



THE QUEEN OF SPEED

Despite being dismissed by some as a publicity stunt, Shelley Jory's all-girl powerboat team went on not only to beat all-comers but set a new standard in the sport. Nic Compton met her

When I first meet Shelley Jory, she's at the 'wet pits' at the Powerboat Championships in Cowes. She's dressed in a chunky turquoise driving suit – like a glorified boiler suit really – wearing leather boots and carrying a bright red helmet. As she passes fellow competitors – all men – she gives them a high five and exchanges a joke. One of them gives her a playful punch on the arm. Around us, there's a continuous roar of engines and a whiff of petrol in the air.

A few days later, I visit her at her family business in Southampton. She's wearing a fitted black suit, and her hair is elegantly pinned up off her neck. She's just come back from a wedding fair at Harrogate where she's bought £20,000 of wedding dresses. She gives some hurried instructions to one of her nine staff – all women – and then tears herself away to talk to me. The shop is packed with chiffon, lace and tulle and the scent of flowers fills the air.

Meet Britain's first female Honda Powerboat Champion and joint runner-up for 2005 Yachtsman of the Year award; a woman who has taken on the men on their own terms and not only won but, in the process, transformed the face of the sport. A woman who sells flowers and lace on weekdays and races hell for leather at weekends. A woman who lives life to the max and pushes herself to the limit – and sometimes that little bit further.

“At first the guys took the piss out of us, but the next year they started copying us”

Brought up in the leafy town of Warsash in Hampshire, Shelley had no interest in boating until she and her boyfriend stumbled across the powerboat races off Cowes. “We watched it as spectators and just assumed it was a millionaire's sport – something beyond our reach,” she says. “But one day I started looking into the finances and realised it was much more accessible than we'd thought. Most of the people racing out there were just ordinary people like us with regular jobs who got a bit of sponsorship to help fund the boats but were basically doing it as a hobby.”

The couple bought their own boat and started racing in 1996, with Shelley first acting as race manager then joining the boat as navigator. It wasn't long before she realised that she could steer a boat just as well as the guys, and in 2000 she launched her own all-girl team with friend Darrell Elmes joining her as navigator. Nicknamed the Bad Girls, the pair soon earned respect when they finished third in the 1.3Lt British Nationals. Soon, Shelley was being asked to navigate for other (male) teams and duly proved her mettle by winning bronze in the 2002 2-Litre worlds.

Finally, in 2003 she decided to bite the bullet and join the speed freaks in the V24 class. Fitted with V8 engines and capable of speeds of up to 80 knots, V24s are 24ft one-design race boats fitted with ‘gull wings’ and designed for close, inshore racing. Her venture into the big time nearly ended in disaster, however, when she and her navigator Gavin Brown somersaulted and had a crash while racing at 70mph. The pair were stuck in the boat for three minutes and, by the time the boat was towed to shore, only a foot of it was still above water. “We didn't realise how dangerous it had been until the rescue boat came to pull us out of the water and everyone was crying and asking if we were alright,” says Shelley. “It scared the shit out of me, and the next time I went racing I hated every minute of it. Ever since, I've been very aware, every time I sit in the boat, that I could potentially get killed – or, even worse, become paralysed. It is a dangerous sport and it's important to be aware of that.”

Despite that, they were soon back on the race course, having completely rebuilt the engine, and not only came second in the British Championships but a month later won the three-hour Endurance Race on Lake Windermere – the



first time a woman had taken the title. Shelly would go on to repeat her success the following year.

By then the Honda Formula 4-Stroke series (see p8) was enjoying something of a revival, and Shelley was approached by the organisers to put together an all-girl team – something the series had never had before. Within a month, she had brokered a sponsorship deal with electronics manufacturer Raymarine, bought herself a Cougar 225 speedboat and found herself a race partner in the shape of experienced navigator Debra France. Despite having only had 10 minutes

won the overall championship – another first for a woman. It would be easy to assume that, in such a male-dominated sport, the guys would not take very kindly to being beaten by a couple of women, but Shelley is adamant that, aside from a little good-humoured banter, the main effect has been to raise the game across the sport. And certainly none of the crews I spoke to at Cowes seemed anything but supportive of the girls.

Whatever the sexual politics of the situation, there's no doubt that Shelley takes preparation and training very seriously indeed. “Every weekend we're on the water practising, to find that bit more speed. We have a powerboat trainer driving another boat who simulates race situations, like when a boat is cutting you up. I also have a personal trainer who I work with for an hour, three mornings a week, before I go to work. My upper body shape has changed completely – I've become a lot stronger. You have to be if



“I'm aware every time I sit in the boat that I could potentially get killed or worse”

you're wrestling with a 250hp outboard, and I've obviously got a lot less weight to throw around than a 6ft bloke. The boat gets looked after like a child really – I drop it off at the fibreglass people in the morning, then pick it up and take it home in the evening. Then there's the valeters and the mechanic and the photoshoots – it gets more attention than me!” And, for the winter, the boat gets tucked up safely at Drivers Dry Berthing in Southampton.

So, does she have any children, I ask. “Of course not. I'm too busy racing powerboats and organising other people's weddings to get married or have children! My friends all think I'm totally raving mad – but they all come to watch me and follow the results. Even my mum, who is always trying to talk me out of it, is at the front of the railings at the races, shouting at me to go faster!”

Being the Queen of the powerboat fleet does come at a price, but then it's obvious that whatever Shelley did she would do it to the max – or, as she puts it, “110 per cent”. And it's equally evident that, whatever she chose to do, she wouldn't stop until she reached the top, regardless of whether her opponents were men, women or green-eyed monsters. Looks like the powerboat boys are in for a long, tough ride.