

RACING for fun

20 YEARS ON THE CIRCUIT WITH JACKIE WILSON

by Christopher Wright

For 20 years Jackie Wilson has lambasted his way through the sport of circuit powerboat racing, winning, flipping, calling a spade a spade and making many, many friends.

Now he has decided to call it a day, so let's have a look back to the early days, the highlights and lowlights of a distinguished career which in many ways is a history of the sport.

'Yellow Peril got me going,' says Jackie. 'I was minding my own business at Poole Harbour in 1959 and I saw this incredible boat zooming over the water. It was during the Duchess of York Trophy, always run then over 100 miles. And did that Yellow Peril shift — sometimes it would get up to 40mph!

'Don't forget in those days they were all two-seater monohulls. You weren't allowed to race by yourself. Cyril Benstead, Commodore of the London club, wouldn't even allow a family partnership if you had kids and my wife Brenda was refused permission to race with me.

Rough luck

'Mind you, passengers sometimes had rough luck. Like the time in 1962 Mike Bellamy told his passenger to lean out and see how far the chasing boat was behind him and the poor devil cut his nose off on a buoy as he leaned out.

'You see, the buoys were made of a damn great tyre with an oil drum bunged in the middle of it. The idea was to go round them, not hit them. If you did run into one you came to a very sudden stop at 40mph.

'Boats used to be impaled in the tyres and there they would stay until someone tugged them out.'

But back to the Yellow Peril. 'She was owned by Bob May, who decided to sell her in November of 59, and I stepped in. The boat was £170 and the engine, a 6-cylinder 78A Mercury, was £380, lot of money in those days — especially for me — but I thought 'what the hell' and got it'

But things didn't quite work out according to plan. 'She wouldn't go fast enough so Bob May came round one Sunday and spent all day showing me some racing tricks.

Throttle wide open

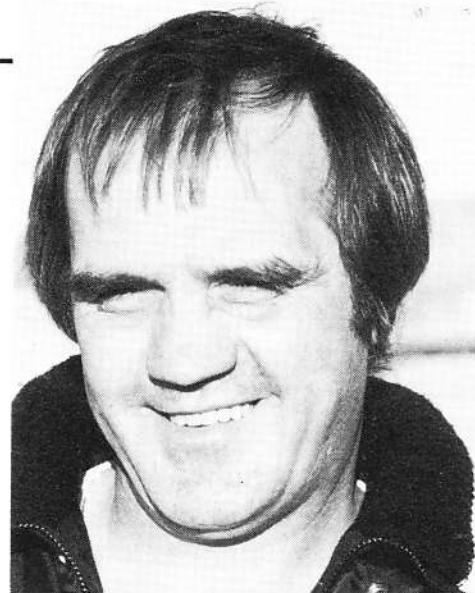
One of them was an elastic band he wrapped round the throttle. That kept it wide open and that was how he drove throughout the whole race. Turns, bends, buoys — it made no difference — he never took the elastic band off.'

Our hero did not make a massive impact in the sport in his first season. 'My first race was the Spring Trophy and I finished about last and didn't win a race all year.

There were one or two reasons. I kept on flipping and I couldn't afford enough petrol for three heats.

'The sport was a lot more expensive than it is now. The spare parts and petrol, apart from the cost, were difficult to get hold of. We had to drain the tanks from our vans to get round the course.

'In fact one of my breakthroughs in circuit racing came in '61 when Eric Weston and I pooled our resources and we began to finish all three heats. We drained



my van, Eric's van and when we could get away with it without being caught we used to drain the odd couple of gallons from Eric's brother's Mercedes. A heat always lasted 12 laps then until TV came along and it went up to 25.'

Back to the Wilson saga and in 1960 he bought a boat no-one else particularly wanted. Known as the Derry Devil the hull cost £90, engine £100 and it was the very devil to drive.

'She was a bit of a cow but I got the hang of her and we started winning races. I was in the boat with my father, who weighed 8½ stone. I weighed 10 stone at the time and being so light we were very successful.

'We took the London Challenge Trophy and the Daily Mirror Trophy (that was the one everybody wanted to win because you got a lot of publicity). They were both at Iwer. The Cotswold club had not been formed then.

Full of character

'The sport was full of characters. Commodore Cyril Benstead of the London Club was a massive man who weighed 20 stone. No-one argued with him and his word was law, when he wouldn't let Brenda in the boat with me because we had children that was the end of that.

'The boats were usually fibreglass and I remember 1960 was the year a lad called Norman Fletcher dug a hole in his garden, called it a mould, filled it somehow with fibreglass, entered the hull in the Boat Builders Trials and finished very high in his class. You can imagine that happening nowadays.'

Wilson then bought and sold a succession of boats, but the sport changed in 1962 when Charlie Shepherd designed a single-seater. The Marine Motoring Association had the muscle then, not the UIM, and the new single-seater regulation changed everything.

Faster and faster

That's when the speeds began to build up and, skipping a few seasons, Mercury decided in about 1968 it was time to form an official racing team and invited Jackie to join it.

'It made a hell of a difference. They provided the equipment and even gave me £200 for a win. I then started to travel and raced regularly in America.

'Never did me much good, though. I didn't win one race until the Parker Enduro



in Arizona last February when I took the inboard class with the Cosworth.

'One thing I did do in the United States was chop my bloody nose off. It was at Havasu in 1970. The boat flew up and so did I. The trouble was the boat was heavier than me and came down before me. I landed on it head first.

Still a pretty boy

'What a mess that was. It took 44 stitches to sew it back together again'. Never mind, Jackie, you're still a pretty boy.

Mercury and Wilson parted company in 71, soon after Jackie and a fellow called Renato Molinari had finished second in the Paris 6-hour.

'They reckoned we should have won and at the inquest a certain gentleman from Italy started pointing the finger at me. Well, I had the fastest lap times and no-one passed me so it wasn't my damn fault. And I told 'em — very clearly.' I'll bet he did.

There followed a two year break, when Wilson raced only as a co-driver in the Paris 6 hour. 'I bought my garage then and I just didn't have time to spare. But no matter what I wasn't going to miss Paris.'

Wilson's love affair with the Paris 6 hour began in 1959 and lasted 20 years. He won the XU class in 1964 and, of course, the ON last year with his son Mark.

In between he has finished in every known place, when he did finish. His first attempt was with John Derrington in Yellow Peril, but they had to pull out with smashed mountings.



'Oh, we've had everything happen to us at Paris, but I've always enjoyed it. It's a great course and a great setting, with the Eiffel Tower in the background.

'Anyway, the garage sorted itself out and back we came in full force in 74, when Bill Brown and I pooled our resources. I bought the boat and Brown the engine and things went along fine until Carlsberg came up with sponsorship worth £25,000.'

For reasons which we need not delve into, Wilson and Brown failed to reach agreement on certain issues and that was the end of that partnership. 'To hell with it. I wasn't going to carry on with the team. I didn't like the situation one little bit. But I

continued overleaf

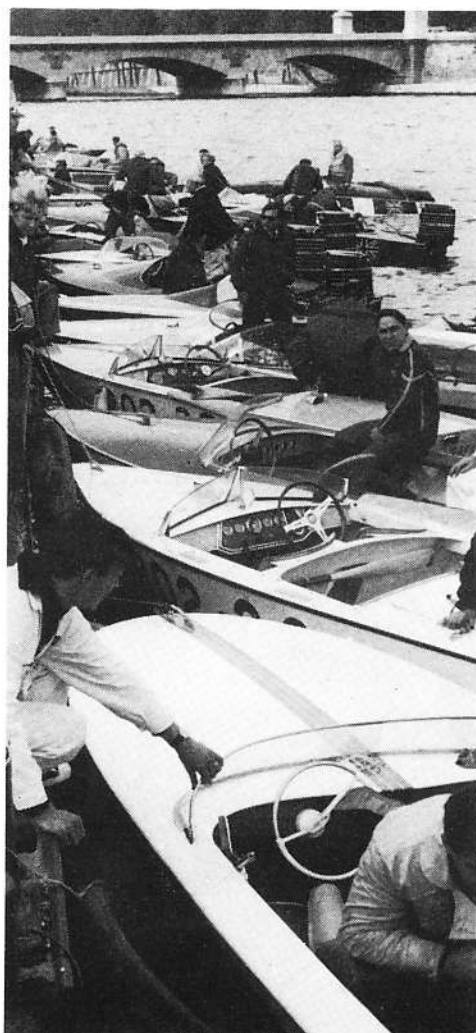
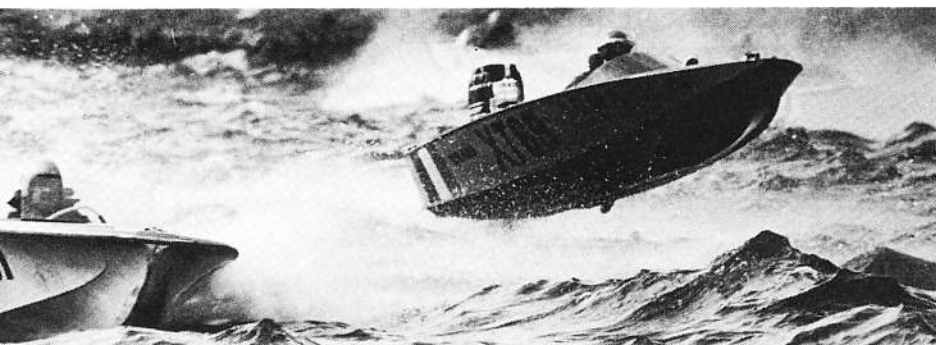
Above: The beautiful Cosworth, complete with aerofoil.

Left: The Paris 6-hour as it looked in 1964.

Bottom left: Jackie and the fruits of victory.

Below: In the Paris pits in the monohull days of 1962.

Facing page: A grim Wilson sporting natty helmet and goggles in 1961.





Above: Jackie Wilson and Don Roff receive the British Grand Prix Trophy in 1970. Ringed are (l) John Reed and (r) Bob Spalding.

Left: Wilson winning the XT Class in Paris 1964.

Below: His last race, when he took the ON Class in Paris with his son, Mark.

Bottom: One of the original catamarans and here Jackie is racing at Auronzo, Italy.



kept on racing — and beating Bill Brown.'

Wilson and Brown did meet again during Windermere Record Week. 'I was given the green light and was heading for the start line when Bill's boat came up on my blind side and sliced mine in half. Charming. But it was purely an accident and they do happen, especially in this game.'

But Wilson has made his mark at Windermere in rather more pleasant ways. He broke the world R3 litre record in '75 at 89.82mph and increased it to 98.92 in '76. He also broke the OZ world record in his Cosworth when screaming across the lake at 123mph.

Most frightening

Wilson said the most frightening moment in his career came when he turned his EU over in Paris and couldn't get out. 'I like to be comfy when I'm racing so I stuffed sponge into the cockpit and wedged myself in solid. Certain parts of the body can get a bit bruised you know, especially your bum.'

'So I turned the thing over and couldn't get out. Wedged in tight. Things started to turn red and I thought 'Good bye Jackie', but it's amazing what you can do when you have to and with the most superhuman tug of my life I yanked clear. God, the air tasted good.'

The saddest time was at Parker last year after he had won the inboard class. 'Keith Duckworth had stepped in for a season and thrown all his racing know-how into the team.'

'The Cosworth ran like a dream and never missed a beat during the seven hours. We were so chuffed, going all that way to America and after all that effort actually winning.'

'There was a beautiful gold trophy we should have won but they wouldn't give it to us because we had an 'un-American engine'. I was sick — but we soon got over it.'

Happiest moment

'The happiest moment was at Chasewater in 1966. Brenda had just had our daughter, Sammy, and Charlie Shepherd said that if I won the Regent Gold Cup in the Boat Builders Trials he would buy her a pram.'

'It was a Bristol EV with a Carniti engine and I won the trophy. And when I crossed the finishing line the flywheel flew out into the lake. So what! I'd won the pram.'

And on the future of circuit racing? 'I'd like to see an ON class of engines bought from the factory of bog standard equipment of three carburettors and a racing lower unit.'

'Let everyone have a chance, not just the top works men. That's not good for racing or for spectators.'

His overall impression of 20 years in racing? 'Marvellous. Absolutely bloody marvellous. I've loved it and I reckon I've had more fun in the sport than anyone else ever.'

That's quite a tribute to both racing and Jackie Wilson. No-one's in doubt when he doesn't like them, and on the other hand his friends are friends for life.

He is a great character and has been a true competitor for 20 years. We shall miss him racing but look forward to hearing that dour voice now cheering on his son from the bank. Well done, Jackie, and thanks for all the excitement you've given so many people for so many years.