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Hovering on fanaticism

World Championship last staged in U.S. in 1989 in Ohio

By Howard Greninger/Tribune-Star

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Skirting across water at about 60 mph, Christian Godicheau traveled up a small earth embankment and turned sharply near a bale of hay.

It was then that the 26-year-old from Angers, France, found his hovercraft airborne nearly on its side. He cut an engine, allowing it to fall back flat onto the ground. The maneuver threw Godicheau out the side of his hovercraft.

"I made a mistake," he said, using his hands to show he should have taken a much wider turn during a practice run Tuesday at the Wabash Valley Family Sports Center.

The Sports Center, east of Terre Haute International Airport-Hulman Field at Tabortown and Swalls roads, is the site of the 2002 World Championship for the World Hovercraft Federation.

This year marks the 25th anniversary for the 12-member French team, Anjou Aeroglisseurs. Godicheau has driven hovercraft for seven years. "I became

interested by my father as a friend of his had a hovercraft," he said.

Flags from several countries -- Japan, Sweden, Great Britain, France -- can be seen waving in the breeze at the Sports Center. The first World Hovercraft Championship was staged in 1987 in Germany. The event is now conducted every two years. The last time the event was staged in the United States was in 1989 in Troy, Ohio.

A hovercraft is a self-propelled vehicle supported on a self-generated cushion of air contained in a flexible skirt, which makes the vehicle amphibious and able to travel across less-than-perfect surfaces.

Mashito Goto is a member of a Japanese hovercraft team from Kuwana, Japan. The team represents the only company in Japan that makes hovercraft, Goto said.

One yellow hovercraft the team uses sports advertising from a Japanese television station, which uses a cartoon-like character as a sort of mascot. The craft costs about \$30,000 if bought in Japan.

Goto said his team drivers consider the Sports Center a very good racing site. "It's a wonderful course, with up and downs, water and grass," he said. Goto said he thinks Terre Haute "is a kindly place and very nice," and the small group already has been brought a treat: some Japanese food.

Paul Hibbard, a native of England now living in Denmark, arrived in Terre Haute on Monday. Hibbard, 28, said his hovercraft arrived in a shipping container that carried nine hovercraft from five different countries.

"I have been racing since 1990. I started with a school team with a teacher that was running a team in the junior category. I was about 15 years old," he said. "The European scene has about five races a year, so it is a lot of the same guys racing. There's a pretty big camaraderie and friendship among us. Most people's holiday is to go racing. When you get off on holiday, you want to make sure you have fun and this is it."

Hibbard said he made his hovercraft, costing about \$8,000. "If you paid someone else to build it, you can triple that cost," he said. It cost him about \$1,000 to ship it overseas.

He has been racing his craft for about five years. His hovercraft has two, two-stroke engines, with a 250 cubic centimeter engine in the front and an 800 cubic centimeter engine in the rear.

Carl Smith, a resident of Leicester, England, is among a team of 60 people who came to Terre Haute to race 18 hovercraft. Smith said it cost about \$27,750 for the team to come to the championship.

"It's really not an expensive sport, not in our country," he said. "It is the cheapest

form of motor sport in Great Britain."

Racers on his team used Tuesday as a chance to become familiar with the race course.

"The course appears to be the same as what we race in Europe. I'm hoping we do well. It's a long way to come to not do well," Smith, 27, said.

"I have been shopping for food and components for the RVs, things that were broken. The locals are very helpful around here. It's a nice place to be and a great site to hold the world championships," Smith said.

"I first saw these hovercraft with my parents. When I started work, I bought my first craft and here I am now at the World Championship in America," Smith said.

Terry Lobdell, 40, of Montgomery, Ill., won in regional races for hovercraft in Terre Haute earlier this year. "This is my first world championship. I am pretty much in awe, these guys are pretty fast out here," Lobdell said.

"These guys will go 70 or 80 miles per hour, but the fastest I have gone is 60 miles per hour," Lobdell said. He also points out that he is using a "cruising" hovercraft instead of a pure racing hovercraft. "It is overweight and underpowered for racing. If you want to have fun, you have to participate.

"I did take the nationals, so you don't have to have the fastest craft to win, sometimes you just have to finish," he said.

Dave Galka, editor of HOVERNEWS, a publication about hovercraft, said hovercraft racers like the racing site near pit facilities.

"They like the site here. They can tune their machines, get practice time and come back and work on them at night and the next day is some more practice time," Galka said.

"They don't have that in the other world races. So the drivers love this as they have three days to test the course and refine their machines. They don't normally have this at a world championship," Galka said.

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