

Working with The Man .

Naval historians all over the globe might well be green with envy at my good fortune- to have had the rare opportunity to actually serve an 11 month tour of duty under Admiral Lord Nelson's Senior Master Shipwright. Here was the man who was responsible for building and maintaining the most nimble and powerful armada to ever command the seven seas. Serving first as a shipwrights apprentice, and then later as a 'partsman' for one of the most accomplished and forceful talents to ever make fair a teak deck, I worked with the true master shipwright of his time...

Okay, alright, you got me. I'm busted. That *was* 250 years ago and I couldn't have been there. So I *didn't* work for the master shipwright of Admiral Lord Nelson's fleet. Still, I remain *absolutely* convinced that I did work with his modern day reincarnation: - Ron Brown, Master Shipwright in service to the unlimited hydroplane fleet. And, to my mind, that was even better.

I would also admit that, when I began as a volunteer working on the 1982 Atlas Van Lines restoration crew for the Hydroplane & Raceboat Museum, my knowledge of Ron Brown was a bit thin. I knew that he had been the Budweiser crew chief during the majority of their Golden Age. I knew that, as the Budweiser crew chief, he had won more turbine races than any crew chief alive. And I knew that you can't win 13 national championships by not having some serious hydroplane chops. But that was about the extend of my Ron Brown experience. After all, I am a 'roundnose' guy, from back in the Muncey era. When Bill flew off into immortality in Alculpulco, I took a hiatus from my interest in the sport and therefore missed the majority of Ron Browns glory years with the Budweiser.

Little did I know how all of that would change on that rainy Tuesday evening in February 2002 when I walked into Jim Harvey's shop to check out the dismantled hulk that was the 1982 Atlas Van Lines. What a mess it was! It looked hopeless, like a giant egg carton with two thirds gone missing. I recall chuckling out loud when I saw it, thinking that someone must be kidding. Today, a year later, nobody is chuckling. The 1982 Atlas Van Lines is, without a doubt, among the cleanest, straightest, most gleaming and accurate example of hydroplania in existence. The principle reason: master shipwright Ron Brown.

Oh sure, there were others who served the cause quite well. Jim Harvey owned this boat for years and served as crew chief for Fran Muncey in '82 during their miracle season. Through an arrangement with the Museum, Jim let us use half of his shop for eleven months to rebuild her, offering invaluable assistance along the way as he restored her Rolls Merlin engines and kept a wary eye on the volunteer

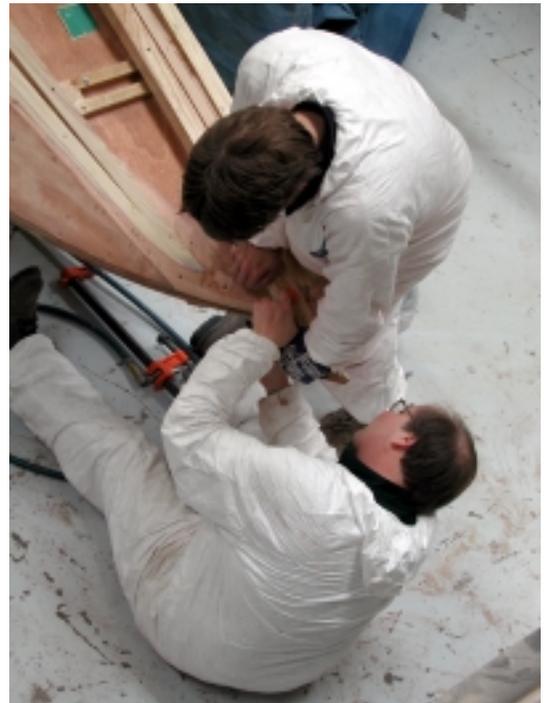


crew. Jim and Ron share the work bay in South Park, Seattle that is Jim Harvey Motorsports and Ron's company- Performance Technology.

I doubt that there are many other hydroplane owners who would- or could- put up with the Atlas restoration experience in their shop. But Jim and Ron seemed to enjoy it all. I never saw either of them lose their patience with any of us volunteers, not even once. They are both fun to be around and the whole crew likes and respects them. Along with Ron, Jim is a key figure in governing our restoration decisions. He, Jim Lucero, and the original Atlas crew built this boat in under 100 days back in the winter of 1982. He affectionately calls this hull his 'bad penny' because over the years it just keeps coming back, needing lots of work.

Our Museum Crew Chief, Don Mock, probably knows more about the boat itself than anyone alive. No detail has escaped him. I could write a small book about Dons' association with this old boat. He is Mr. Atlas Van Lines, period. It was Don who advised the volunteer crew as to their daily work assignments and expectations. It was Don, more than anyone else, who kept the working atmosphere lighthearted and fun.

The shifting cast of Museum volunteers who restored the boat- and I was one- did an enormous amount of work in support of the effort. One can't overestimate the value of the team that pulled off this remarkable feat. From our fearless leader, Museum Executive Director David Williams, right down to the most transient volunteer, it was simply an amazing effort made in the name of the Hydroplane & Raceboat Museum for owner John Goodman. But day in and day out, it was Ron Brown who spearheaded the restoration, lending skills that ranged from laying her lines once again all the way to masking out and shooting the paint- and every step in between. It was Ron who poured his heart and soul into her in an unrelenting, uncompromising, even keeled effort to set the standard for all hydroplane restorations to follow.



While the results speak for themselves, it was really the process, the team, and the opportunity to observe Ron Browns' work style that stands out to me now that we are done. A craftsman all of my life, I have never witnessed anything quite like Ron Brown in action. He is a stocky fellow who lives in a constant blur of activity. He rarely wastes a minute of work time in conversation and never wasted a move as he rolls this rock uphill. He doesn't seem to move all that quickly, but because he never stops he accomplishes enormous quantities of work in any given period of time. And every stroke of it is pure quality. Working along side of him, You get the feeling that you might beat him in a sprint. But I guarentee you will lose by a mile over the long haul.

He never spoke to me- or anyone else that I saw- about any expectations for the quality of our work. But each and everyone of the restoration crew understood implicitly, right from the beginning, that working on this boat, with Ron Brown, required your A game. On occasion, when something didn't meet Ron's standards, you could read it right off the squinched up expression on his face: do it over, do it better. And you did, pronto. The rest of the evening, the rest of the week, the other volunteers would chuckle about you being in 'Ron's doghouse'. But you always knew that quality work would get you out again. Conversely, a 'good job' from Ron allowed you to believe that you really belonged on that crew.

One might gather from my description that Ron Brown is a tough taskmaster, and I suspect that he was with the Budweiser crew back in his active racing days. Ron is a champion. He knows what it takes to win races

and, like all true competitors, he isn't in it to lose. Fortunately for all of us, the Atlas project wasn't about getting a raceboat ready for the rigors of a competitive racing season. In that regard the pressure was off for all of us. This project was about executing a high quality hydroplane restoration, with the emphasis on 'quality'. So while it was hard, sometimes brutal work, it was also a whole lot of fun. If, for any reason, you didn't find the atmosphere agreeable, you could simply walk away. Few did. In fact, I wasn't the only crew member who felt a sense of sadness to see this project grind to a brilliant conclusion. I think Ron did too.

When the work shift ended on any given Tuesday or Thursday night, about 9pm or so, the work crew would often share a beer and a few minutes of lively conversation there in Harvey's shop with Jim and Ron. To us certified 'hydro-geeks' listening to Ron and Jim tell stories about the old days was the real payoff for a hard night's work. These two guys can really trot out some gems and we all hung on every word.

For me, those evenings spent working with the Atlas crew were a refuge from the troubles in my life at that time; a father who was dying of cancer, a business that was battered by the economic downturn, some dreams that had to be put on hold. I had just turned 52 and a good part of me had resolved to find something to do that was just for me- a distraction that was bound to have a good outcome. For me, the Atlas project- and the Hydroplane & Raceboat Museum- were a perfect fit.



The frosting on the cake was the rare opportunity to witness, first hand, the skills and talents of a true master. As I get older, I seem to value quality more and more just as I find myself less and less tolerant of mediocrity. Somehow, I feel that Ron shares that intolerance too. It certainly shows in his work. Still, I never lost that momentary feeling of anxiety when Ron Brown would curtly announce: "Marc, I have a project for you." It's showtime. Time to step up. Time for your A game. Tonight the fleet, and the Master Shipwright himself depend on it.

Robert Ballard, eat your heart out.

Marc Connelly
For the Hydroplane & Raceboat Museum
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