

L.I. Speedboat Race May Be Key to Title

By JOANNE A. FISHMAN

Charlie McCarthy's boat is black with a white deck, white bottom and yellow bootstripe. It's a rugged 38-foot machine capable of roaring across the ocean at speeds approaching 90 miles an hour.

"All my friends that see the boat are excited; it's a big macho thing," says the 34-year-old driver from Warwick, R.I., who burst on the offshore-racing circuit this spring. "This boat really goes and its got engines that make nearby concrete vibrate."

"But it's hard," he adds, "to come home after a race and say you were beaten by a woman."

Charlie McCarthy's idol has been Don Aronow, the resilient but now-retired world champion driver, designer and builder. After planning his entry into offshore competition for 15 years, McCarthy now finds himself sharing the lead in the national standings with Betty Cook, the defending United States champion.

A victory for either racer in Saturday's 179.9-mile Guy Lombardo-Halter Classic could prove pivotal, putting the winner well ahead in the quest for the national title. The race begins at 10 A.M. in the Atlantic Ocean off Jones Inlet on Long Island.

McCarthy's fascination with offshore racing dates back to 1964 when he spotted a story in a boating magazine that started out, he recalls, "millionaire sportsman Don Aronow drove his Donzi to victory in the Miami-Nassau race."

A college student at the time, McCarthy decided that was the life for him. "I knew it would take money and I'd have to get on my horse," he says.

He did. Today he is the president of a group of transportation companies that controls 300 trucks. He has a new offshore boat designed by Jean Claude Simon and named Top Banana, and he has formed the Banana Boat Company, which turns out a couple of custom boats a month.

Believer in Fiberglass

While most of the deep-V hulls on the circuit contain Kevlar, McCarthy's boat is made entirely of fiberglass because he believed the original Kevlar boats were too light. Top Banana is powered by twin 495-horsepower Mer-Cruiser engines. They are the only ones in offshore competition that use carburetors because McCarthy contends fuel injection is not dependable.

Top Banana's shape also differs from the traditional hull. The bow is narrow, without much flair, causing the boat to cut through the waves rather than leap over them. It's also somewhat flatter than the conventional deep-V hull.

The catamaran hull is the newest development in offshore racing, but McCarthy is not sold on it. "The whole idea behind offshore competition is that it contributes to the final development of the recreational boat, but I have mixed feelings about the safety of the catamarans," he says.

"In a deep-V hull, the weight is in the rear and after the boat jumps out of the water, the propellers are the first part of the boat back in," he explains. "I think a catamaran might flip over

backwards with the wind pushing the bow back and the engines swinging underneath like a pendulum. The smaller tunnel boats, which are similar in design, are having this problem."

While offshore competition is new to McCarthy, racing is not. When he was 11 years old, he started racing Rhode Island Quahog skiffs at night to elude the game wardens. "We'd dig up quahogs on the seed beds that were the size of little necks because you could get more money for them," he recalls, "but when you heard the motors coming, it was time to leave."

McCarthy, who holds a black belt in karate, is a resourceful competitor, too. He and Paul Lesniewski, the crew chief, go through a checklist three times before each race. And after each race the drives and engines are rebuilt.

McCarthy says all the years of planning and dreaming were worth it.

"It's magical out there when you think that something that big and powerful with all that noise is going so fast. Then you come off the top of a wave and cut back the engines and it's quiet. The boat flies for three or four seconds and all you hear is the wind rushing by the side of your helmet. That's when it's all worth it."

Fifty boats in the open and performance classes are expected to compete in the second running of the Guy Lombardo event.

The open-class boats will run a 179.9-mile course and the smaller performance classes will follow a 103.3-mile course. Both open and performance boats will start and finish off Jones Inlet and run along shore from East Rockaway Inlet to Fire Island Inlet. The open boats also have a leg offshore to Ambrose Tower.

The best place to view the race from shore is by the tower at Jones Beach State Park, where the boats will pass a quarter-mile offshore. An area west of Jones Inlet will be marked off for spectator boats.



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