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Enthusiasts appreciate non-commercial aspect

Wives are biggest sponsors of hovercraft teams, driver says

By Howard Greninger/Tribune-Star

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Holding tightly to a pull cord, Jamie Lewendon frantically tried to get his engine started as other racers had already been given the starting flag to race in the World Hovercraft Championship.

A capacitor discharge ignition unit failed.

"These things happen in a race. When one thing goes wrong, it seems other things keep happening. It's not been a good weekend so far," said Lewendon during the second day of racing at the Wabash Valley Family Sports Center.

While racing hovercraft is international in scale, it remains an amateur sport, where racers not only have to know how to drive, but must also know their way around a tool box.

Lewendon, 24, is a design engineer who works for MBM Technology Ltd. in Brighton, England.

"My hovercraft overheated in the first day, and I had to change the piston. Then I had to change the piston a second time in the next race," Lewendon said. "I added

a much bigger radiator and now the third piston is out along with the CDI [capacitor discharge ignition unit]."

In addition to mechanics, racers participating in the world championship are largely covering the cost of their sport. Lewendon's hovercraft has a decal showing the sponsorship of MBM Technology, along with a decal of Castrol on the rudder of the hovercraft. The companies provide enough money, less than \$3,000, to defray costs of shipping the hovercraft overseas.

"Our wives are the big sponsors," jokes Craemers Frank, who lives near Maastricht, Netherlands. "We are working and give them [wives] all the money. We have some minor sponsors, but only in small amounts of money, about \$1,000," Frank said.

Frank, 48, is a maintenance engineer who works for Numac, a precision parts company that helped sponsor his hovercraft.

"We don't want [the sport] to have big money, then it gets too commercialized. If you get something like Formula One or NASCAR, then everyone will keep to themselves. If there is an improvement, then someone else can't see it. Here, we share all knowledge and we help each other," Frank said.

Like other racers, Frank has to watch the skirt on his hovercraft. The skirt holds in air that provides a cushion for the craft to skip over land and water. It takes about a half hour to change the skirt, made from a polyester material coated with plastic or rubber, yet strong and lightweight.

"I have to sew them myself, so I brought extras with me," he said.

Henk Martens, 45, is a truck driver from Nijmegen, Netherlands. He said the best way to race is to ensure you have a good engine.

"We do six runs in the [three-day championship] race, and if you drop down one race because the engine is not good, in our sport it [is] hard to catch up," Martens said. Martens said his hovercraft is powered from a snowmobile engine.

Michael Metzner, 25, of Bamberg, Germany, tries to brush smooth small chips in plastic blades on his hovercraft. He said it takes as much as two hours to get his hovercraft ready between races.

"The best racer, I think, will also be the best mechanic. If something is wrong in the hovercraft, I can feel it in the race, but I cannot explain it to other people and I have to look it over on my own," Metzner said.

"This is my ninth hovercraft [event] this year and I have had a lot of practice in changing the engine and looking for what is broke or missing," Metzner said. He learned about engines growing up in Germany, starting with motorcycles.

He works for his family business that paves streets.

When asked about sponsorship, Metzner pulled out a credit card. "My bank is my sponsor and I had to go to the bank before coming," he said, chuckling.

"I cannot find a [corporate] sponsor in Europe for a hovercraft because no one is interested in hovercraft. It is a good spectator sport, but for companies there is not enough reasons to sponsor a hovercraft," Metzner said.

"I like it like this. Once a sponsor gives thousands of dollars for a winner, there is no more friendship. Then you can't go to each driver and help out. In that moment when big money comes into the sport, then it is not fun. I like the friendship of each driver," Metzner said.

Racers face a variety of maintenance challenges, such as Andreas Feulner, 37, of Bamberg, Germany, who was the Formula One European champion this year. Metal springs that held down part of his hovercraft's exhaust system broke and two springs went into the rear fan. That meant he had to change the fan before his next race.

Hans Westerberg, who lives near Stockholm, Sweden, replaced fan blades on the front of his hovercraft, saying he had problem with lift when he went out across water. He replaced them with longer blades.

"I could feel that some air was leaking out. You tend to hit the water and then you lose a lot of speed. You want to stay off the water," he said. "Racing is the details. Everything helps."

Scott Tilley, 24, is an electrical engineer who lives in Peterborough, England. He works for Hanson, a brick and concrete block manufacturer. His father, Tom Tilley, is a mechanical engineer for McCain Foods. Hanson helped sponsor the Tilleys' hovercraft.

The Tilleys worked to change the angle of the rear fan blade on their hovercraft, to help improve thrust. "We are just tweaking and getting it right for this course," Scott Tilley said. "It takes a lot of time to work on this."

"The first race I broke down. I didn't know what it was when I was out there [on the race course]. I came back and changed the coil, changed the CDI [capacitor discharge ignition] and found a loose wire. You have to be quick to find the problem and fix it," Scott Tilley said. "That's part of the challenge."

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