



## Backyard Racing

The DNA of powerboating runs directly to racing, but will racing today lead to fame and fortune?

By Randy Vance

In its early days, powerboating was defined by racing. It began as an elite game with gorgeous mahogany inboards costing a few years' salary for the regular guy. But when outboards hit their stride, racing went grass roots. Many of today's marine legends, like Charlie Strang, Reggie Fountain, Bill Seebold and Earl Benz made their names in backyard races.

Could that happen today?

We wondered about that when Honda asked us to test a proprietary European Honda Formula Four-Stroke Power Series race boat. In the series, all contestants run stock BF 225 Honda outboards, identical props and identical Cougar racing runabouts. Shelley Jory, 37, of Southampton, U.K., bought

her own boat to compete. She then scored a sponsorship deal from Raymarine.

"The Cougar is affordable and normal people can race it," says Jory. "You don't have to win the lottery." Jory's Cougar cost \$60,000. Her \$30,000 annual racing expenses are partially covered by her deal with Raymarine.

But that's chicken feed compared to America's most popular racing — Formula 1 and offshore powerboat racing. Fountain, the president and founder of Fountain Powerboats, got his leg up in racing in a homemade boat decades

**Shelley Jory (above left and inset) and Libby Keir are a top team in Honda's European grass-roots racing events.**



PHOTOS: COURTESY SHELLEY JORY



The *Boating Life* editors recently tested a race-ready Cougar complete with a TH Marine Hotfoot throttle and jack plate.

ago but now dominates offshore racing with a combination of skill, experience and a reported \$5 million to \$8 million in annual racing expenses.

"I started racing in 1954 with a B-class hydroplane and a D-class utility boat," says Fountain. "I built my first boat in my garage with hammers and nails and screws. It was 16 feet long, had a Mercury Super-Ten Cruiser — you held the handle. Eventually I put a steering wheel on it."

Fountain's first racing buck came at age 14 from a farmer who hired him to run his boat. In the early '70s, he joined Benz and Seebold on Mercury's racing team. All three went on to successful careers — Benz founded Triton Boats, and

**TH Marine's hydraulic jack plate features polymer bushings that smooth the operation and protect from galvanic corrosion.**

## POWER TO THE PEOPLE

The American Power Boat Association (APBA) has about 5,000 members and about 3,000 licensed members who race. The governing body above most racing events in the United States, the APBA partners with other national organizations on international standards under the Union of International Motorboating based in Monaco. Local race organizers seek and covet the APBA sanction for their events. Membership charges begin at \$10 annually for juniors, \$25 for associates and \$55 for participating members. For information about local racing and how you can participate, go to [apba-racing.com](http://apba-racing.com). — R.V.

Seebold's reputation as a Formula 1 racer is still strong today.

Strang also cut his teeth on racing. He parlayed that into leadership positions at both Mercury and Evinrude. Strang was recently recognized by the American Power Boat Association (APBA) for his 70 years in racing. No other has established a seven-decade run in the game.

"I was 15 and nuts about boat racing — really about outboard motors," Strang

recalls. "A neighbor had a little rowboat with an Evinrude, and he let me race it. On Long Island, where I grew up, there was a race boat with an Elto Quad engine. The boat was called *Benny Levy's Baby Sink*. I can see the lettering in my head. It conked out and drifted up to shore near me. I ran down and got a close look. I was hooked."

Even though racing moved to more high-profile and expensive formats, Strang says, "Backyard racing still goes on with a vengeance."

But vengeance comes in junior packages.

"In the Midwest, we have an incredibly active circuit," says Mark Wheeler, vice president of the APBA. "We can go every weekend in the summer."

By "we" Wheeler means himself and his 13-year-old daughter Laura, who races in the APBA J (junior) Class in the Midwest and Florida.

"When we got started in junior hydro racing two years ago, we bought Laura a used boat for \$2,000 and a motor for \$3,000," says Wheeler.

Racing runs in this family.

"My uncle, my dad and my grandpa raced," says Laura Wheeler, a formidable contender. "I like competition against others and ... I like going fast."

J Class racing uses full safety gear, including helmets, and over the decades the 40 mph races have proven safe. Laura's parents approve of it — at least one of them, wholeheartedly.

"Mom's a little worried," says Laura. "She only found out about racing when



PHOTOS: RANDY VANCE

**Navigator Libby Keir and Shelley Jory flank powerboat coach Neil Holmes to accept the 2005 British Honda Championship trophy.**

she started dating my dad."

Darrell Sorensen of Chowchilla, California, is the go-to guy for a new J Class race boat.

"I sell about 30 kits, five to seven complete boats and about 20 sets of plans a year," says Sorensen. "In Northern California we have a rental program where a person can try boat racing for a nominal fee."

"At the Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum in Seattle, they have a father/son or daughter building project for junior hydroplanes," says Sorensen. "One of the boats from their program won the APBA national championship in 2007."

At \$5,000, the hobby probably isn't as expensive as golf. But in Honda's European program, boaters spread into family recreation.

"The Cougar is sleek and looked like a proper race boat," says Jory, "but the aft canopy comes off and there's a back seat under it so you can take kids and picnic on the weekend."

Though that would be unthinkable with many racing boats, our recent test drive in a Honda-powered Cougar proved that, sure enough, it was a



Sunday drive, with none of the roaring engine noise that Formula, Thunderboat and other racing classes create — and none of the maintenance.

"The engine is faultless," says Jory. "It's turnkey racing. It fires up every time. That was great for two girls who can't pick up spanners (ratchets)," she

**J Class hydroplanes race with intensity at speeds in the 40s while low on the water.**

adds, also speaking for her navigator, Libby Keir, neither of whom boast mechanical skills. But now Jory is about to step up to a Skater 38.

"I'm gonna go from 28 feet long to 38 feet and from 225 hp to 1,200 hp," she said.

Is there a career hidden in boat racing?

"It never should have been a career," says Jory. "My career is in the fashion industry in bridal wear. But racing took off, and I was a girl who seemed to drive well from the beginning. But a career?"

"I literally run two businesses now. I run my bridal business with my Dad, and on the side I have a very successful racing career. The wedding business has bought me all my race boats. And in 20 years, when I retire from racing, the wedding biz will be there."

Fountain also sees few monetary rewards in racing.

"Grassroots racing? That's a tough row to hoe now," Fountain warns. "There's no prize money in it. It can cost \$75,000 to set up a boat and at least \$400,000 to race it, and if you mess up, you could get killed."

So why does Fountain do it?

"I've been in it my whole life, and I wouldn't be foolin' with it now if it weren't to promote my boats," he says. "If anybody's racing, I'm gonna be out there kickin' their ass."

It just could be the size of Fountain's skill and his wallet that keeps U.S. grassroots racers well in the background.

