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Championship day

Formula 1 winner survives dip in water

By Matt Miller/Tribune-Star

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Conrad Beale roared through his first two days of racing at the World Hovercraft Championships.

On Thursday, the British hovercraft driver took first and second place in two separate heats. On Friday, first and second again.

But Saturday morning, during the fifth of six heats in his racing class, Beale was swimming instead. His craft flipped just 200 meters (about the length of two football fields placed end to end) from the finish line.

By the time Beale recovered, he was in sixth place.

The unfortunate placing put Beale one point behind competitor Andreas Feulner of Germany. He had to finish ahead of the German in the final heat if he wanted to take the world title.

Beale pulled through, running what he called a near flawless race and winning the fastest class at the championships. Beale's Formula 1 class capped off the final day of championship racing at the Wabash Valley Family Sports Center.

Closing ceremonies and an attempt at a world speed record at Fairbanks Park today will conclude World Hovercraft Week.

At times, Feulner and German teammate Michael Melzner were so close behind the leader that they were showered by the spray from Beale's black and yellow craft.

"It was very tight racing," said Feulner, through translation from mechanic Andrew Stelzhammer. "You have always the chance to catch the first."

However, Beale was too fast and made too few mistakes, Feulner said.

That final heat was the total package for race fans, said Phil Whitney, an assistant marshal for the championships. It combined machines with up to 180 horsepower with some of the best technology, all in a close race.

"They were flying like kites," Whitney said, explaining how some corners could toss the craft off the ground or water. "It even shocks me, and I've been around them for some time."

Unlike Friday's rainy conditions, the sun welcomed hundreds of fans to the course on Saturday. The muddy conditions remained, which made for parking headaches but paradise for the racers.

A damp course is slicker and makes hovercraft travel faster, said Chris Fitzgerald, chairman of the 2002 World Hovercraft Championships.

"The drivers sort of prefer that environment," he said.

Henk Martens, an Formula 2-class racer from the Netherlands, enjoyed the conditions and the design of the course.

"It was wide enough [leaving] room enough so if you lost control of the craft you have space to make room for [other] crafts," he said.

The world speed record attempt will begin at 10 a.m. today at Fairbanks Park on the Wabash River. Closing ceremonies will start at 3 p.m. at the park.

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