

Powerboat Racing in SOUTH AFRICA . . .

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reports

Photos: David Baker

Visiting the same place twice is known frequently to bring disappointments, so the fact that on the occasion of my 1970 visit to South Africa there were two Italian entries in the World Championship Offshore Race whereas this year there were only national entries (of whom none finished) might infer my complete desolation. South African powerboat enthusiasm, however, together with the sunshine, the scenery and the hospitality, is sufficient to dissipate the keenest disappointment.

Offshore racing began in South Africa about 5 years ago with a predominantly "Class III type" interest and was fostered by one of those exceptional, dedicated enthusiasts, one Albie Matthews who, under the auspices of the South African Powerboat Association, formed an Offshore Race Committee. Sponsorship was given by Mobil Oil and an annual event, based on Simonstown, was organised in False Bay, on the Eastern side of the Cape Peninsula. With Mobil's continued and current support the event prospered as a mixed race for International Classes I and II, and a "Class III" run virtually on R.Y.A. rules. In due course the event became a recognised International meeting and in 1970 the I and II Classes achieved World Championship status as a separate race. Much as in Britain, Albie Matthew's Committee includes some "naturals" as Scrutineers, Measurers, "Hey-You's" etc., who know and get on with their jobs—which was as well, as this year's meeting was a two race affair with some 35-40 boats to manage, despite only six appearing in the senior contest. The South African Marlin and Tuna Club at Simonstown is a huge asset. Its neat little club house houses the Radio and Race H.Q. and the members provide a magnificent and



Bob van Niekerk is the South African national genius who has produced a series of adventurous designs. His latest (shown here) has a stepped centre hull on which the boat rides, the sponsons merely maintaining stability, while the bridge attachment provides air lift.

competent fleet of some 28 large semi-fast patrol, observer and rescue craft. They also lay marks, provide the start boat and are linked by their own radio. The South African Navy supplies a couple of Minesweepers on the roughest leg and the Air Force provides a Dakota for air cover—again all linked to H.Q. by radio. The Boat Park which is adjacent to the club, is a vast, but rather rough-surfaced area on the water's edge with its own launching ramp suitable for the smaller boats. Big boats are accommodated on the dockyard crane. Mobil's fuelling facilities, Race and Scrutineering control, and all the boats on trailers are located in the boat park. Near at hand is the False Bay Yacht Club, and also the Seven Seas Club (which isn't necessarily a yacht, or-anything-else club) but it disburses liquid and solid replenishments for humans from its first floor bar looking out over the whole scene, which is all very pleasant! All in all it adds up to about as good a race base set-up as you can get. One big drawback is the absence of piers or pontoons at which to berth the boats when afloat but, with a relaxed, informal atmosphere pervading everywhere the drivers seem to cope without disturbing organisational efficiency. Briefing in the village hall maintains the "informal" theme, Albie's harangue being slick and comprehensive, then, after coffee and snacks, a film show.

Race morning dawned in that awful way that some do. A howling South Easterner and white horses! An hour and a half to go and the Tuna boats were already out round the bay. Radios were crackling away at H.Q.—a hurried conference, and drivers were advised of a postponement and an emergency briefing. It was a case of "shortened course" with a vengeance and race lengths were reduced to 150 and 66 nautical miles for the big and little chaps respectively, with starts delayed one hour in each case. Meantime it was fascinating to hear the Tuna Club's Commodore calling in and re-arranging his fleet on the "short course" in the brief time available.

Of the six entries in the Class I and II race, the sole outboard, A. F. Philp's twin 135 h.p. Mercuries on a one-off 23 ft. hull, was a non-starter. This was most disappointing as I subsequently saw that she was highly competitive. I do not know her reason for absence. The other five comprised a splendid variety, including three widely different designs by the Cape Town genius, Bob van Niekerk. These were the Cocks' (father and son's) highly successful 21 ft. catamaran with twin 125 h.p. Mercuries, winner of every 1970 race she entered; Ken Stephens' (of Daily Express race memories) boat, which was a sort of "giant Molinari" with a single Holman & Moody Ford; and Bob Friedman's remarkable

Trimaran/reverse three-pointer with stepped centre section, also H. & M. Ford powered. The fourth entry was Crowther's simple, home designed and built, twin Mercruiser *Gipsy V*, and, the fifth and final contender was Paul Winsley's 28 ft. *Smuggler* 2-berth cruiser (with all the accommodation guts removed) powered by twin hot 3 litre racing Volvos. The Cocks' boat was built on James Beard's Cougar theme but its bottom formation and step positions differed a lot from the Cougar and the Mercuries were ordinary as opposed to the BP racing type. Stephen's *Meteor V* was fitted with the most courageous transmission yet seen. Unable to obtain a Mercruiser with racing outdrive he had endeavoured to achieve the advantages of outdrive weight distribution and shaft angle by positioning the engine with gearbox aft, facing forward, coupling via a universally jointed layshaft to a V-drive which was fitted through the tunnel roof. Thence, from the output of the V-drive, a sliding spline, universal jointed propeller shaft connected to a Mark II Mercruiser outdrive, with a second universal taking the angle of the shaft to the outdrive prop shaft. The outdrive, of course, had all its other shafting and bevels removed but still did the steering **and** was fitted with power trim—the whole point being that utilising the universals and the sliding splines the prop shaft could be varied in position and length. As Ken Stephens already had the engine and gearbox, the V-drive and the outdrive, the cost of his transmission was a fraction of that of a new outdrive unit. Friedman's remarkable craft, looking rather like a floating igloo, was, as is common, only finished three days before the event, but initial running showed that at least it worked, even though it needed some adjustment. Friedman's boat also had the horizontal propeller shaft with a

universal joint at the P bracket but with a fixed angle. This idea is not new. I remember seeing an Italian BPM unit on some attractive Italian racing boats in about 1935. Perhaps outdrive costs will inspire a revival.

Reverting to the race—under Albie's expert control all five competitors mustered at the revised time and went off to a nice start with Cocks leading and Crowther trailing. By the time they had reached the turn at Bailey's Cottage (5 m. NNE of Simonstown) Winsley had suffered a cracked bulkhead and had a stringer adrift, Crowther had been holed, and sank (his boat was retrieved later) and Cocks, still leading, found his cat unmanageable in the three-quarter head seas and retired to find he had a steering gear fault. Ken Stephens thus took the lead, followed by Friedman who stopped with mechanical trouble after 1½ rounds leaving Ken out on his own and making 30 knots in the really mountainous seas. But on his fourth round Ken, too, was brought to a halt with—of all things—a duff ignition coil.

The 27 strong Class III contingent made an even better start, except that two boats had so muffed it up that they were *approaching* the fleet as it moved to the line! The field provided an interesting variety of craft, nearly all South African built (some amateur, some professional). A few were based on GRP production, but the majority were wood, often rather angular in appearance, but most effective in performance. The best would certainly be competitive with British craft in IIID and below, despite the virtual unavailability of BP/GT type racing engines in South Africa. Class IIIE was interesting in that it was wholly inboard except for one twin 80 h.p. Mercury installation, and the inboards included a Ford V6 engine coupled to a 250 Volvo outdrive in

an Avenger hull, and a Catamaran powered by twin Ford 1.3 litre engines supercharged by a *single* turbocharger coupled to both units! Sadly it was a non-starter.

This race, which really *made* the event, was a terrific battle for survival. Le Roux's Ford V6 was very fast but unreliable and the IIID's had the edge on the 3 litre Volvos. The big twin 80 h.p. Mercury boat, which had looked a certain favourite in the sea conditions, dropped out with steering trouble. The survival of the IIIA's and IIIB's was quite amazing, but conditions worsened and, when four boats had turned into the home stretch and seven more had already started their last round, it was decided to stop the race—allowing the four to finish and counting the rest in their places at the end of round three. Calling in seven little boats scattered over 14 miles of course was child's play to the Tuna Club, and Race Control had the finishing order and Class places worked out before they all returned. At an average of little over 20 knots D. Brookes brought his Evinrude engined locally built boat home first, followed by Ardenoff's 1250 Mercury craft, with A. Roux in third place. Fourth was Andrew Louw in the same GRP Mercury runabout with which he won overall in 1968. With a performance, the toughness of which was belied by her very attractive appearance, Mrs. Myerburgh won IIIA from five males. Bob Cumming justified his 1,000 mile journey from Transvaal by winning IIIB and his mate, G. Nel—a famed S.A. circuit pilot—celebrated his offshore baptism by finishing 2nd in Class IIIE, at the youthful age of 62 or thereabouts!

We were all guests of Mobil at a splendid prize-giving banquet held at the Rhodesia-by-the-Sea Hotel, where the jollity more than made up for the absence of "Big race" prize winners and, whilst this collapse of the "top of the bill" was a real blow, altogether it had proved to be a substantial and meaningful meeting.

A few days later I witnessed another race at Cape Town itself. Although entitled an *Offshore* race with the panoply of a big event it was, in fact, rather a minor Club "do" on a circuit smaller than we in Britain use for basic races. The organisers invoked the Club status to relax several rules, which let in a reverse-gearless Johnson "Stinger" racing outboard and possibly enabled Philp's *Black Panther* to run—otherwise some



POWERBOAT, June



20 craft from the big race constituted the field. Again the weather took a hand and although the circuit had to be even shorter than planned, and the race distance shortened, the rough seas transformed what would have been a bit of a bore into quite an exciting affair. I was out afloat on a mark boat and it was fascinating to watch the racers disappear completely into the troughs and then erupt into the air off a crest. The Cocks' cat led comfortably by an increasing margin until put out by another steering failure. It seems they planned a major revision but only had time between races to repair the existing one, which failed in a different place! Whilst running, however, the cat demonstrated excellent riding qualities and really skilful helmsmen. Ken Stephens, after appearing very comfortable in the conditions in his run down to the starting area, couldn't "unstuck" in the boil at the start, appeared a long way back, and then was out with one of his many universals broken. Philp in the fourth Class II boat in the field ran 2nd, and then led when Cocks retired, whilst Paul Winsley also started well back but gradually climbed to 2nd place. He had repaired after the big race but was clearly nursing his craft along until he finally drew alongside Philp. A flag was then shown from H.Q. denoting course shortened and one round to go, leaving very little time to ascertain who was playing with who—if at all—and the upshot was that Philp won by about five feet. All really good fun! Meanwhile, those amazing Class III folk again demonstrated great skill and seaworthiness, no less than 14 finishing out of 19 starters, with finishers in all five divisions. The Myerburgh family scored a double in winning IIIA again but with husband driving. The Johnson "Stinger" got nowhere and old man Nel again got a place in IIIE. Ardenoff, runner up in False Bay, was 3rd overall, and Class III outright and IIID winner—a fine effort. Again the Ford V6/Avenger showed tremendous promise but had endless stops for details.

This meeting also ended in a

nice party with chat and bonhomie all round.

THE GENERAL BOATING SCENE

A few points on the racing, yachting and boating scene in South Africa may be of interest. It must first be remembered that the population of the country is a fraction of Great Britain's, and it must be realised, too, that the country has mostly a barren exposed coastline ringed by large oceans. There are no "Solents" or estuaries or natural part-sheltered areas. Many plans are proceeding for marinas and new harbours, but the physical features of the coastline restrict yachting generally. The lack of yachting venues, in turn, discourages any real growth in the South African boat building industry and as, in common with many former Empire countries, the traditional revenue raiser is enormous import duties, the choice of competitive craft is pretty restricted too. Thus with few venues and few fast production boats available, considerable credit is reflected on South Africa's endeavours in the field of offshore powerboat racing, despite the debacle of the Class I and II race. Apart from the six entrants referred to earlier, I came across Gordon Lanham-Love at the big race, and took him to task for not racing, but he protested that he had put *On On* up for sale. Koenie Röntgen, another Cowes-Torquay visitor, was recovering from a road accident and two other pilots were missing through circuit racing clashes. In fairness to South Africa I could name quite a few countries organising races who couldn't raise ten potential home competitors, or indeed half that number. Their Class III is even more promising with 30-40 competitors already contesting about four main races a year, plus quite a few Club affairs. Their rules are almost entirely current British R.Y.A. rules, and they are vociferous in questioning why Class III isn't International.

The circuit racing picture is quite different. It is mainly based in the North, in the Transvaal and Natal, where there are quite a few lakes

and, of course, the Vaal River. Their International six hours at Peatties Lake is already famous and last year attracted the British Curtis/Percival team. There are some 400 South African circuit pilots, a figure which compares directly with many European nations. They race closely to U.I.M. Class rules, but have developed some inboard and stock engine hydroplane classes due to the (already mentioned) cost and therefore scarcity of American outboard engines.

Racing is very closely allied to water skiing and the two clubs I visited combine the two sports, providing some high grade competitive skiing. One result of this combination, and the generally prosperous state of the country, is that the clubs are better equipped than ours. The Riviera Aquatic Club on the Vaal River is far in excess of anything in Britain—in terms of luxury, facilities and equipment. In addition to a striking modern club house with bar, changing rooms, etc. there is a swimming pool and members can rent riverside bungalows and private boat garages, each bungalow having its own jetty. On arrival one drives alongside a blackboard and chalks up a sign, then proceeds to one's bungalow whilst the club boatmen take out your boat, launch her, and bring her to your jetty—before you have had time to unpack the drinks and swimsuits. Racing and skiing competitions are run from a magnificent permanent control tower where club founder and patron, Monty Tolkin, has had fitted a fabulous electronic installation whereby one can press a button which sets in motion the complete operation of the five one-minute discs, the starting clock and the starting gun. Down at the Cape Albie Matthews commodores the Cape Aquatic Club at Zeekoievlei—roughly translated it means Hippopotamus Pool. Fortunately the hippos have all gone but a set-up similar to the one on the Vaal River, though not so luxurious, exists. During my Cape sojourn a two week International water ski meeting was in progress and I spent

a happy day relaxing on the lawn watching French, Swiss, Italian, U.S. and home contestants competing in the exciting ski jump section. The organisation was that happy blend of amateur efficiency in which, as at home, the ladies figure prominently. This lake is of a reasonable size and permits the use of a club racing circuit without disturbing those who prefer sailing. They have a club meeting each month, with both scratch and handicaps, and also stage at least one National per year.

Owing to the size of the country the sport is divided into zones and works on a sort of federal basis. As in Europe, they are more integrated than we British, organising mainly mixed meetings for hydroplanes and sportsboats. They have their administration problems, and generally I think they'd admit they are not as well organised as we are, but then they do not have our resources.

My summation of South African powerboat racing is that it is healthy, enthusiastic and enterprising, but the South Africans, like many of us, would like a better International lead. I have already indicated the snags over yachting

generally, but the sport does exist and it is growing. I visited the Royal Cape Town Yacht Club, which is situated in a corner of the docks and is scarcely an environmental success (I've got the word in at last!) — "success". It is primarily a sailing club—it recently organised that magnificent Cape to Rio race, which proved a huge success—but quite a few power people are members, and they enjoy day-cruising and fishing, and even helping out with powerboat racing. Big ventures are in train to enlarge Cape Town docks and the plans include moving the yacht club to another site, which I was shown. The move should transform the Club's facilities as, at the new site, they will be able to organise sailing and power events directly from the club. I hope they succeed.

As to other water sports, I have mentioned the South African Marlin and Tuna Club and fishing is indeed a popular pastime with plenty of big fish about and quite a market for one's catch. There are several fishing clubs in the Cape vicinity and one often hears references to "ski boats" which means, in fact, a certain type of open fishing boat, outboard propelled. Surfing, of course, is a "natural" and, for

example, at Muizenberg in False Bay there is a beautiful stretch of beach with splendid well spaced rollers breaking in the right phase. I didn't, however, encounter or hear about skin diving. This doesn't mean it doesn't happen, but I rather feel that due to the type of coast and seas the opportunities for this form of water sport are small, particularly as sharks are quite common in most places.

As already stated, there is not much of a boat building industry but one largish yard—Thesens—can build quite respectably sized yachts in wood and steel and, in fact, built the ocean racing yacht "Albatross" which won the above-mentioned Cape to Rio race. I also had a trip or two in some pretty little semi-fast 27 ft. wooden cruisers, and there are several local builders able to cope with "one-off" orders. A keen racing man by the name of Garth Mauritzen operates about the only true GRP runabout production plant in the country, in his Cresta craft outfit in Durban. There is still room for a degree of expansion in all forms of boating sport, such as could be satisfied by local boatbuilding resources, but the duties do not favour any foreign imports.



The Mayor of Cape Town Mr Friedlander waving the checkered flag to Paul Winsley, Bruce Dalling and Dave Abbott as they cross the finishing line in front of the Merchant Navy Academy. The flag partly obscures Table Mountain.