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Don Aronow, and the brand he created, is still recognized the world over - 20 years after his death. (Pictured here in the late 70's in front of the Cigarette building on NE 188th on Thunder Row)



HISTORIC OFFSHORE RACING

HISTORIC PHOTOS COURTESY HORBA ARCHIVES

offshore legends



"I enjoyed a unique relationship with Don Aronow because I wasn't an employee or a customer; we were simply friends"

--Charlie McCarthy

Don Aronow

STORY BY CHARLIE MCCARTHY

On the occasion of Don's 80th Birthday, and the release of a new movie about his life, I wanted to share some of my personal memories of a man who is one of the true legends of offshore racing. Don was the Founder of Formula, Donzi, Magnum and Cigarette Racing - while at the same time winning countless offshore racing awards. Even though his life was cut short in 1987 when he was tragically gunned down on Thunder Row, the birthplace of performance boating, his legacy lives on today.

My friend, Don Aronow.

"Cigarette" is named after a rum runner boat which operated illegally around New Jersey and Brooklyn during the Prohibition - Legend has it that it was un-catchable...

With his classic good looks, Don was even tested for the role of Tarzan.



To find out more about the Historic Offshore Race Boat Association visit www.historicraceboats.com



This shot was taken in 1969 during the Bahamas 500 which Don won. The boat in this photo is a 32 foot Cary. In typical Don style, he had to build the boat under Cary's name in order to get around his non-compete clause with one of his previous companies...

Don has the trim tabs up for calm water, but he's always ready to take any advantage he can...

Don Aronow

Don Aronow: My Friend

FIRST MEETING | I fell in love for the first time in my life during my freshman year at Saint Leo University, just north of Tampa, Florida. But this relationship was no ordinary one — the object of my passion was offshore powerboat racing.

My roommate at Saint Leo's, who came from a family of boat racers out of Chicago, introduced me to this great sport, and I was invited to join the pit crew of Mike Gordon. Mike raced an 18-foot Rayson Craft endurance boat, with a big, 427 Ford engine. As pit crew members our job was mainly to be gofers. We'd go for food, we'd go for beer, and we'd go for parts, whatever was needed. We were only too eager to be part of the excitement and pageantry surrounding the race scene.

Personally, I was blown away. I'd never seen anything quite like it: the glamour, the money, the boats, and the women. I was hooked for life.

Mike took his racing very seriously and eventually stepped up from his endurance SK-type hull to a brand-new, 27-foot deep vee from a new company in Miami called Formula. Mike bought his new boat just in time to race it in the upcoming Miami-to-Key West contest.

When we arrived at the race site, Mike was still working on the boat, but he took time off to show it to us. This gave him the opportunity to rave about this new boat company

that was building the greatest boats in the world. He was obviously very impressed with his new purchase, and talked about it to anyone who would listen.

Mike had taken delivery of the boat just a few days previously, and only got to run it for a few minutes before leaving for the race. He was already making changes to the boat and needed some parts from Formula. So my roommate and I went for some parts at Formula on the other side of town.

We arrived at 188th Street in North Miami around noon on a Friday afternoon. There were just two buildings on the street — a cement factory on the left and a small, lonely two-story building on the right, with a canal behind it and cement trucks parked out front. There wasn't a boat in sight, and the rest of the peninsula of land they called 188th Street was still undeveloped. From Mike's description, I expected to see a lot more than this. As we approached, we spotted two boats behind the building and a small sign on the door that said Formula Powerboats.

No one answered our knock, so we opened the door, and the pungent odor of fiberglass resin hit us in the face like a brick wall. I'd never smelled anything so toxic before. Inside the Formula building, we found a few

offshore legends

more boats at various stages of construction, and a few workers building a hull.

Eventually, a tall, friendly man, who struck me as being somewhat shy, approached us. That was my first impression of Don Aronow. I had no clue who this man was or who he would become, and neither did he.

Don told us Mike had called and the parts would be ready in a few minutes. He told us to look around while we waited, so we poked into everything like little kids in a candy store. He had a sweet little stern drive boat with a 289 almost completed and a twin inboard 27 footer that was still under construction. There was also a 23-foot boat with the name "The Cigarette" on the stern (pg 54). None of us realized that day what we were witnessing or what the future would hold for this fledgling company.

When the parts were ready, we loaded them into the car. Then, before we left, I turned and asked this fellow, Don Aronow, if he was going to race in the upcoming event. He pointed to the 23 footer that looked almost complete — the one with "The Cigarette" on the stern — and said, "Yes, that's my boat." I laughed and told him he should stay home and save his money because my roomie and I were on the crew of Mike's new boat and we were going to win. Everyone else would have to settle for second place or worse. Don just laughed and said, "You have the right attitude kid, tell Mike good luck."

DON'S 'FORMULA' | Because of fate, timing, and good fortune, I not only met Don many times over the years but we became good friends, both on and off the racecourse. He wasn't a legend when I first met him; at that time he was just some guy who was a very competitive racer trying to learn how to build race boats. Don was not an introvert, but he had a quiet confidence. He didn't need to be the center of attention. In fact, when he met someone for the first time he always seemed shy and withdrawn (this didn't always apply when he met a woman). Don knew that once someone got to know him they would quickly realize he was worth knowing. As for the women, let's just say he met a few of them too.

My weekend visits to race sites continued on and off over the following years as I watched Don sell Formula and start up Donzi in the same building. He then sold Donzi and moved right next door, after which he built a new building and started Magnum Marine. Don liked to say he had a formula he followed. Build a good race boat with a new design; race the boat, and win with it; then develop

the production line off the race boat. When sales pick up, sell the company, move on, and do it again. Brilliant!

Don knew everyone in Miami and had the ability to tap into their various talents to get the very best and then bring them all together to create a new and amazing boat. He could see that his team, his "Formula," would produce designs and records that would stand for a long time.

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the movie

Thunder Man

(the Don Aronow Story)

Produced by
Max Alvarez
Donald K Ranvaud
Silvio Sardi

MAX
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ONDAMAX!
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SILVIO SARDI
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Thunder Man The Don Aronow Story
A new movie about Don's life, narrated by Andy Garcia, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in France this May. For more information, visit www.donaronowfilm.com (Ondamax Films, 90 mins)



The Original Restored Formula 233 Cigarette

This is the actual boat run in the 1963 Miami Key West race. It has been completely restored by HORBA member Bob Denisco.

In the early years, before he became known as “The Legend,” Don was very much involved with the day-to-day running of the business. He had a restless spirit that always forced him to seek a better way of doing things. Proven methods meant nothing to Don; he knew he could do it better if he made it himself.

As an example, in 1966 Hugh Doyle commissioned Jim Wynne and Walt Walters to design a new offshore racer. The result was Ghost Rider, a 28-foot deep vee, with twin engines on V drives, and a single rudder. The engines were turbocharged and could give the boat a top speed in the mid to high 80-mph range for short bursts. The strategy was to get out front, then back off to race in the 60-mph range, while holding the lead. The cold molded plywood boat was made in England by Souter. Ghost Rider was undefeated in 1966, winning every race it entered in the US, the Bahamas, and Europe. Jim Wynne was the driver and became the 1966 World Champion.

Don’s response to this the following year was a 27-foot, fiberglass race boat that was barely more than a simple hull and deck. He built two versions of this boat, one powered by a single stern-drive engine; the other by three outboard engines. No turbocharging or exotic cold molding for Don. The straight-forward, no-nonsense, 24-degree deep vee hull with reliable powerplants gave him the World Championship in 1967.

WORK HARD, PLAY HARD | Don loved having fun. He always had a big smile on his face and a great sense of humor. He loved to play jokes on people and never seemed to mind when they returned the favor. Don loved winning races more than anything; that’s what he was all

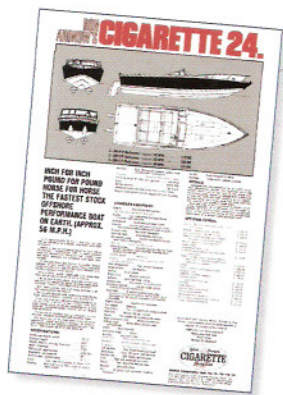
about — winning. After winning a race, Don would become the life of the party.

I recall one particular night in Key West after Don had just won a race. We were having a poolside party, and Don wanted to start some trouble. He grabbed a young waiter, stuffed a fifty dollar bill in his hand, and told the boy to accidentally/on purpose push one of his best customers into the pool. A little later, the kid came back to Don and tried to get out of the deal. He was afraid he’d get in trouble with his boss, so Don pushed him and the customer into the pool. By the end of the night, everyone had gone into the pool.

Don was very involved with his workers, and in return, they were very loyal to him. One time he found out a worker had been a fisherman back in Cuba and was working as many hours as possible at Formula to save enough money to buy a fishing boat. Upon hearing this, Don gave him the money to buy the boat.

Another time, in the early 70s, when the fuel crisis had long lines at gas pumps, boat sales came to a screeching halt. Don gathered the workers and said, “No one gets laid off; just keep making boats and put them in the yard. No overtime, but no layoffs either. People will start buying them again when the gas flows.”

BANANA BOATS | I enjoyed a unique relationship with Don Aronow because I wasn’t an employee or a customer; we were simply friends. When I first met Don, I couldn’t afford one of his boats; I could barely afford to feed myself. I often told him that someday I would come back and buy a race boat. Don just laughed and shook his head.



offshore legends

When the day finally came when I felt my business holdings gave me enough spare change to go racing, I went to see my old friend Don with the intention of buying a 35 Cigarette race boat. But that's not the way it turned out.

Don was always a hell of a salesman, and he was about to do a number on me. He said, "No, I won't sell you a boat." He then laughed and said, "But what I will do is put you into the boating business." Now it was my turn to say no. I knew I couldn't afford to buy one of his boat companies, and I knew nothing about building boats, much less race boats. In fact, I wasn't even sure I could afford to go racing.

Don said, "I will sell you some of the extra molds from Cigarette and you can start a company and then write off all your racing expenses as research and development costs."

And so, with Don's help and molds, **the Banana Boat Company** was born. I was then instructed to go home, back to Rhode Island, and hire some workers, then bring them back to Florida where they would be trained alongside the workers at Cigarette.

Don advised me to start with the 24-foot boat, make the first one, and then bring it back to Florida where he would have his guys rig it for me. Over time, that little

24' Banana Boat became a real popular model along the Northeast coastline. Don even had Stan Irwin build special engines for me. Don helped me with everything, from deciding the name of the company, to designing the advertising.

The natural color for a banana boat would have been yellow, but Don advised me to make my race boat black and use white lettering for the name on the side. He

After one very badly damaged Ferrari, Don was rethinking his win-at-all-costs strategy.

explained that, first of all, the boat would look longer in black, and when the time came to cover a race, the press would always print the sharpest photo. In those days, press photographs were always black and white, and the photos that stood out the best were selected for print. (Just a couple of months ago, I was at Michael Aronow's house; he is on our board at HORBA. We were going through some of Don's personal files and he pulled out a note I had sent

CONTINUED ON PAGE 60 ▼



Charlie McCarthy founder of the Banana Boat Company (under the guidance and help of Don Aronow), he's a longtime boater/racer and Managing Director of HORBA.



Don Aronow winning the 1965 Miami Nassau race in a 28 foot Donzi



Don in his office at Cigarette with his next project in hand... Unlimited hydroplane racing

Don after my first race, with a copy of the press clipping. I couldn't believe that Don had kept my note of thanks to him. I was overwhelmed when I saw it in that box. I had won that race and he was right, the only photo of a boat used with the story, was the one of my black boat with the white lettering TOP BANANA on the side.)

WIN, OR DIE TRYING | When Don and I would talk, we often spoke about becoming the Open Class World Champion. Nothing else mattered. Win, break, or die trying. If you didn't have that attitude, you had no business being on the racecourse. This was a man's sport, where only the strong survived.

Don told me I had everything it took to win a World Championship, except time. He explained that after a certain point, money is the same with everyone, but the ones who could afford to devote an unlimited amount of time to the sport were those who would go on to become

world champions. He told me I had the skill, but since it was more important for me to pay attention to the trucking business, I should view racing only as a hobby. Then he told me why he was trying to dissuade me from even trying. He said he was putting his new customers in boats with pros on the throttles. He said these boats and throttllemen would be set up so even a monkey could drive the boat to a World Championship.

In June 1979, after five long offshore battles, I was tied with **Betty Cook** for the National Championship (so much for a man's sport). Just three days before the next race, truckers went on strike across the country. Being in the trucking business, this was not a time for me to go play. Don called me on the phone and told me not to even think about it. "Do not go to that race. Stay home and take care of the business," he said. It killed me, but I stayed home and Betty went on to win the World Championship that year, something I felt she deserved anyway.

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Charlie McCarthy with his 38 foot "Top Banana" winning the Newport Beach, California race.

Don was a very gracious person in many ways, but when it came to competition, he HAD to win. Competing against Don was often an ugly thing. He was so competitive about everything. He and Mark Donohue used to race home on Biscayne Boulevard to Don's house, going over the traffic islands and down the sidewalks. Don even competed with garbage trucks.

One particular night, Don was leaving the horse track long after it had closed, and the place was completely deserted. The parking lot was huge and flat. It was designed in a T-formation, with one main intersection. Don was driving his newly restored Ferrari Daytona and decided he wanted to beat the only other vehicle for miles around, a garbage truck headed for that same piece of road. You know the result — Don never backed down; neither did the garbage truck driver. One very badly damaged Ferrari later, and Don was rethinking his win-at-all-costs strategy.

On another occasion, after a wonderful waterfront meal and some drinks, Don challenged Billy Martin to see who could get back to the shop first. Billy jumped into his car and began screeching tires as he worked his way out of the parking lot. Don watched him go, then simply jumped into

his car and went right through the shrubs and out onto the road right in front of Billy and took off. Don won.

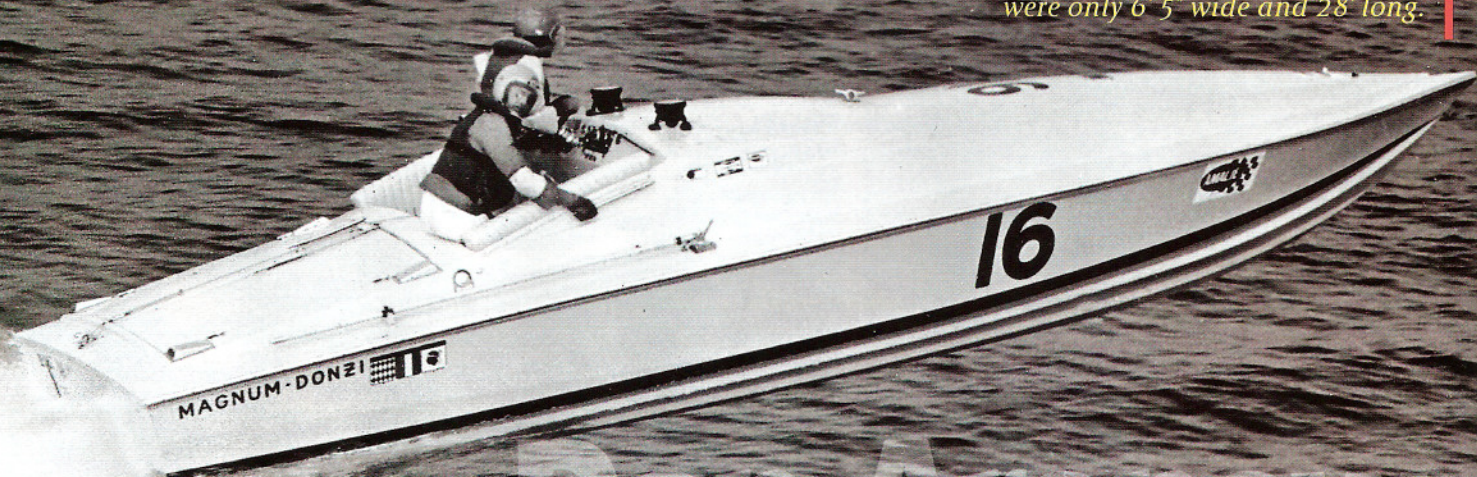
Don was a smart business man, and jumped at any opportunity. He helped me with some investments by including me in deals in which he and his friends were involved. Every year in January, a group of us would buy positions on Bell Jet Ranger helicopters. In my case, I would order two new helicopters and give the salesman a deposit.

Delivery time was running about a year at that time. In July of every year, like clockwork, Bell would announce that there would be a price increase of about \$40,000. As the delivery date of our new helicopters got closer, we would begin to get calls from buyers who wanted a new chopper but didn't want to wait. They were often willing to pay the new price for our delivery date and chopper, and we pocketed the spread. I sold my last two to Wayne Newton and a big divorce lawyer from Palm Beach.

Back in those days, the offshore racers had a much closer relationship with the top auto racers of the day. Mark Donahue and Don were very close. Roger Penske and Mark were just developing the Camaro-based IROC series, and Mark built one of those cars for Don to play with on the street. Don loved that car so much he used it as his daily

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circa 1966 - Don Aronow in one of his "Banana Boats." These boats were only 6' 5" wide and 28' long.



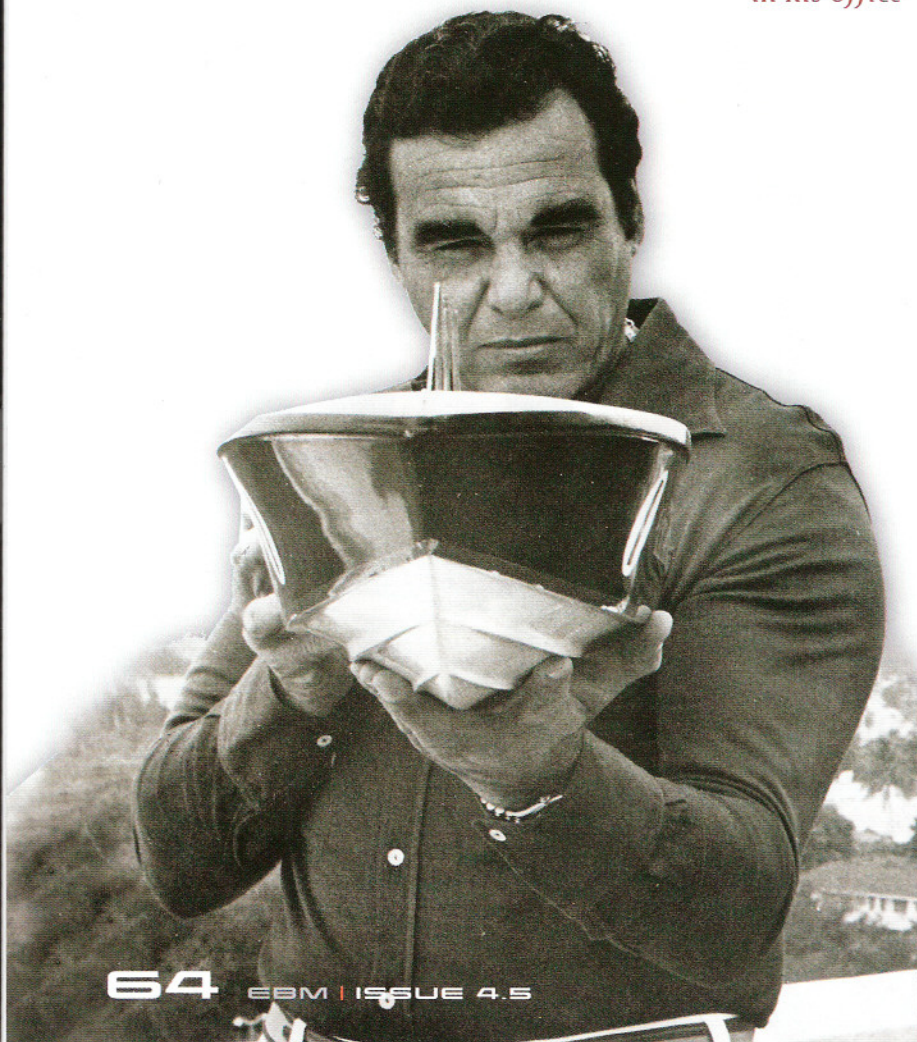
DON ARONOW

Don Aronow

driver for many years. Don wanted his friends to have them too. I had one just like Don's in silver, and Dr. Bob Magoon had one in red with a turbocharger. We even talked about running the Cannonball race with these cars.

"THE SHOP" | In the early years of the Formula and Donzi era, weekends were often spent back at "The Shop," as he would call it, with his kids in tow. He would tinker and doodle new design ideas while the kids ran around and climbed in and out of the boats. One such outing turned into a research and development session. Don had a new Donzi 16 footer, all lettered up with DONZI splashed across the sides. At the time, his idea of marketing consisted of

Don with the model of the Cigarette he kept in his office



racing up and down the Inter-coastal, jumping the wakes of the big cruisers. He thought people would see the DONZI name and be impressed with the little boat's ability to jump like that and just keep going.

He was having a great time, but his son, Michael, as the passenger that weekend, was sliding all over the boat. Don looked over and asked if he was having a good time. Michael said... "No, not really, I'm getting beat up back here." Don told Michael to take the wheel and give it a go, which Michael did. Now it was Don's turn to try and hold on to the smooth fiberglass. Within a very short time, Don said the test session was over and it was time to go back in. The next day, the Donzi workers were told to install the famous horseshoe-shape grab rail around the cockpit. No more sliding around for Don or his customers.

MY MENTOR | Don had as many facets as a diamond. If he liked you, he would give you the shirt off his back (usually silk or linen). But if he didn't like you, there was no way you could get on his good side. His business associates called him ruthless, and he was. If he knew someone had lots of money, he would work them hard to get the very best deal for himself. On the flip side, if he knew you didn't have money, he would be very generous with his time and advice and whatever else he could do to help.

If he liked you, he would give you the shirt off his back, but if he didn't, there was no way you could get on his good side...

Without Don's help I would never have accomplished my dream of racing in the open ocean. His advice on racing was always on the money, and during races he would often fly over me in his helicopter just to wave his fist out the window and encourage me to keep going.

Whenever I raced in the Bahamas, he always made sure I had Willie Meyers as my navigator, a man who knew those waters better than anyone. One year, I won the Key West race in my little 24-foot Banana Boat in the Modified Class, beating 28- and 30-foot boats on a very rough day. When the trophies were handed out at the awards banquet, Don got Bill Wishnick and some of the old guys to stand up and give

CONTINUED ON PAGE 66 ▾

1968 - "Maltese Magnum"
Don running a production
style Magnum



Don Aronow

Don in his later years. He leaves behind a legacy, and accomplished just about everything he had set out to do.

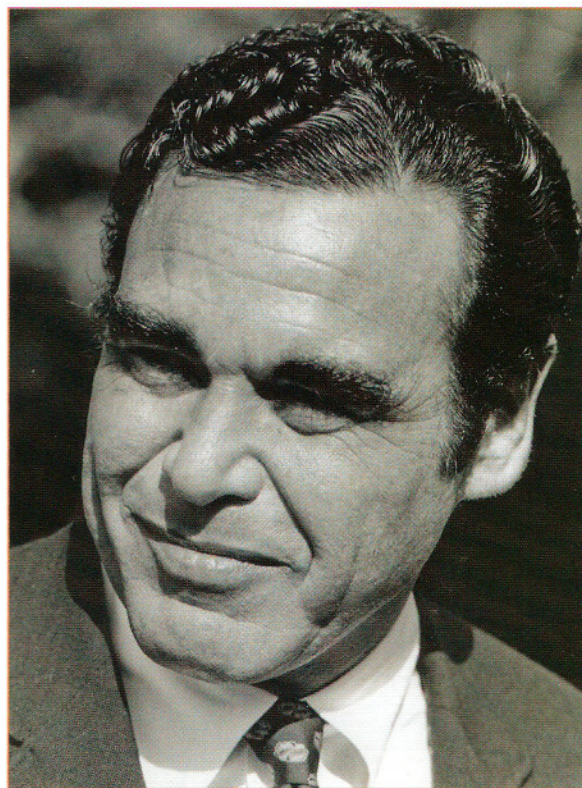
me a big ovation. I felt like I was a world champion that night, standing in front of those guys with a trophy in my hands.

I learned a lot from that man over the years; he was my friend, mentor, and idol. There was one piece of advice he gave to me that probably won me more than a few races, and I'll share it with you. He said that no matter how rough it was, there would always be flat spots in between the big waves. That would be the time everyone else relaxed to catch their breath. He said that's when you have to push and prepare yourself for the big wave. Trim up and take advantage of the flat spots but watch out for the big wave that's waiting for you, and get ready to take off. By that time, you'll be further along than the competition. If you look at the famous photo of Don in the Cigarette, you can see his tabs are up; he was trimmed up and running fast in the flat stuff when he found that first big wave.

That's the way Don lived — trimmed up and running flat out, never knowing when a big wave would slow him down. He's been gone for 20 years now, but I can still hear his laugh; it was the laugh of a man who lived life to the fullest and enjoyed every moment. It was the laugh of a man who knew something the rest of us didn't. It was the laugh of a man who had no true peer. Don was in a class of his own. As the undisputed King of Offshore Powerboat Racing and Father of the sport, he will always be remembered as a fearless competitor and an icon worthy of praise.

I'd like to wish my old friend a Happy Birthday. Don would have been 80 years old on March 1, 2007.

May he rest in peace. •



To find out more about the
Historic Offshore Race Boat Association
visit www.historicraceboats.com