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At one point the race left her breathless, but Betty Cook, ex-world and current national champion, blew them all away in the Bacardi by JULIA LAMB

The classic offshore powerboat racer is rich and restless. When big houses and big cars pale, the racer peels off some \$80,000 for an exotic race boat, adds \$250,000 or so to campaign it for a season and joins the eight-race circuit. Winners are awarded elaborate trophies of crystal and silver and modest purses of about \$12,000, barely enough money to keep them in spark plugs. But the circuit takes them to all the nifty places. Last week's event, the fifth annual Bacardi Trophy Race, offered a 198-mile trip across the sea from Miami to Bimini and back.

Seventeen of the big boats boiled out into the Atlantic last Saturday before a crowd of some 5,000 spectators lining Government Cut. The six finishers had to slash their way back and forth across the Gulf Stream in five-foot seas, searching out eight small checkpoints and dodging countless pleasure craft along the way. And each racer discovered, as the rich and restless almost always do, that it takes more than money to make a winner.

Consider Rocky Aoki, the well-known restaurateur who spends enormous sums to ensure that he is well known. By his own reckoning, Aoki spent about \$500,000 last year on racing. Poor Rocky—if that's the right word to describe him—started all eight races on the 1978 circuit and failed to finish a single one. But when the 1979 season opened March 17 with the Bushmills Grand Prix off Newport Beach, Calif., Aoki showed up with a new 38-foot tunnel-hull boat. He took up where he had left off, his *Benihana* blowing a water pump 10 minutes into the race. He said he hoped to do better in the Bacardi, the second event of the season. But even if he did badly, Aoki pointed out, he could always console himself with thoughts of his proposed \$93 million hotel-casino complex in Atlantic City, or the restaurant he will open in Moscow for the 1980 Olympics, or the powerboat speed records he hopes to establish between Japan and China. He may only be 5' 3", but Rocky Aoki thinks big.

Charlie McCarthy of Warwick, R.I. arrived in Miami with a better record. McCarthy had not only finished the Bushmills GP, but he also won it. It was the first open-class race he had ever entered. Because it was the first race of the season, he thus became the points leader for the U.S. offshore title.

McCarthy got his start in powerboats 23 years ago, when he was 11. He and his friends would clamp outboards on small skiffs, then meander along the Rhode Island shore, looking for good spots to dig for quahogs. Several times, usually at night, the young clammers would come upon seedbeds, quahog nurseries for succulent, if illegal, small clams. "Mother would stand on the shore and blink a flashlight when the game warden approached," McCarthy says. The night diggers would then rev up and outrace the law.

McCarthy now owns 300 trucks, a boat building business and a hot new offshore design he calls a Banana Boat. *Banana?* "It's just the opposite of what you think of as a racer," he says. "I sort of picture a banana boat moving slowly up from South America with everybody aboard asleep—including the guy at the wheel."

McCarthy likes to do things differently. Though the majority of competitive offshore boats are now built of duPont's strong, light—and expensive—Kevlar, *Top Banana*, the 38-footer he is campaigning this season, is constructed of old-fashioned fiber glass. Further, the two 600-hp MerCruisers that power it were the only carbureted engines in the open class for the Bacardi because, "I didn't feel comfortable with fuel injection." After spending three years and well over \$100,000 to put *Top Banana* into the water, McCarthy pondered the question of what he would do if the boat succumbed to the pounding of the Gulf Stream. "If the boat goes down," he said, "I'll go back to digging quahogs at night."

But the treacherous stream wasn't the only obstacle he had to face. There was also Joe Ippolito, 28, second in the na-

tional points standings for the last two years and the defending Bacardi champion, who would be driving a 38-foot Scarab. And there was 45-year-old Preston Henn, a Florida drive-in movie tycoon, who had won the Bacardi in 1976 and 1977 and might have won again last year if he hadn't been caught jumping the gun.

Bill Martin and his new *Bounty Hunter* also were considered a serious threat, especially in rough seas. The bright orange, 39-foot Cigarette was a mean-looking machine built to particularly heavy and solid specifications. "I've broken eight open-class boats in half," said Martin, a furniture company executive from Clark, N.J. "I was determined to make this one last." And who would Martin be watching for? "I consider Betty my only competition out there," he said.

Of course. Betty Cook. Martin was referring to the 1977 world champion and 1978 U.S. champion, who is too often described as a 54-year-old grandmother. The fact is true, but the description is inadequate. Cook is a tough, articulate woman whose determination and attention to detail have put her on top in what was once an exclusively male field. To be totally prepared for all conditions at Miami, she had brought not one but two boats, a conventional deep V and a new, 38-foot tunnel-hull handbuilt in England from—of all things—wood. The V was to be used if the Gulf Stream kicked up over five feet, the more fragile and faster tunnel if the Stream decided to flatten out. So Cook waited for the Gulf Stream to lie down and play dead.

It didn't. On the morning of the race, though officials assured the entrants that seas were only three to five feet, the racers were suspicious. "If they say three to five," said one skeptic, "what they really mean is four to six and up to 10." Though estimates varied, everyone agreed it was a day to keep wood hulls safely at their docks.

As the racers roared out into the Atlantic, *Flap Jack*, a 38-foot Bertram