



# “I SURVIVE ON FEAR ON FEAR AND ADRENALINE”

an interview with Shelley Jory-Leigh  
by David Rose-Massom



“ “I SURVIVE ON FEAR AND ADRENALINE, EVEN NOW AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS OF RACING.” POWERBOAT RACER AND CHAMPION SHELLEY JORY-LEIGH WAS TRYING TO EXPLAIN TO SOLENT LIFE WHAT IT FELT LIKE TO RACE THESE MIGHTY MACHINES ACROSS ROUGH SEAS. “I SIT ON THE START LINE AND THINK ‘WHAT AM I DOING HERE’, BUT THEN THE GREEN FLAG DROPS...” ” ”

It is a sort of Jekyll and Hyde existence for Shelley who by day helps run the family business Brides of Southampton. “I am still a real girl when I am at work.” She adds, “I love to sell wedding dresses and help brides plan their big day; it brings me real joy. I also love shoes and handbags, but put me in a powerboat and I get hold of that wheel and I am a race demon!”

Powerboat racing is a male-dominated sport in which Shelley has excelled; she is not just the best woman, she is the UK’s premier driver and one of the world’s best, man or woman. When a recent accident put her out for the rest of this season she and her throttleman, Patrick Huybrechts, were sitting in second place in the world championships. It was their second serious accident in just one month.



Their 41-foot 1200hp racing machine hit a wave and did not recover, Shelley explains. “The boat just broke on impact,” she said in a real matter-of-fact tone, in much the same way we would explain the shop was out of cucumbers. “The

boat stuffed into a wave, as I have done dozens of times before, and should have just popped out the other side, but it didn’t and the nose of the boat broke off. My head took the impact and I broke my nose; I think I was unconscious for a moment or two. We went from 83mph to a dead stop, like hitting a brick wall; we were like crash test dummies. Patrick had broken ribs among other injuries and I recall taking my helmet off and there was blood everywhere. I held Patrick’s head and tried to keep his airways open. The rescue boat was with us very quickly and also the Italian team stopped their boat to help; they were fabulous.

“Then I just recall someone saying to get out of the boat as it was sinking. I cried when I found out the boat had sunk; even though I don’t own the boat, you do love it.”

Go to Shelley’s website and there are stunning images from an onboard camera of the accident the month before; as she turned the boat into a wave the craft reacted violently and threw her throttleman totally out of the open-topped mono-hull as it manoeuvred at high speed. It may be on water but hit the sea at high speed and it is like landing on concrete.

So how did a pretty girl, who as an only child and destined to grow up to work in the bridal gown business, end up beating the men at the high speed sport of powerboats?

“I am 40 now but I have always been into sport. I was crap in the classroom (she laughed) but in sport I was the captain of everything. I have even tried parachuting and horse riding. Back in 1995 my boyfriend at the time had a powerboat we used to play in and go waterskiing and after watching some races he said he would like to do that. After some research I became the team manager and a friend of his became navigator; it was a weekend hobby. Come the second year I wanted to do more than manage the team, I wanted to race.

“I learned to be a navigator. Back then it was maps and compass and not GPS electronics; even now I still use both. Although I have the modern technology I still like to have my compass,” she said. Shelley may still be recovering from her broken nose and under instructions not to race again this season but every word she speaks about her sport is filled with passion. “As soon as I began racing I wanted my own boat and wanted to drive; then it was a 23-foot Batboat with a 90hp engine. It was like an egg