

A LEGEND

LIVES ON



After more than 40 years of making a mark in the offshore arena, Don Aronow's race-bred 233 Formula resurfaces with top speed in classic style and performance. by Bob Black

Publisher's Notebook

I first encountered Don Aronow's famous Formula #16 at Innovation Marine in Sarasota, two years ago – the prospect of restoring the classic was a story that Bob Black, one of the marine industry's legendary PR experts was born to write – Bob is a real veteran, who knew the Aronow team members personally. Here's Bob's rendition of the resurrection of Don Aronow's #16.

ABOVE PHOTO © MICHAEL ARONOW

- Bill Taylor

Once upon a time, there was a 23-foot Formula boat named Cigarette.

No, folks, it's not a fairy tale. This particular boat was the first standard Formula to be built, and it was raced by the legendary Don Aronow - the man who invented Formula Marine (later to be Thunder-bird Formula). Don went on to invent Cigarette Racing Team and Donzi and Magnum and Squadron XII and USA Racing Team. Whew! Several lifetimes worth of performance boat companies all tied up in one man.

Today, 42 years later, this special Formula has returned to the performance boating spotlight, thanks to a perfect rebuild from the waterline up in both hull cosmetics and power.

This is the saga of the restored Formula race boat #16 - arguably one of the most famous hulls in offshore racing history, and, we might add, one of the most complete and faithful restorations of a famous boat ever undertaken.

The story starts (and finishes) at a rather non-descript building in the Tampa, Florida, suburb of Ybor City -

On May 19, exactly four years to the day after the DeNisco's rescued the boat from the garden behind Peroni's house, the classic 233 was launched at the 10th Street Ramp in Sarasota, Florida.



The above image clearly indicates the insurmountable work required to get the 233 back to a refined state.



Ready to run on their rebuilt pride and joy are (l-r) Bob DeNisco Jr., Bob DeNisco Sr. and Scott DeNisco.

the former cigar-making capital of the nation. This is where you'll find Bob DeNisco Jr, president of Dynamic Sales Associates, Inc., a manufacturer's rep company. We interviewed Bob last December with his dad, Bob Sr., a retired regional sales manager for General Motors, and his brother Scott, a food broker. At that point in time the famous #16 boat had just left Sarasota-based Innovation Marine after an engine rebuild, and it was on its way to Sarasota's Boathaus for cosmetic hull renovations.

This particular boat, and engine serial number 18880-15-AT 02 080 A, first saw the light of day in late 1962 or early

1963. Don Aronow's boat was 23'3" with a beam of just under eight feet. The deep-V hull was made of fiberglass, a comparatively new boatbuilding material at that time, and it was de-signed by the yet-to-be famous Jim Wynne, a raceboat driver and naval architect, along with his partner, Waltman Walters. It became known to the world as the Formula 233.

According to Michael Aronow's book, "Don Aronow, The King of Thunderboat Row", Don had hired Wynne and Walters full-time and "he chose the name Formula Marine because he believed that to-gether with Wynne, Walters, racer-mechanic Dave Stirrat and

fiberglass boat builders Buddy Smith and Jake Trotter, he had just the men capable of creating just the right 'formula' for innovative powerboats."

The company motto became "The Right Formula For Success."

In 1963, Aronow and Wynne began campaigning the early Formula 233s. Wynne won the Mi-ami-Bimini-Miami race and Aronow was second overall in the Miami-Key West race and won his class. Aronow drove a boat named Cigarette which bore the number 16 on its side. This is the boat that the DeNisco family has focused on, and brought back to life.

There are several other boats that have become famous for their links to the originators of the genre - the very first Formula to hit the water was Jim Wynne's Volvo outdrive boat. He had sold his outdrive invention to Volvo and this boat could be considered a prototype. Another hull was a 'mockup' and had been built for a dealer; the third was launched and raced - it was, in its way, as famous as Aro-now's Donzi 007, which was built by another company that he founded and whose boats he raced.

Below: The 233 in her prime. Here, George Peroni, the second owner of the boat, at the helm winning the Gateway Marathon in May 1964.



PHOTO © MICHAEL ARONOW

Above l-r: Restoration on the 233 was like taking one step forward and two back when it came to finding or build-ing pieces and parts. According to Dave Stiff, vice president in charge of the project at Innovation Ma-rine, the engine came to them in three shopping carts. An inventory of the parts was necessary to see what part worked, and what didn't. They also had to make the crossover to today's Coast Guard standards. When it was new, running with a two-bladed bronze prop, the boat probably ran in the high 50s. On the morning of May 19, 2006, she turned 4,900 rpm and ran a little better than 62 mph.

ARONOW

By studying old photographs, it was possible to reconstruct what the boat had originally looked like.



PHOTO © MICHAEL ARONOW

On deck is the lovely Miss Gateway Marathon with George Peroni at the helm.

Don Aronow may not have been the first person to build his marketing efforts around racing, but in the boating business he certainly was the most successful of his era. Just a few years ago, Reggie Fountain, today's firmest believer in building a boat's reputation through racing success, said, "When my boats win on Sunday, they sell on Monday." Aronow knew this was true many years ago - well before Ford and Chevy began chasing after NASCAR.

There is a huge difference between offshore racing in the Aronow heydays and offshore racing today. In the old

days, up to the late 1980s and early 1990s, the boats really went offshore. There was always a long leg (sometimes 150-miles) for the offshore racing classes, and navigation was an important part of the game. The crews often finished a race bloodied and bruised, and broken bones were not unknown. Sea conditions? They raced in anything up to 10-foot waves, occasionally more (offshore is still a dangerous sport, but that's simply due to the risks of stuffing or rolling at speeds that were unthinkable 40 years ago.)

Aronow raced the boat during the fall

of 1963 and sold it to George Peroni on February 25, 1964. It was bill of sale No. 221 from Formula Marine Corp. at 2940 Northeast 188th Street, North Miami Beach 62, Florida (188th Street was the boulevard destined to become the famed "Thunderboat Row." Aronow and his companies made it world famous).

Peroni's Formula, with a 310 hp Kiekhaefer MerCruiser, was delivered complete with "compass, parts kit, anchor, windshield (no glass), fire extinguisher, crank, engine cushion, antenna mount, extra 19" prop and cradle" it carried a list price of \$8,600. Aronow applied a "special discount" of \$2,000 and included half of the total Florida tax of 3 percent; the total came to \$6,090. The special discount came from Aronow having raced the boat on one occasion the previous fall. Following the race he had it put on a cradle, and there it stayed.

George Peroni bought the boat to race, and race it he did from 1964 to 1972. He changed the name from Cigarette to Empirical and brought home a couple of truckloads of silver geegaws for winning class races. Empirical holds two world records, as well. (Mind you, those world record races were never competed for again, but they stand - tall as an Australian pine tree and pure as the Biscayne Bay air.)

Shortly after Peroni acquired the boat, Don Aronow called him and asked to borrow it. He said that he had "some guys who want a ride in a fast boat." George said sure, and Aronow took The Beatles out for their first real speedboat ride. They were in Miami for their Ed Sullivan show appearance. Michael Aronow said "it was an incredible afternoon for us."

George Peroni and Jim Wynne had gone to high school together at Miami's Edison High, and were pretty much lifelong friends. Jim's relationship with Don Aronow is what brought them together and they stayed close friends for life.

The Formula went from race boat to pleasure boat when George hung up his racing spikes, and he used the boat with



Left: Ringo Starr couldn't resist taking the helm of the 233. Below: Shortly after Peroni acquired the boat, Don Aronow called him and asked to borrow it. He said he had "some guys who want a ride in a fast boat." George said sure, and Aronow took The Beatles out for their first real ride in a speedboat. The Fab Four were in Miami for their Ed Sullivan show appearance.

his family for many years. At one point in the early 1980s, the boat blew a valve and George had the engine removed to be repaired. It was stored in a shed when the family suffered a tragic personal loss, and the boat just sat outside under canvas for 20 years.

Then along came Bob DeNisco, Sr., a classmate of George Peroni and Jim Wynne at Edison High. Bob Sr. had been a frequent passenger, and drove the boat when George was using it as a pleasure craft.

When Bob saw the boat in his old friend George's backyard in May, 2002, fond memories of past rides came to mind. He brought in Bob Jr. and nephew John. Once they confirmed the history of the boat, they thought about bringing it back to life. George sold it to them for \$1 and "other valuable considerations."

Those considerations - basically a 100 percent restoration - have cost the DeNisco family a lot of money, a lot of time and a lot of love - love which has been shared by the people at Innovation Marine who rebuilt the engine from the ball bearings up, and Cousin John and his company - Dino Marine - who structurally restored the hull and deck, and the Boathaus, where they ever-so-carefully brought the boat back to life.

"So much lineage has come from this hull," Bob Sr. says. "This was the first fiberglass racing hull." What Aronow had done was to prove that fiberglass worked, that it was strong and stood up to horrendous sea conditions. If you look at the pictures of racing in those days, of the racers beat up and the clothes torn off them, you'll get an idea how tough it was to "go down to the sea in boats."

"This was the changeover period for boating - from wood to fiberglass," Bob Sr. says. "This is what made boating viable and what brought boating to millions of people around the country and the world."

Bob DeNisco, Jr., says that the restoration is "one step forward, two back," in terms of finding or building pieces and parts. Pretty much of the original boat is in the restoration boat, except for an original rub rail, and they're still searching for that. Peroni says the original had been taken off when the boat was stored and was picked up by someone who didn't know what it was. Peroni also said that he made two changes to the original boat: he wrapped the steering wheel in hemp because the wheel was small and his hands are large, and he flattened the cylindrical gas tank so the



PHOTO © MICHAEL ARONOW

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The day finally comes to test the results of restoration.



floorboards would cover it. Outside of these two things, the DeNiscos got the whole ball of wax launched.

At the outset, when it was first raced, the driver straddled the gas tank. It must have been a won-derful feeling. There were no seats in the boat and when the DeNisco's get it back after being completely renovated, it still won't have any seats in it.

The engine restoration was another labor of love. It was given to Sarasota's famed Innovation Marine to rebuild, and as the DeNiscos put it, "Innovation Marine has gone well above and beyond what anyone could expect them to do."

According to Dave Stiff, Innovation's vice president in charge of the project, the original outdrive just wouldn't hold up and an original couldn't be found, so they substituted it with a Bravo I.

"The engine came to us in three shopping carts late in 2002," Stiff says. "Not only did we have to inventory the parts to see which would work and which would have to be replaced, but as the rebuild pro-ceeded, we also had to make the crossover to today's Coast Guard standards." Not only did the old time racers go to the big water in small boats, today the United States Coast Guard would consider those small boats to be hugely unsafe.

The first thing Dave Stiff and Bob

Wood at Innovation did was to spend a year looking for an original 409 block. The one that was in the boat was, according to Dave Stiff, "totally rotten." They fi-nally found one and verified the serial numbers, but the search, according to Stiff, was the toughest part of the rebuilding. CMI was enlisted to make special head adapters and special headers. A new flywheel and balancer were added, and they even found some original decals for the Kiekhaefer Mercruiser engine. Engine restoration is what Innovation is famed for, but in this case, they had their work cut out for them.

While some parts are new and some fabricated, some of the old parts like the crankshaft were res-cued, burnished up and used. For example, the gauges for the 1964 engine were not operable so these were replaced with Steward Warner products, which are not that much different from the originals.

It took three years in all, since Innovation sort of worked on it in their spare time. Basically, In-novation Marine Corporation is in business to manufacture and service custom performance marine gas and diesel engines. It's the sole engine builder and certification center for three APBA Offshore competi-tion classes.

When the DeNisco group started looking for a company to renovate the hull, Innovation Marine recommended Rob Wilhoit at The Boathaus in Sarasota. The first thing Rob was asked to do was "just buff the bottom of the boat", but as the DeNisco's gained confidence in him, he got the job of putting the whole hull back together - and quite a job it was, too.

Rob and his team had to fabricate all of the missing small parts. In many cases they had to make their own molds to do it. Hatches needed to be fabricated and reinforced, the inside emptied and gutted. His team also needed to add two feet to the stringers so that the engine could be properly mounted. Much of the old teak was cracked or missing, but by studying old photographs, they were able to reconstruct

what the boat had originally looked like. The original steering wheel was refurbished. The helm was up-graded to a Teleflex "Big T" for safety, and new racing trim tabs were added. According to Wilhoit, the original Bennett trim tabs on the boat were the first set ever to be used on a race boat, but parts were miss-ing and irreplaceable.

The Boathaus saw to the building of a new electrical harness and the rigging of the boat (electri-cal, plumbing and hardware) and delivered it back to Innovation in March, 2006 to put the engine back in and test it.

What happened next was a marvelous example of Murphy's Law(s) in action. In a final step, In-novation ordered new tail pipes - heavy devils they are, too - and they arrived in April. One fitted fine. The other was inches out of whack and too thick and heavy to bend on-site. Back to Michigan the offend-ing pipe went. Time passed. A new one arrived. Still didn't fit. It was sent back once more and the final product worked.

Rob Wilhoit buffed the boat. Innovation's Dave Stiff dyno'd the engine, and on May 19, exactly four years to the day after the DeNisco's rescued the boat from the garden behind Peroni's house, it was launched at the 10th Street Ramp in Sarasota.

When it was new, running with a two-bladed bronze prop, the boat probably ran 52 mph back in the 60s. On the morning of May 19, 2006, she turned 4,900 rpm and ran a little better than 62 mph. Just recently, during a second sea trial, the 233 achieved 64.7 mph, displayed on GPS. She's quick, and pretty, ever so pretty.

The boat is scheduled to be the center of attraction and "Grand Marshall" of the Sarasota APBA/SBI race over the July 4th weekend. She well deserves the honor.

What a marvelous end to a long story that had more than its share of frustrations and delays. Boat # 16 is living testimony to the days when the boats, engines, and men of offshore racing were making his-tory come alive. ♠