

# MAKING WAVES

## SEAFAIR HYDROPLANE CHAMPION LIVES LIFE AT FULL THROTTLE

BY JOHN KINMONTH



Paul Becker knows a thing or two about physics. He knows what happens when a gust of wind gets under the hull of a hydroplane going 165 miles per hour. He knows how the body reacts to the debilitating effects of “pulling five lateral Gs” around a corner. He knows how to land both a 747 and a Navy A-4 fighter jet in almost any weather condition.

And, after last year’s Seafair, he knows the sweet feeling of hefting the first-place Unlimited Lights hydroplane trophy in front of 375,000 people and millions more watching from home.

A dream come true for this 59-year-old Bellevue Club member, Paul competes on the Unlimited Lights Hydroplane Racing Association’s national circuit and last year’s victory at Seafair in his boat, Miss Critical Logic, was his first ever. Doing it in his hometown made it all the sweeter.



“I never thought in a million years I would get this opportunity,” he says.

In a sport where top racers typically start in their late teens and early 20s, Paul was a late bloomer. He didn’t get behind the wheel of a hydroplane until age 50, and then it was only supposed to be a test session as a favor from friend and hydroplane mogul Fred Leland.

“Growing up, driving a hydroplane just once was always on my ‘bucket list’ of things to do,” he says. “It was the equivalent of a kid who grew up in Indianapolis getting the chance to take a lap on the Indy 500 speedway—I figured I should make it count.”

As a former Navy A-4 fighter pilot, Paul is no stranger to the cockpit and quickly cranked the borrowed boat up to top speed, taking corners with precision. Back on shore, he was almost

immediately offered a gig driving the backup boat for Hopp Racing Enterprises.

“The opportunity just came up and hit me in the side of the head, so I took it,” he says.

### FATHER/SON TIME

In hydroplane racing, behind every good pilot is a great crew. When he started, Paul looked no further than his 15-year-old son, Chris, to act as crew chief for his racing team.

“I said, if we do this, you’re going to be my crew chief,” he says. Chris rounded up several of his friends from Newport High School—who also swam for the Bellevue Club Swim Team—and they’ve formed the nucleus for the Miss Critical Logic racing squad for the past eight years. Traveling all over the United States for races, Paul says the preparation for an event is labor-intensive.

“In five years, Chris never even made a mistake,” says Paul. Chris is now in college pursuing a business degree, but still works with the team whenever possible.

Always searching for the combination of raw power and handling ability, much of the sport is dependent upon fine-tuning the boat. With an engineering degree from the University of Washington, as well as experience designing space shuttle components, Paul's background comes in handy both in boat design and in racing.

"Wave action and wind are always the biggest variables affecting the race," he says. "If you make a mistake, you're toast."

**SOUND BODY, SOUND MIND**

Besides racing hydroplanes, Paul flies long-haul commercial jets to Asia and Europe for Northwest Airlines and works as senior marketing manager for Critical Logic ([www.critical-logic.com](http://www.critical-logic.com)), an innovative software-modeling firm that's also his team's main sponsor. Despite his busy schedule,

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Paul keeps a dedicated workout schedule in the Club. He says exercising five days a week has been one key to his success in the water.

"You take a beating out there," he says. "Being in shape gives you an advantage because you haven't got a ton of room for error, especially when you're pulling up to five lateral Gs around the corners."

To put in perspective, there is so much force exerted on Paul while he's racing that they use duct tape to keep his earplugs in place. Although injuries are rare in modern hydroplane racing, the crashes are spectacular.

Right on the heels of his Seafair win, Paul experienced a complete aerial rotation 40 feet above the water at the Silverdale event last year when a gust of wind got under the hull. Paul limped away with a broken heel, missing his chance at the 2008 Driver's High Point title.



While Paul doesn't have the most powerful boat or biggest budget, he's consistently managed impressive showings in the overall standings, having achieved third in total points for the past three consecutive years. Despite a consistent string of second-place finishes against some of racing's biggest names, up until this past year, he had never earned a first-place finish.

"They've called me the bridesmaid, never the bride, more times than I count," he says, jokingly.

In last year's Seafair finals, Paul got out to an early lead and never gave it up, with his nearest competitor nearly 600 feet behind him as he crossed the finish.

After his post-win television interview and ceremonial dunking by his crew, Paul acknowledged a large part of hydroplane racing goes way beyond physics:

"It's about the fans and it's about having fun with my young crew."

**REFLECTIONS**

**Favorite Book:**  
Anything by Clive Cussler.

**Favorite Food:**  
I'm a barbecue guy. My idea of a perfect meal is a perfectly grilled steak, romaine salad and a RedHook ESB.

**Best Advice:**  
You only go around once in life, don't miss an opportunity.

**Hero/Greatest Influence:**  
My dad—brilliant man, climbed Mount Rainier. He did it all.

**Favorite Activity at the Club:**  
Long, hot shower after a hard workout at the "BC."