound that just booms across the lake and unifies the crowd along the shore. Everyone would always know exactly what's going on."

O'Day also thinks the Seattle race has been moved too far out into the lake. The course was moved for safety reasons years ago but he says "an overabundance of caution" was used and believes the course could be moved closer to the fans without compromising safety. "They've done it in Detroit and Tri-Cities," he points out.

Hanauer agrees with O'Day that a

showbiz element is missing. He thinks Seafair should build a more prominent podium for the winner's ceremony. Both men say an effort should be made to procure a superstar voice to sing the National Anthem on Sunday.

As long as we're talking sound systems and showbiz, here's another thought: Why not stage a concert with a major national act Sunday afternoon in Genesee Park? It's no secret that there's lots of down time during the afternoon. Why not fill some of it with a rocking band? Get the right act and you'd bring new fans out to the lake who just might find the boat races fun. Again, straight from the NASCAR book on how to stage a race.

Hanauer and O'Day share a love for the sport and frustration with what they see as a lack of creative thinking that could bring in new fans. The funny thing is, nothing proposed by either guy is costly. Which is another thing that makes boat racing unique.

"It's kind of funny," says Hanauer. "As bad as the hydros are and with all the problems they have had, they're still here. No one has given the hydros credit for not asking for money. There's been no demand for a new stadium. There's no tax money going into an effort to support the hydros."

For that fact alone you should consider purchasing a ticket and taking in the races this year. **SNW**