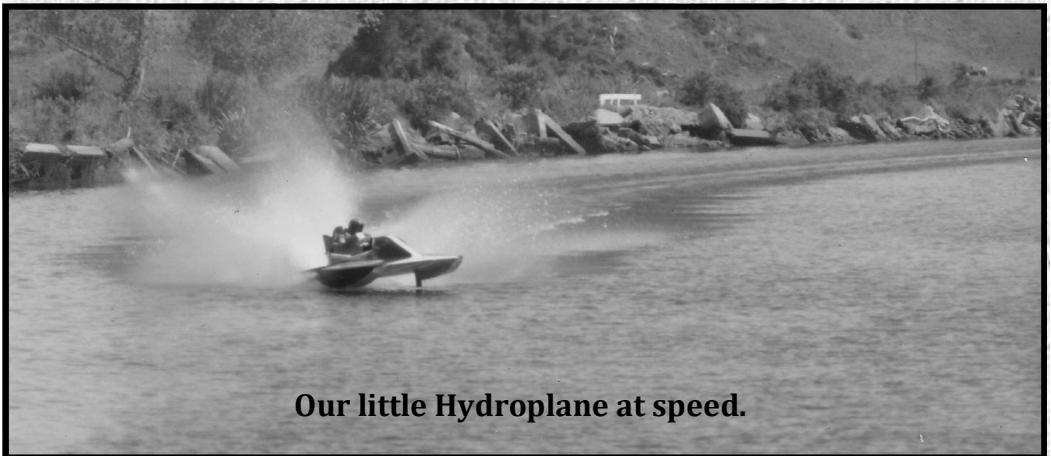


This is the final part of a re-print of a very interesting article about past Club Member Dick Davidson, who passed away earlier this year.

Barbara van Heuckelum, who was the Magazine Editor at that time, wrote the article for Dick, which was printed in three parts, in the December 2013, March and June 2014 magazines. Dick was very reluctant to talk about his life but Barbara finally convinced him by offering to write it for him if he told her his stories. In her view it needed to be shared.

I was asked to do several other engines for people who went to Bonneville in the few years after that. One of those was for Tauranga local Tony Christiansen, I built his engine last time he went over there a few years ago. I wanted to build a Jag engine because I reckoned I'd break a class record over there with a Jaguar engine, which he was keen on it too, but the funding wasn't available so we didn't do it. Ian Fergusson from Wellington, - he called all his boats Roxanne - he won numerous New Zealand titles. I did all his boats. I did all of the engines up here in my workshop and sometimes transported them down in the back of the work ute, sometimes taking two at once.



Our little Hydroplane at speed.

There were also numerous jet boats I did for various customers in the marathon days.

The Stanaway brothers, Kevin and Laurence, started up the first car grooming business in Tauranga, where Ebbett Tauranga are now in Cameron Road. They were characters. I got to know them well and became mates with Kevin. He and I had a little hydroplane which we raced and had a lot of fun with.

I owned the motor and did all the mechanicals and the preparation and he owned and looked after the hull. He is related to the Stanaway that is a sports reporter on TV.

Later on, Laurence Stanaway was one of the many people who asked me to put 350 Chev. motors into Jaguar XJ6's. I was quite well known for doing that. It made a good combination and you got plenty of horsepower out of a brilliant handling motorcar that the Yanks couldn't build. That was the appeal and that was why they were popular.

One of the one's I did for Laurence, - I'd just finished a brand new engine and put it in and got it running and tuned it all up and that, - and he and his son, who was too young to have his licence, came down from Auckland and stayed overnight. His son said, "Oh Dad can I have a drive in the Jag?, so to my amazement Laurence threw him the keys and the next thing we knew his son was going past this house, in Chadwick Road, at 100mph.

I said to Laurence, "You'd better do something about that boy." I was amazed when he replied, "Oh well if the cops catch him he hasn't got a license to lose has he?" They were hard case years.

Back to our hydroplanes. We had two in the end, but it was the first one that we enjoyed competing with most. It won the North Island speed record for its class. The thing was bloody dangerous. I ended up in the Kawerau Lake. I was going around the corner and the force of speed sent me through the side of the boat, punching a hole in it, and I swam about in the water for a bit until the boat eventually stopped. The hull was too old. It was plywood.

I used to do all the mechanics races in Rare Eagle, because, you know, they used to let the mechanics of the boats race against each other.

I regularly tested Jet boats on the Wairoa River. The warden wanted to lock me up and throw away the key. In one marathon I had done the engines for four or five different race boats, in the same Jetboat marathon.



Taking River Rat to Marathons. This is Solway Park Hotel in the early days.

It was a bit awkward and I was working till two or three o'clock in the morning sometimes and trying to get up and navigate in our own boat the next day.

Just to clarify. Marathon racing in a jet boat is like doing a car rally on a river. You go along the course and need a navigator and a driver. The Jet Sprints now have a navigator too. Tony Ward and I were the first North Island Champions at the very first Jet Sprint race.

You see the navigator pointing to where he thinks you should go. You do the same thing on the river with the marathons, - you are given a route, the navigator tells you where to go. Unlike a car rally where you are given course notes, in a marathon you are just told where to start and where to finish.

So there is a lot of skill and knowledge required by the navigator, especially on the South Island rivers. Some of them are half a mile wide, and then they divide up and it is real guessing game which of its narrower portions continue on to the end. If you don't pick the right one you are buggered.

Many a time we've ended up high and dry on the gravel bank. You try and push it back on and keep going, but that is why River Rat and the others were aluminium boats. At the end of a marathon some of the fibreglass boats were in shreds. They couldn't even put them in the water.

It was a different type of racing to circuit racing which is when you race around a lake. It is all left hand turns in circuit racing. You are not allowed to do a right hand turn at all, so you go to Karapiro or the Blue Lakes and you race around a circuit. They also race in the Manukau harbour now, just down from Waterlea Autos where I used to work with Kevin Lamb before coming to Tauranga.

I liked circuit racing best and it suited the way I worked. You are using bigger horsepower engines and getting instant satisfaction. Very exciting.

Marathon racing is also hard work. You had a week's racing in the North Island and so many days break, then getting everything transported to Christchurch or wherever, and then you have another scrutineering meeting and then another week's racing there. You go from river to river all over the South Island. I ended up with hypothermia one year because I was an hour in the water trying to save the engine so it didn't fill with water.

I wasn't successful anyhow, but I was the colour of a strawberry all over when they got me out. I was very lucky I didn't end up in hospital with that little lot. It was snowing at the finish line which was about quarter of a mile away from where I was.

One time on the Grey River just at the finish line which was at the mouth of the river we cracked the jet unit so water was spraying all over the engine. I stood up in the boat while it was still racing and tried to rip off the engine cover so that the water could spray up in the air and away from the engine. It didn't come off completely, and flipped back hanging loose.

Once you get to the tidal part of the river there are waves and the boat was leaping about, and the cover was flapping along at the back, and with the water from the unit spraying right up in the air it was most spectacular. Us two were hanging on like grim death to the finish line.

At that stage we were second and it was the World Champs, so it was a really big deal, and the TV guys came over and interviewed us. It was my first time on TV.

We were standing on the bank discussing what we had just gone through, still pretty hypo and they came over and asked us to repeat what we were saying, but without the swear words.

While I was doing these races, I was still on my own in my business, so when I was away I just shut the shop and put a sign on the window, "Away Jet Boat Racing". You couldn't do that with a business now and survive. Les McLaren used to do the same thing. The only time McLaren's Service Station closed was to watch Bruce at the Grand Prix, and Les used to have a big sign and put it over the pumps.

Marathons ended for me in the mid to late 70's. About this time my girls were very involved with swimming and I became President of the Greerton Swimming Club and spent a lot of time supporting the girls at their events. Lynn was very involved with it too.

I was still doing circuit boats then and the odd saloon car for the speedway. Also a sprint car engine for a local driver who won several feature races at Baypark. The trips away to do circuit racing were not so long, so I was still able to do them and support the girls as well.

I had a great time with these different motor racing sports and made a lot of good friends. Lynn supported me all the way through and put up with unannounced overnight guests and broken promises and lots of time on her own when I had to work late or go on trips. I always enjoyed it when she was able to come with me and I'm grateful that she took me on. It can't have been easy for her sometimes.

My family I couldn't be more proud of, and talking about my life has made me realise how well I did really, under the circumstances. I've achieved a lot. I didn't get to travel overseas with Bruce's F1 team, but I've had a wealth of experiences and a very rich and full life. A life well lived as they say.

Dick Davidson



Dick and Lynn Davidson