

Vintage Views

The Helter Skelter Saga

Part 4 The Rebirth by Ron Snyder and Phil Kunz

"If I was driving **Helter Skelter** back in my early inboard racing days, I bet I would have won some championships" said Ron Snyder. "You can quote me on that. Most of the time I was following **Helter Skelter** and saw its roostertail or transom – from my seat in the cockpit of **Suzy's Kitchen**. I raced against Phil's boat with Jim Kropfeld driving it many times. I specifically remember Newport, Kentucky, September 10, 1972 – but not positively, as you will see. I remember nailing the start in Lane 1, and led the pack into the first turn. I know Jim was not happy with this turn of events, and as he came barreling into the turn – **Helter Skelter** flipped over, ending the heat. And, as it turned out, ending Phil's racing career with the boat. Soon after the season, Phil sold the boat, and eventually sort of lost track of it as you have seen - until Rich Willim found it.



John Jenkins sits aboard his handiwork, the newly restored **Helter Skelter**.

"Skipping to 2012, when Phil and John Jenkins and Tim Settle brought the restored/rebuilt **Helter Skelter** to *Dayton Testing*, I was offered the opportunity to actually drive the boat I had raced against so many times. Phil took it out first for its maiden run, and felt satisfied that his old boat performed like it used to in '72.



Phil at speed during the first test run of his old/new **Helter Skelter** at Dayton.



Margaret Myers assisting Phil with the slings following his initial test run.



Ron Snyder having lots of fun at Rocky Fork in **Helter Skelter**.

After John Jenkins took it out for a run, I was the next driver, and after a few laps I understood what kind of boat I had run against. It really is a sweetheart of a boat. I realized why **Helter Skelter**, especially with Jim Kropfeld at the wheel, was so consistently competitive. The boat was built for rough water, so you could imagine how smooth it ran on the calm waters of the *Dayton Hydroglobe*. Driving it later at *Rocky Fork*, where the water is somewhat rougher, it still ran smoothly, like a charm.



A triumphant Ron Snyder after several laps in the boat that beat him in many races.



A determined Ron Snyder flies **Helter Skelter** over the water at the *Wheeling Vintage Raceboat Regatta*.

"We ran it at the *Wheeling, West Virginia Vintage Event*, and had a small "adventure" there. A small rag which was wrapped around the breather cap came loose and dropped onto the hot exhaust headers. There was smoke, and there were some flames by the time I got back to the dock. Thankfully, the *New York Navy* was nearby with fire extinguishers and quickly put the fire out.



Smoke - and fire - at Wheeling, quickly extinguished by the *New York Navy*.

“At *Celina*, **Helter Skelter** again ran strong and smooth until it started acting like no other hydro I had ever driven before. It got crazy, erratic with some vibration underneath. I couldn't steer it well at all. I nursed it into the infield, shut it off and checked over what I could see. Mechanically it seemed OK. **Helter Skelter** was towed into the dock area where it got hooked up the slings, dropped on Tim's trailer and brought back to the pits – right next to the **GP Midnight Miss**. There we could see that the bottom plate over the strut and propeller had come loose and had curled itself around the prop. Here's the strange part. The same thing had happened to **Midnight Miss**! Identical breakdowns! Graham Coddington, the owner and driver blamed *me* for his bad luck, and I of course blamed *him* for ours. Never could anyone have imagined such a problem happening to one boat, much less two next to each other in the pits. Both boats were, thankfully, repairable without too much effort. All in all, driving **Helter Skelter** has been a wonderful experience.



Jackie Meyer, in Phil's **Helter Skelter**, shadowing John Bridge II in Paul Poledink's **White Lightning**, at Celina



The 2013 *Celina Vintage Memorial Participant's Award* honoring Jim Cunningham, the designer and builder of **Helter Skelter**.



An unusual mechanical malfunction surprises Ron Snyder while running **Helter Skelter** at Celina.

Final words by Phil Kunz

“After I drove a few laps in the reborn **Helter Skelter** at Dayton, I felt satisfied that the efforts of all the people who worked on it were successful. In their runs with the boat, John Jenkins and Ron Snyder then confirmed my seat-of-the-pants feelings that we had brought **Helter Skelter** back to its competitive running condition. Jackie Meyer, another experienced hydro driver and race official, ran some nice hot laps along side other vintage hydroplane survivors at *Celina*.



Former hydro driver Jon Myers guides his daughter Margaret onto the course for her initial run.

“Margaret Myers guiding **Helter Skelter** around the Dayton course that day is another story altogether. I encouraged her to drive the boat – her first time in a hydro – after competing against her in the sport of RC hydro racing. Through the 2009-2012 racing seasons I was quite successful, with four High Point Championships in the modified hydro class. However – in 2013 Margaret bested me and walked off with the High Point Championship in this class. Her abilities, judgment, and careful RC driving habits convinced me that she could probably pilot a full size raceboat – such as **Helter Skelter**. So after her father Jon, a veteran of S Class hydro racing, ran a few test laps in **Helter Skelter**, Margaret took to the course -and proved me right. Another generation got to experience what we all have felt while running our raceboats.



Phil and Margaret, two winning RC model hydro competitors, discuss driving a full-size raceboat.



A "well done" from her sister Julia and father Jon after Margaret Myers' laps at Dayton.

“So what's the takeaway from all this? In the late '80's, I saw old sprint cars undergoing restoration and being run at vintage car racing events. I realized that the old hydros were catching the spirit of vintage, and have been fortunate to take part in this movement with my own boat. **Helter Skelter** now has a second life, which I am happy to say is a part of mine, as well as many others – former crew members like Reed Beckjord, and John Kovach, some of the children and friends of my old crew, as well as all the old-time race participants and newcomers to the grand sport of hydroplane racing – of the vintage and historic type, of course.

Submitted by Paul Poledink