Hopping across the finish line

BY ROB TAYLOR

Last year Greg and Jerry Hopp, along with everyone else, were chasing Phil Bonocini of Sammamish for the Unlimited Light Hydroplane Racing Association (ULHRA) national points lead. This year Bonocini and the rest of the ULHRA fleet could be chasing the Hopp’s Racing Team Greg and his father Jerry, who hail from Stoholish, got the early jump in national points standings. Sunday Greg drove the UL 15 Mike’s Hard Lemonade/Go Lucky to first place in the KZO K Cup of the seventh annual Tastin’ N Racin’ at Lake Sammamish State Park.

“This is a great start for us,” Greg said. “The boat ran like a charm.”

The UL 15 had a near flawless weekend in the opener of the ULHRA season. While other boats broke down, the UL 15 was still in top running condition for the final. Saturday it had the fastest qualifying speed of 127.841 mph. In Heat 2B, the UL 15 went 113.885 mph. In the KZO K Cup, Greg Hopp and the UL 15 cracked up for the finish as it overcame Dave Bender in the UL 38 Golden Nugget Casino and George Woods in the UL 54 Security Race Products. Paul Beckert, a pilot for Northwest Unlimited, drove UL 14 Arros Renta to fourth place, edging Kelly

UL 15 picks up Tasty victory

Stocklin of Issaquah in the Thunder Valley Racing Team’s UL 40 finished fifth in the B Main. The top four boats in the B Main qualified prior to the race because of a violation. A large crowd that lined the shoreline had anticipated a battle between either Greg or Jerry Hopp, or Bonocini, the two-time Tastin’ N Racin’ champion, and Bender.

Bonocini entered the weekend as the three-time ULHRA national champion. The UL 72 Budweiser-Pocket Mechanic, owned by Bonocini and Joe Feurstein of Issaquah, was first in owner points last year with 7,729. Jerry Hopp was second with 7,426 and Bender third with 5,345. Bender was also second in driver points behind Bonocini and Jerry Hopp third. see HYDROS, page D3
Tastin' N Racin' draws record crowds

BY DAVID HAYES

A two-day event that features hydroplane boats that sound, as one fan put it, like giant, loud hair dryers, it takes a lot to stand out.

Take for instance the trio of buddies from Seattle — Paul Floyd, Paul Waters and Kari Urwiler. Or better known by their nicknames of Ghostbusters characters Venkman, Ray and Egon. Camped out near the water to watch the hydro races for the seventh-annual Tastin' N Racin', the trio staked out their picnic table with a distinctive Jolly Rogers flag complete with skull and crossbones.

"It's just a flag we use for RC racing (remote-control cars)," Floyd said.

The trio has journeyed to the shores of Lake Sammamish all seven years of the event. Floyd said they caught the first year almost by mistake.

"We were driving through the South Park area when we heard on the radio this was going on," Floyd said.

"a small cooler and a prayer," they ended up having a "helluva time" and have returned each year with bigger and better supplies. This year they put their tabletop barbecue to the test, attempting to grill what appeared to be an entire side of beef.

With no favorite driver, they aim just to have fun.

"This is one of the last bastions of half-assed freedom this side of the thunder boats you can get," Floyd said.

The trio were part of an estimated crowd of 40,000 — the biggest ever according to organizers — taking in unlimited light hydro racing, international-themed grilled food from vendors, a huge car show, a carnival for the kids and lots of sunshine.

In fact it may have been too hot for some. One vendor said on Saturday, which soared to a searing 93 degrees, lemonade was going faster than the food. But fans returned in droves on Sunday when the temperature mellowed.

Unfortunately, many drivers suffered through interminably long waits just to get into the park, as the line of cars stretched for about a mile much to do and see for all ages. Michael Courtade brought his children Kari, 10, and John, 8, to experience the hydro, something he's done at Seafair since he was his son's age. Fresh from the auto graph line, Kari and John had armloads of signed posters and cards.

Both said Issaquah's Kelly Stocklin is their favorite driver. Taking it all in at her third Tastin' N Racin', Kari said she wanted to get all the drivers' autographs "just in case I didn't make it back next year. And also so I know who they are and can root for them."

John said he loves to come to the festival just for the racing, simply because he loves the loud noises the hydro make.

Set up in the greener grassy area of the park was the car show. In a display featuring souped-up classic cars, Bill Holeva's jet car attracted much attention. His 2000 Drag Star lists its special features as the ability to "go fast."

Holeva built his exhibition car from military afterburner jet engines used on Navy F-8 Crusaders in the 1960s. "That makes this car unique," Holeva said.

supposed to own these engines."

But because he was able to "intercept" the engine in pieces, saving them from the scrap heap, and because sufficient time has elapsed since the engine was in service, he figures no one from the government will show up and haul him off in handcuffs.

Since Holeva can't enter his exhibition-only vehicle in pursed races, the only money he makes from the car is through appearance fees. Holeva said it takes him about 60 shows a year across the United States and overseas in Germany, Japan and Australia. He is currently making plans to make a world record attempt to top 350 mph. But it takes the right raceway to drive it on. Just starting it up proves too much for his Burien neighborhood.

With so much to see and do at Tastin' N Racin', co-chair John O'Brien said the combination has helped make this the biggest and best yet.

"They say the guideline for festivals is if they make it past their fifth year, then people are coming back because they enjoy the event, not just the competition," O'Brien said.