

COOK, BROWN, U.S.' BEST IN '79

A petite American lady driver and a Japanese-born male compatriot not much bigger, transformed offshore powerboat racing into a "fly now or pay later" proposition in their 100 mile per hour English catamaran hulls in '79.

Although the honors were scattered with four drivers winning the circuit's seven races, it was the exploits of world and U.S. champion to be Betty Cook and restaurateur Rocky Aoki in the 38' foot English built, American powered Cougar Cats that established the status quo for the sport for years to come. Healthy, there was simply no way to catch the James Beard and Clive Curtis sea gliders.

The season blasted off in style when a brash young New England trucking executive, Irishman Charlie McCarthy upended the advertised heroes in the Bushmills Grand Prix on St. Patrick's Day (March 17th). In his first open class race in a new 38' prototype Jean Claude Simon designed hull aptly handled "Top Banana". Although McCarthy was able to hold on to a piece of the lead with a third at the next race, the Bacardi Trophy race off Miami, Fla., May 12th. Cook was already gaining momentum that would gather in both the U.S. and world championships. Taking a gander at the turbulent Atlantic off Miami, Cook and her throttleman John Connor and navigator Bill Vogel Jr. left their tunnel at the docks and won the race in the venerable Scarab "Kaama".

The third '79 race was the second annual Guy Lombardo affair on June 2nd which picked up the new owner of Cigarette Racing Team, Halter Marine, Inc. of New Orleans, La., as the sponsor. This time Cook chose to run her schizo-beaked prodigy and for all but the last 16 miles of the 179.3 race it proved an awesome weapon until out-drive troubles quelled its flight. Open class rookie Howard Quam, a Chicago

pancake house chain owner, fried everybody else as he brought his ultra quick 38' Bertram "Flap-Jack" past the stricken "Kaama" and on to the victory. At dockside Quam discovered that six inches of two of the three blades on one prop had broken off.

Next was the June 29th Manufacturer's Bank/Spirit of Detroit race over a combined foggy, rainy 198 miles of the Detroit River, a sometimes coffin for the big unlimited hydros which were to run two days later, and Lake St. Clair. This time Cook's "Kaama" cat won going away setting a new U.S. course mark of 83.9 miles per hour as Aoki's "Benihana" broke before the start and Joel Halpern's "Beep Beep" Cougar Cat holed out and nearly sunk.

The cat coup set the world's top offshore owners and drivers atwitter as they scrambled for ways to latch onto one of the monsters in time for the world championships in Venice on October 20th.

Cigarette launched a feverish project to get one into defending world champion, Italian Francesco Cosentino's grasp as Cougar Cat put the finishing touches on several others and Italy's Molinari family began to fashion yet another for Cosentino's teammate Guido Niccolai.

On July 18th it was extravaganza time, the date of the world's biggest offshore powerboat race, the Benihana Grand Prix off Pt. Pleasant, N.J. but all was not well. Sponsor Rocky Aoki, with only a grueling and hull shattering record run to Cuba to show for his efforts and 12 straight breakdowns, told a New York Times reporter that he was tossing in his goggles and helmet if he failed to finished again! By race time it looked like the former Japanese Olympic wrestler wouldn't get a chance to toss anything anywhere as the skys deluged on the race course.

With crews running hard in squalls so

thick they couldn't see the beaks of their boats, Aoki's "Benihana" suddenly emerged from the gloom all by its twin-podded lonesome. Number '13' was a lucky digit for Aoki as he won his own bash!

By now the big cats were beginning to become a definite pain in the bow to the conventionally wrapped drivers and there were only two more races left on the U.S. circuit. On August 25th they ran the John Wayne Memorial race off Long Beach, Calif. and the once jinxed Aoki and his cat won again!

Now the cats had won half of the six U.S. races run to date! But on September 14th, the day before the '79 U.S. finale, the Benihana Grand Prix West, a tragic freak accident almost wiped out Aoki and his crew of Gerald Dehenau and Errol Lanier when the race boat they were testing nose dove and snapped ten feet off its bow. The most seriously injured Aoki hung onto life by a thread for days. Once more choosing her rough water deep vee Scarab "Kaama", Cook won the race and her second straight national championship! Performance class overall winner was Ft. Lauderdale, Florida's Harry Roth in the 32' Cobra "Harry O".

Race No. 1

Bushmills Grand Prix

(205 miles) Newport Beach, California, March 17.

With all eyes elsewhere, an open class rookie with an Irish tag, Charlie McCarthy of Warwick, R.I. climbed into his Jean Claude Simon designed 38' "Top Banana" and led the 205 mile Irish whiskey sponsored Bushmills Grand Prix from start to finish . . . and on St. Patrick's day itself!

One of those rare characters the biographers like to toy with, McCarthy revealed afterwards that he'd dreamed of being an offshore racer for 14 years

Continued on pg. 14