

# The Competitive Mr. Aronow

by JOSEPH GRIBBINS

*photography by Allan Weitz*

**Winning is second nature to the man who continues to dominate the world of high-speed boats.**



Don Aronow started building fast boats eighteen years ago—pretty much because he likes it.

"I like it because... well, I wouldn't be building cruisers. I'm building the kinds of boats I like—because of the speed, the sport. The boatbuilding is really a big excuse to be involved in racing, to be competitive."

Aronow likes building fast boats so much that he's started five boatbuilding companies since 1963, all of them successful and each of them another excuse to be involved in racing. The fifth boat company—Squadron XII—was launched last summer with a 60-mph 27-footer that looks like an Alfa-Romeo Spyder with a pointy end. And the first Squadron XII contenders—four 39- x 8-foot torpedoes driven by fuel-injected MerCruisers—are in the offshore racing lists this year.

When Aronow came down to Miami in 1960 at the age of thirty-three, he promised himself to do nothing for a while. He had done plenty in the ten years since his graduation from Brooklyn College, where he took a degree in Physical and Health Education. He had earned seven letters in college—in football, heavyweight wrestling, track and field; he was a dedicated athlete, and he wanted to be a coach.

Aronow taught Phys. Ed. for a year at Cunningham Junior High School in New York; but he was restless. He was, then as now, a builder as well as a competitor, a businessman as well as an athlete. He spent the next year working with his wife's family in the construction business in New Jersey—"just to learn it," as he says—then went out on his own with something he boldly called The Aronow





*The Aronow-designed Cigarette hull has won 250 racing victories, and the name has become generic for this raceboat style of powerboats.*

Companies. The Aronow Companies made Don Aronow a millionaire eight years after Brooklyn College. He built houses, shopping centers, and industrial buildings in the hot real estate market of the fifties in New Jersey, and in 1960 he decided to retire.

Jim Wynne—naval architect, marine engineer, and in the early sixties one of the cast of characters who made offshore powerboat racing not only a reborn sport but a hairy form of R & D for the fast boats that the world takes for granted today—remembers Aronow's beginnings as a boatbuilder and race driver. "He was a guy who came down from New Jersey, people said, and he would drive in with a Rolls Royce and he would see about his boat."

That was Aronow twenty years ago—a man with a lot of money and energy and nothing much to do. The boat was a modified-vee hull built by the renowned Howard Abbey, and what Aronow wanted to do with it was to win the Miami-Nassau Race.

There were a few problems. The engines were installed wrong—port engine to starboard and vice-versa—and the shallow-vee hull was only fast on flat water. The race across the Gulf Stream required a deep-vee, as Jim Wynne and Sam Griffith had proved spectacularly in 1960. Still the competitive Aronow finished a respectable fourth in the 1962 Miami-Nassau run after his boat's ass-backwards engines had been squared away. He also finished his search for something he liked to do. He liked to race boats.

In the '63 Nassau Race, Aronow ran a 27-foot deep-vee boat designed by Peter Guerke. This time he was third; he was getting closer. That year he came to Jim Wynne and Walt Walters to commission a boat for future racing—something small with high deadrise—a lightweight, responsive machine that would still be capable of clipping along in the Gulf Stream or soaring off big seas and landing with some poise.

The boat that Walters drew and Wynne engineered was the Formula 233, a 23-footer that put Don Aronow in the boatbuilding business. The Formula Boat Company was a true excuse to be involved in racing. Formula 233s were built for gentlemen sportsmen; but the real purpose of the enterprise was the racing team Aronow put together in a sport that was gaining momentum as a bruising spectacle and



a launching pad for interesting new boats.

Jim Wynne was racing on Aronow's team then, along with Jake Trotter, Alan Brown, Sam Sarra, George Peroni, Bill Shand-Kydd, and Britain's Lord Lucan, and they did well with their 23-foot stern-drive boats—no overall wins but a lot of seconds and thirds.

"We knocked them dead with class wins," says Aronow.

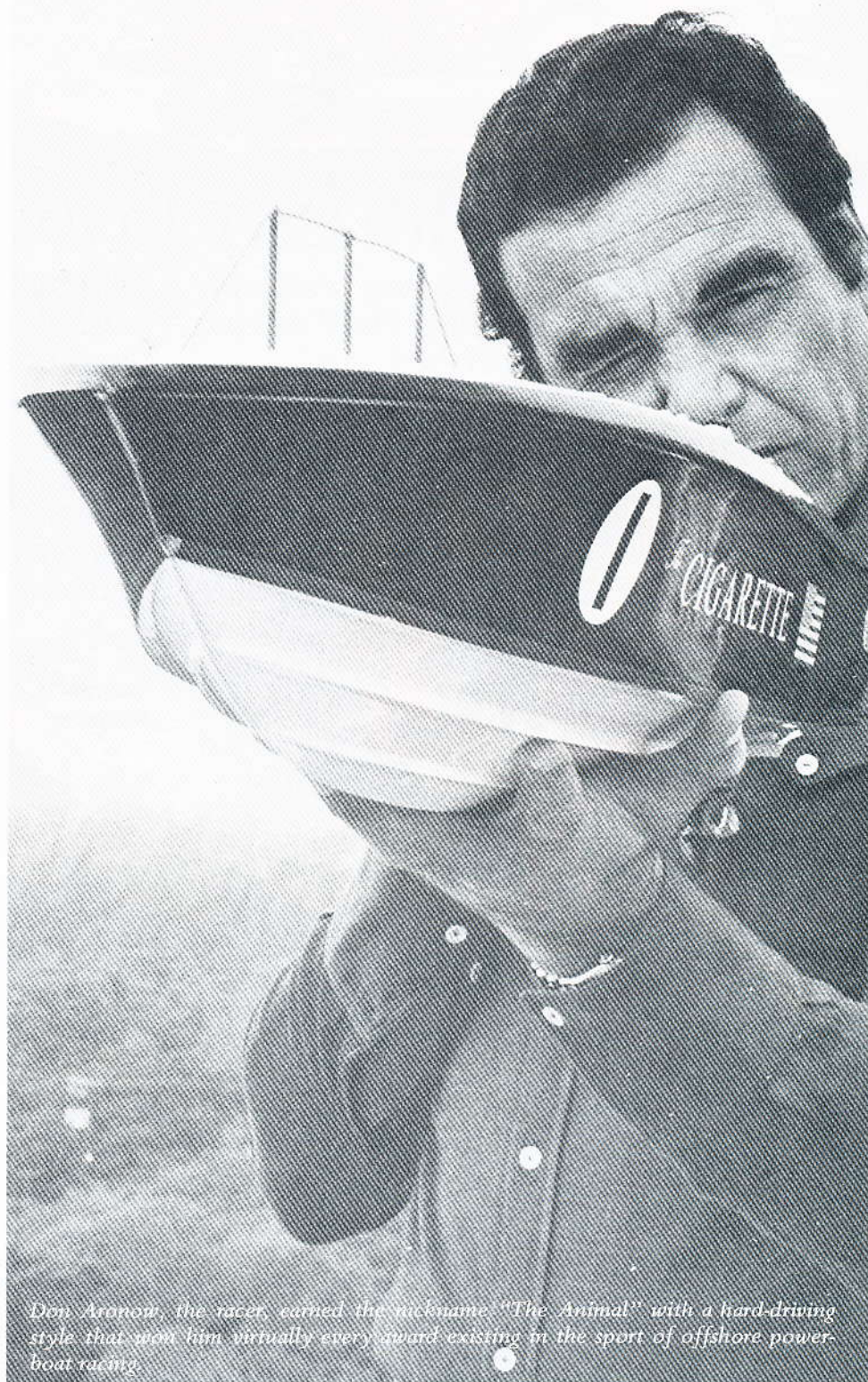
Aronow's team raced smaller and less powerful boats than their rivals. It was a David-and-Goliath game they enjoyed playing, and there were several ways to win. Aronow's style was to put the throttles in the corner and push the big guys until their engines blew or any of a hundred other items came unstuck. Jim Wynne's style, befitting an engineer, was to set up his machinery so perfectly that his boats were foolproof as well as fast. Aronow and Wynne both won races; but Aronow became famous for fires and explosions. The other drivers began to call him "The Animal".

The Animal began to be unbeatable in the mid-sixties when he combined his hard-charging style with somewhat more respect for the equipment. In 1967 he won the Offshore World Championship with two 28-foot Magnums, one of them the first outboard boat to win an international race. He was U.S. National Champion in 1968, and in 1969 he blew everybody away.

Aronow's performance in 1969 was so phenomenal it can hardly be described. He won the Long Beach-Ensenada Race at a world-record average speed of 67.1 mph; then he won the Gateway Marathon at West Palm Beach; then he won the Bahamas 500 on a day when he woke with a fever over 100°, averaging 64.5 mph for 540 miles of dodging coral heads; then he raced in Naples, Italy, for a second place and at Viareggio for another first at 74.3-mph pace that beat his Ensenada record; then he won the Hennessy-Long Beach Race at a course-record clip; then he broke the race record and finished first on England's boatbreaking Cowes-Torquay course; then he ran the year's Miami-Nassau gauntlet—winning it, of course, and, oddly enough, breaking the course record. He was given nearly every honor in powerboat racing at the end of that championship season, and he retired from racing with literally no more worlds to conquer.

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Photo by John Crouse



*Don Aronow, the racer, earned the nickname "The Animal" with a hard-driving style that won him virtually every award existing in the sport of offshore powerboat racing.*



to do the fishing.) "Bertram Burgess" kept things in balance with a handful of ringers from Bourbon Street—watch out for that Cajun Power!

At the opening party (which was co-sponsored by the Bahamian Ministry of Tourism), the Minister himself, the Honorable Livingstone N. Coakley—who was accompanied by one of his aides Mike Jarvis and his protocol officer Craig Clarke—congratulated both Hutch and Schaeffer for their tremendous spirit of cooperative competition. The Minister also presented each contestant with a commemorative plaque. Also on hand was

for the tourney started, these superb athletes on *The Business* challenged Hutch and Schaeffer to a formal tennis match. The game itself wasn't all that crisp, but the outfits were simply elegant—especially Pishock's.

Between the conferences and an occasional nap, they did manage to do some fishing. They were astounded when they actually had a double header of blues on for a moment. The drag was too tight on one and the line popped like a string on a zither; the other escaped in the shock wave.

Meanwhile on the Hatteras boats, Pete Boinis brought in a 28-pound

baby white, Eric Bingham on *Cannibal* had a 54-pound white, and Paul Baker on *Fire Three* was looking good with a 381-pound blue. However, the Bertrams were not idle. Loftus Roker had a 58-pound white, Bob Cockran on *Five C's* had a 322-pound blue, and Jim Russell started his marlin march with a 175-pound blue. So on the first day, Bertram led Hatteras 565 to 463—and Hutch wasn't all that happy.

As we approached Chub after that first day's fishing, we could see two boats anchored on either side of the channel. As we got closer we could see  
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a fresh stock of MerCruiser parts to the sale of the company's used helicopter was quickly resolved.

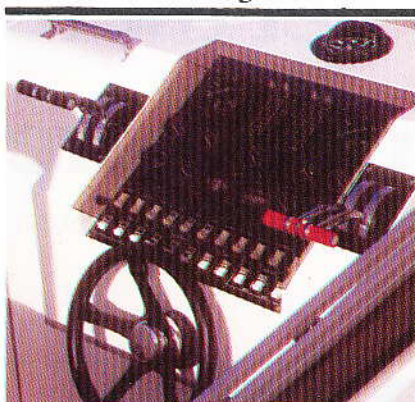
In the afternoon, visitors from France were given a tour of the shop, Aronow's old coach Happy Furth called and made Aronow laugh so hard he spilled a pile of papers off his desk, and a foreman came in to talk the boss out of some equipment that didn't seem necessary. "The men know better what they need," Aronow remarks.

"I think one of the things I missed here at Cigarette was this—running the place the way I want," Aronow tells me. "And hearing from my friends—like King Hussein." Hussein, Spain's Juan Carlos, several sheiks, Vice-President George Bush, and a roster of important men around the world are among his customers, and they are genuine friends.

"When one of the kings calls," Aronow says, "we always ask 'Which king is it?' They get a big kick out of it."

Aronow has visited Hussein and Juan Carlos on his trips abroad, and once at a political rally George Bush took time out to corner Aronow and get down to some serious business.

**When one of the kings calls, we always ask "Which king is it?"**



*The console of the Cigarette, as impressive as the total machine, is designed for efficiency.*

"Don, do you think I ought to replace my two MerCruisers with something more powerful, or should I have them rebuilt?" Bush asked. The Vice-President owns a Cigarette 28 which he keeps at his vacation home in Maine.

Aronow's office at Cigarette is a jumble of ship models in cases, piles of paperwork and catalogs, fiberglass core

samples, and shelves that hold scores of dusty trophies. In the new offices at Squadron XII across the street, heaps and boxes of stuff in two just-finished upstairs rooms include eighty-nine more trophies, ten award plaques, and press clippings and boating magazines that go back to 1963. There are still more trophies in Aronow's house, and any number of others that he has given away over the years.

Asked about his cavalier attitude toward awards, Aronow quotes a remark Jean-Claude Killy once made about the skiing trophies he stowed away in his basement: "That's all in the past; it's better to look forward to the future."

One of the plaques buried under the magazines and photographs in the upstairs room at Squadron XII reads: "It takes as much effort to lose as it does to win."

Aronow has left that one behind along with the hundredodd trophies, the Brooklyn College Hall of Fame award, and the membership certificate in the American Power Boat Association's prestigious Honor Squadron. After fifty-four years of winning, Don Aronow doesn't need a plaque to tell him how it's done. 