



Monday, December 20, 2010

Heroes Celebration

Oberto/Miss Madison celebration both party, reunion

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CELEBRATION: Miss Madison owners' representative Bob Hughes (left), driver Steve David (center) and crew chief Mike Hanson lift the Martini & Rossi Trophy during Saturday's celebration at The BoneYard Grill. The trophy, which was first presented in the 1950s, is traditionally awarded to the winner of the APBA's Unlimited class. (Staff photos by David Campbell)

The City of Madison threw a party worthy of a national champion Saturday, honoring the U-1 Oh Boy! Oberto/Miss Madison crew at The BoneYard Grill on the hilltop.

The team capped off its third-straight national title last month, the first crowns in the team's 49-year history. With Jimmy Davis providing the music and crew members in from all over the country, it resembled more of a reunion than a mere celebration.

"I thought it was high-time that this crew was honored for what they have done for the City of Madison," said Madison Mayor Tim Armstrong. "I don't think they've been honored before. They've been great ambassadors for the City of Madison and they deserved this."

While Miss Madison Racing is no longer the duct tape and spit operation it was 20 years ago, the team still employs a nearly all-volunteer crew. But after years of watching celebrations from the sidelines, everybody involved with the team reveled in the fact that for the third-straight year, they were number one.

"It's an unselfish passion between Mike Hanson, Steve (David), Bob (Hughes) and everybody who works on the boat and the entire city of Madison," said Larry Oberto, who was on hand representing team sponsor Oh Boy! Oberto. "It's unselfish because it's all about what can we do to make this better for the next race. And the result of that unselfishness is winning."

The genesis of the idea came from Armstrong who has long wanted to give the local heroes the kind of celebration they deserved. The mayor approached team manager Charlie Grooms and the two began making preparations.

But throwing a party with this kind of scope was not an easy task. Crew members are scattered all over the country, with some living in Seattle, Texas and other points. Driver Steve David himself lives in the Miami suburb of Lighthouse Point, Fla., but there they were Saturday, all in Madison to celebrate the team's success.

"What an evening for Madison. This evening is really for anybody who has ever been involved with the Miss Madison over all 50 years," David said. "You don't get to this point overnight. You get there by building on the shoulders of everybody that has been there before. I'm just honored to be a guest here and a temporary occupant in the cockpit."

The night started off with a VIP dinner then moved to the public portion of the event in a tent set up in the parking lot in front of The BoneYard Grill. There, the Mayor presented David, Oberto, owner's representative Bob Hughes and crew chief Mike Hanson with keys to the city.

But there was more. H1 Unlimited Chairman Sam Cole, himself a native Madisonian, was presented with a certificate honoring him as a Distinguished Hoosier by Gov. Mitch Daniels and each crew member received a crystal trophy commemorating the championship. Once introductions were made, the big hardware was handed out.

The first went to David for winning his fifth driver's championship in six years, joining only Bill Muncey, Chip Hanauer and Dave Villwock with that many titles. Then the official H1 Unlimited team trophy was awarded to Hughes.

Finally came the presentation of the Martini & Rossi Trophy. The massive trophy, which is fashioned out of pure silver and encrusted with rubies and emeralds, was first awarded to the winner of the Unlimited class in the 1950s but had sat idle for the past decade as the Unlimiteds remained separate from the American Power Boat Association. On Saturday, the trophy was back with the winners and it took David, Hughes and Hanson all three to lift the massive award.

"This is something big in our sport to have a team win the championship three years in a row and to have Steve David win five out of six driver's championships," Cole said. "The fact that the mayor and everybody got behind all of this, I salute them for it. It says a lot about the city's commitment to the sport and it's exciting to be a part of it."



Martini & Rossi Trophy

The rest of the night's festivities involved sharing drinks and laughs as old friends got reacquainted and were introduced to new friends. While many continued to express awe that the "Floating Chamber of Commerce" has been able to pull off a feat that only five other teams have been able to in the history of the sport, those closest to the team said they never had any doubt.

"Everything I try to do in life, I try to do my best and try to be the best at what I do," David said. "I knew we were capable of this, it was just how do you assemble the people and the parts to do this. And there were a lot of people who were a part of this. It's one of those things where you have a vision, you have a dream and you make it come true and we did."

"People always ask me, 'Isn't it surprising?' It really isn't," Hanson said. "I've been with the Madison team since 1988 and back then when we were running with a small potato budget, we would consistently be in the top two or three in points. And if we finished second to the big red boat Budweiser, we still felt like we won the national championship. But we did it for about two percent of the budget. We knew we had a good race team. What has happened is that there is no longer that big budget team to race against, we have a consistent budget because of Larry Oberto and the Oh Boy! Oberto guys and we just keep getting better and better each year."

The calendar has not yet turned to 2011 and the boat itself has still not made the oceanic return from Qatar but thoughts have already turned to the next season. What's next for a team that has won three-straight titles?

"Four," Hanson said with a laugh. "Didn't you guys learn how to count in school?"