

The Cal-Ore Hydroplane River Racers **By Dennis Powers**

Whether it's Grants Pass's Boatnik, the Rogue River's Rooster Championships, or other competitions, the daredevil Cal-Ore Hydroplane River Racers are racing competitively over different rivers. The races involve drag boats, sprint boats, and hydroplane racing over a river's rapids. Drag boats can hit speeds of 120- to 130-mph and complete a 1/4-mile course in 6-1/2 seconds. The sprint boats can travel up to 80 mph in their races, but with tight turns through buoyed courses.

The Tom Rice Memorial Hydroplane Race at Boatnik is the biggest race of the year, consisting of two laps between Grants Pass's Riverside Park and Robertson Bridge, thirteen miles down the river. Whether speeding over the Rogue filled with rocks, rapids, tree limbs, other racers, or racing around a tight buoy course, a certain amount of fearlessness is definitely needed. The Cal-Ore River Racers Association is affiliated with the American Power Boat Association ("APBA").

The first running of the APBA Gold Cup race was in 1904 over the Hudson River in New York City. Starting at West 86th Street in the city, the boats sped for 16 miles up and then down the Hudson. A 59-foot boat named the *Standard* won with a speed of 22-1/2 miles per hour. These races continued from the 1900s into the present, but the sport didn't develop here until the late 1940s.

White water racing in this region began in Northern California when a race was held in 1948 over the Klamath River. The course was 170 miles long and started from where I-5 crosses the Klamath all the way to the town of Klamath at its Pacific Ocean mouth. A two-person crew manned what was a fishing outboard skiff; a support crew followed with supplies and to help in portage. Held over a two day period, the midpoint was at Ishi Pishi Falls where portage was needed--and this race was held until 1952.

Considered "Gentlemen's racing" at the time, this was done during the 1950s over the Rogue, Trinity, Chetco, and Smith Rivers of Southern Oregon and Northern California, as well as the Lower Klamath. A "basic" river skiff for running rivers and fishing was the prime choice. In the late 1950s, a Mercury 55-horsepower racing outboard was used, and fishermen did become upset over the little "skippy" boats that raced past; however, the increasing speed brought about the new sport of competitive river racing.

When the Active Club of Grants Pass held its inaugural Boatnik (derived from Sputnik, the first satellite) weekend in 1959 for charity, one of the first official white-water races was created. The Cal-Ore River Racers Association was organized, which included the River Racers Club of Grants Pass and the Hoopa Valley (Trinity River) Powerboat Association. The circuit included races over the rivers mentioned above.

The white-water-rapids racing class went to single drivers in 1961, which brought about looking at other racing classifications. When hydroplanes began to be tried, Richard

Freeman of Crescent City built three years later the first white-water-rapids hydroplane; and these hydroplanes evolved over the years in design and performance.

To ensure fair competition, Cal-Ore racers began only racing the same propeller-driven boats powered by 44-cubic-inch, four-cylinder, 65-horsepower outboard Mercury motors with magneto ignitions. Being highly maneuverable and much more fuel efficient than other types, these boats must be a minimum of 13-feet, 6-inches long, a total weight of 575 pounds (including the driver), and propellers limited to two blades.

The nonstop races in late sixties and on were held over a 45- to 50-mile course with boats traveling both ways over two or four laps. There were a few “incidents” over the years of crashes and injuries up to 1997 when the sport suffered three fatalities. Flying over any of the chosen obstacle-filled rivers--complete with other speeding boats, bridge abutments, rocks, and huge underwater logs--the wind is the most terrifying risk. On one YouTube video clip (use the search word “grammymanny: two boats flip”), the ripping wind upends the two leaders in a Trinity River race. (This occurs at the clip’s very beginning.)

Starting with the 1997 Labor Day Grants Pass race, all racing now goes point to point with restarts at both ends. No two-way racing is permitted unless a buoy line divides the course. The hydroplane racing is now over an 8- to 15-mile course and uses multiple laps for this distance over what’s considered to be a “safer” way. At each leg’s completion, the boats line up in their finish order and restart for the return after a sweep boat has cleared the course. Only minor repairs are allowed and refueling is not permitted. Additional safety measures in use also include standardized life jackets and helmets.

Drivers generally come from Grants Pass, but include Gold Beach, Merlin, Hoopa, Eureka, and Klamath; each year the great majority of those placing in the top five are from Grants Pass. A group of about 20 members actively compete now for the overall championship, along with individual race results and placements. There are numerous sponsors of the association with most being from Grants Pass and Gold Beach next.

The Cal-Ore racing season typically starts in May and ends on Labor Day, over the Rogue (Boatnik), Trinity (Hoopa), at Gold Beach (Lower Rogue Outboard Challenge), and over other rivers depending on the schedule. Seeing these speedsters in action is a treat in itself.

Sources: See generally, “Cal-Ore River Racers Association Website,” at [River Racers Website](#); “Cal-Ore River Racers: History,” at [History of Organization](#); See Cal-Ore photos at [Images](#); Jay Reese, “The Biggest Little SportsTalk Show in Oregon: There’s the Indy 500, Daytona 500: then, there’s Boatnik in Grants Pass,” May 28, 2013, at [More Images](#); Larry Cathey, “Hydroplane Race Should Be One Wild Ride,” May 27, 2011, *Grants Pass Daily Courier* at [About Hydroplane Racing](#); “Cal-Ore. Hydroplane River Racers; Boatnik 2011 Whitewater Race,” at [YouTube Hydroplane Video](#); also, “You Tube: Cal-Or River Racers Rooster Crow,” at [Different Video](#).