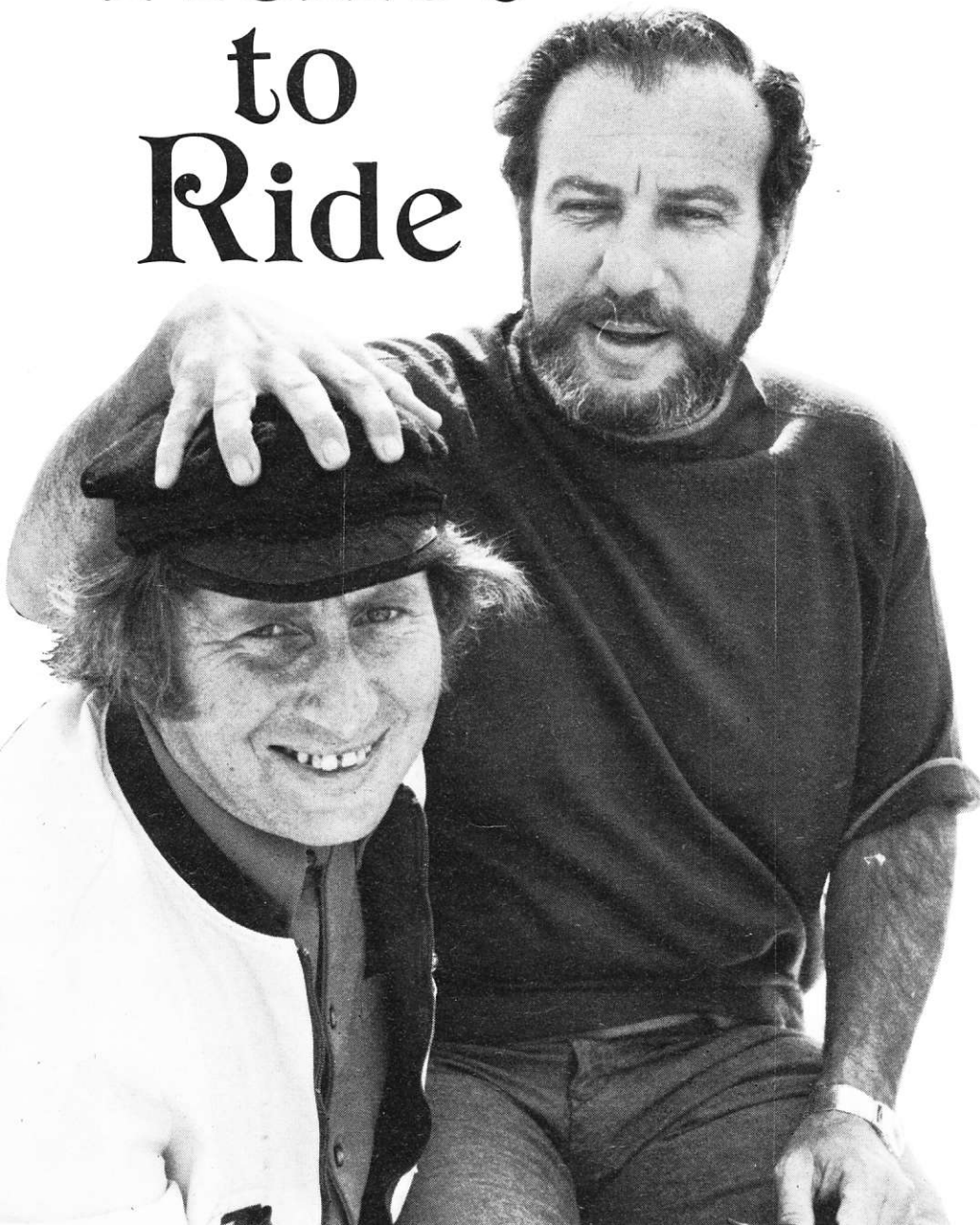


Ticket to Ride



What's it like aboard a high speed tearaway like *Boss O'Nova II*? Ray Bulman, seen above with bearded owner Bill Wishnick, recalls his participation in this year's bounciest ever big race. Pictures by Eric Coltham

EVER thought what your reaction would be if right out of the blue you were suddenly asked to navigate a world champion title contender in an important offshore powerboat race? Well, it happened to me when at the end of last April I received a letter from Bill Wishnick in New York. He was asking if I would

consider using my local knowledge in his boat *Boss O'Nova II* in two world championship events—the *Daily Express* Cowes/Torquay/Cowes and the *Daily Telegraph* and BP International—to be held on consecutive weekends.

Naturally I accepted, who wouldn't? But as

the time drew closer and I began reading and hearing accounts of Bill Wishnick's success against the world's top competition, I began to experience just the slightest doubts.

I have been connected with powerboat racing, particularly offshore, almost since its post-war revival in Gt. Britain, but the one situation I have never been faced with was the responsibility of crewing on a top Class I racer for a driver I had never met or even seen performing.

Boss O'Nova II is a Don Aronow designed 32ft. grp Cary hull powered by two 482 cu.in. Mercruiser petrol engines developing around 1000 hp and is virtually a sister-ship to the 36ft. *Boss O'Nova* that Bill Wishnick also owns. His idea was to leave one boat in the USA and the other in Europe in order to reduce some of the transportation problems connected with competing in a large programme of heats—some held on following weekends in countries thousands of miles apart—in the '71 series. His main difficulty at the beginning of the season was deciding which boat he would field each side of the Atlantic. The 36ft. gave a soft, comfortable ride in rough seas while the 32ft. had the edge on speed in the calm. His mind was finally made up for him by Don Aronow himself who advised the 32ft. for Europe as he considered the majority of events here were calm when he competed and won the title in 1969. Unfortunately the opposite was the case for this season as nearly all the events in Europe have been severe and those in the States flat.

This decision placed me in the fastest craft in Europe which, if the rumours were anything to go by, was capable of performing all kinds of hair-raising antics when flat out in choppy water. Most people who indulge in fast, motorized sports are often inclined to be fearless, purely because they seldom appear to consider the consequences of an accident. Unfortunately for me I do, but in this case it was not what might happen to *Boss O'Nova II* that worried me but the thought of not being able to take the punishment of high speed driving in rough seas, thereby falling down on my job as navigator.

The one thing I was going to be sure about was the course. Although I have competed in powerboat events recently in the Solent and west to Anvil Point, I had not driven in a Cowes/Torquay for some years and never in its newer form where it returned to its starting point. Therefore I decided to carry out a pre-race check on all the land-marks, and together with other British drivers who had also accepted navigation assignments with overseas competitors—Martin Jensen and Keith Dallas—we all made the journey to Brixham for a look at the Skerries turning mark on Martin's cruiser *Charade*. This proved extremely worth while and on our return we all knew the major points of the course like the backs of our hands.

By the time Bill Wishnick arrived in England he was already virtually world champion. His main competitor, Italian Vincenzo Balestrieri, had withdrawn from further competition for the rest of the season following a run of bad luck.

I met Bill and his co-driver Bobby Moore for the first time on the Thursday morning alongside the beautifully prepared *Boss O'Nova II* in one of the sheds at Fairey Marine on the Hamble. Both drivers are great personalities and Bill in particular was so casual in his approach to the race that any earlier doubts I had were soon dispelled.

I took my first ride in the boat immediately after she was scrutineered Friday morning.



With her full fuel load aboard we ran from East Lepe on a heading for Gilkicker Fort at a top speed of 73 mph. At least, that was what I was told—I would have believed any figure. It just felt very, very fast. Pre-race nerves came once again Friday night as I lay in bed listening to the wind building up, but the longest five minutes of that weekend was from 9.55 a.m. until the starting gun from the Squadron battlements. But as soon as we shot across the line and headed for East Lepe Buoy all the butterflies disappeared as I wondered how on earth Tommy Sopwith in *Enfield/Avenger* could be so much faster than the top American Cigarette craft. We chased after him at 70 mph over the initial circuit off Cowes, breathing her exhaust smoke which had an unusual and distinct smell—I was told later that this could have been one of the first signs, oblivious to her driver, that her engine was beginning to pack up.

Although the Solent here was rough enough to damage several competitors, I hardly felt a thing. The excellent American life-jackets—far superior to our own—padded one's body like a Mr Michelin and you feel like an egg in a padded egg-cup formed by the cockpit upholstery. Providing you kept your legs flexed, held on tight and pushed back into the cushioning, I found the actual physical punishment far less at 70 mph in these conditions than I would have received in the majority of Class III boats in a Force 5. But the driving technique was a different kettle of fish entirely.

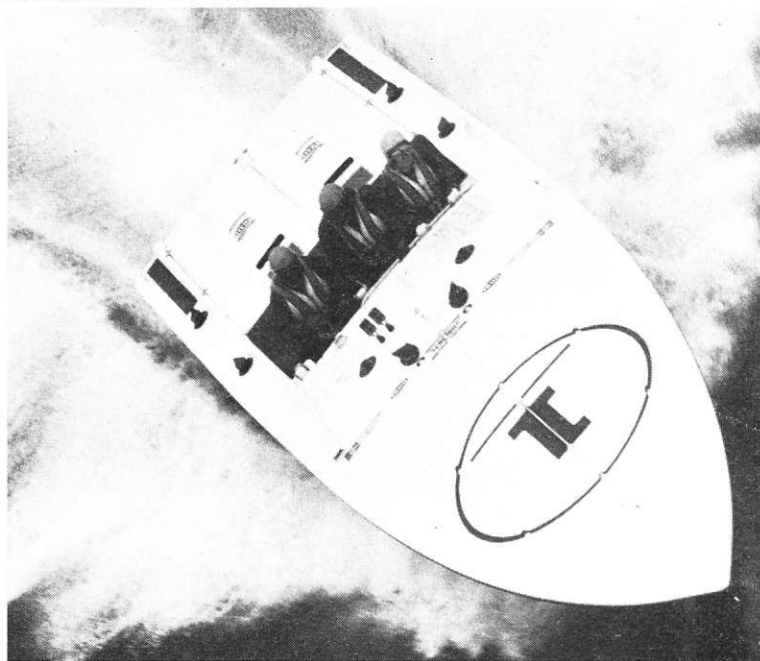
Here were the experts: Bill Wishnick drove with both hands on the wheel while his co-driver, Bobby Moore, opened and closed the throttles faster than a Texan could draw a gun. It showed a remarkable level of trust, understanding and co-ordination between two people, and did much to reduce any punishment I would have received.

After Tommy Sopwith's retirement, Roger Hanks in *The Blonde II* fell back to let us lead the way and the feeling one gets when up ahead of perhaps the best the world can field is indescribable. But so was the feeling we got as we hit the really large head seas once *Boss O'Nova II* passed Hurst Castle.

Bill was driving far from flat out, but the

Back at Cowes, above, after retiring in Lyme Bay. Ray on the bow, Bill Wishnick at the controls and Bobby Moore on the stern deck. Bobby, incidentally, is one of the most seasoned mechanics in the business. In 1964 he was with Dick Bertram in the inappropriately named Lucky Moppie which reached Torquay first (the race ended there in those days) but passed the wrong side of a buoy marking one end of the finishing line

Boss O'Nova was still very much in the race when the bird's-eye view shot on the right was taken. Left to right in cockpit, Wishnick, Moore, Bulman



impact of such a large, powerful boat was quite an experience and my greatest problem was in keeping my head still. British regulation crash helmets are extremely heavy compared with American head gear and this, accentuated by the head wind kept pulling my head back almost throttling me with the chin strap.

Apart from the difficulty of finding the rather small Christchurch Ledge Buoy in the large waves plus making a landfall a couple of miles farther down Portland Bill than planned in the atrocious visibility, the journey was mostly a matter of holding tight and keeping my body flexed.

If a mistake was made it was that we headed on a direct course for the Skerries after rounding Portland Bill instead of running along the shore-line. Precious fuel was consumed here purely because I could not see how one could gain any shelter from a lee shore. But of course I was wrong. The main

bonus here is the wave direction and not the height, but that's another story.

A certain amount of discussion has since taken place among several drivers as to why we retired when still in the lead. The 32ft. Cigarettes carry 350 US gallons of fuel, the 36ft. 440. The race should have taken about four hours in normal conditions and 350 gallons gave a margin of about one hour. We turned back at approximately 1.0 pm when we were still something like 40 miles short of the turning mark with only two hours of fuel left in the tanks. . . .

With no further challenge seriously offered, Bill Wishnick withdrew his entry for the *Daily Telegraph* and BP event in order to allow extra time for shipping *Boss O'Nova II* back to America as an alternative outfit in the forthcoming Miami/Nassau race where he meets Vincenzo Balestrieri on a friendly basis for the final time this season.

Would I go again? You bet I would. □