

Return of the Don



Bob Brown has been a performance-boating journalist for 30 years. His own boat-racing career began at age 12. For the past 18 years, he has operated Media Direction, an advertising/public-relations agency that specializes in the outdoor-recreation industry.

I don't know how many of you offshore racing fans noticed, but if Don Aronow were still with us, he would have celebrated his 80th birthday this year. And knowing Don, he would have probably been Hefing it up at the Playboy mansion. It's kind of hard to believe that his infamous murder out in front of his boat shop on 188th Street in North Miami happened 20 years ago.

I have two reasons for bringing this up. First, I recently got a phone call from a voice out of the past. It was none other than Charlie McCarthy of Banana Boat fame from back in the 1970s. For those not that familiar with Charlie, he's been an offshore racing fanatic all his life, and got friendly with Don when he was a pit-crew gofer for boat racer Mike Gordon in Florida. Some years later, Charlie found himself in a little better financial situation thanks to his trucking business, and went to Don's Cigarette factory to actually buy a 35-footer.

Aronow, who may have been the world's best salesman in addition to being one heck of a great offshore racer, turned on the Donzi charm and proceeded to sell Charlie some of his old boat molds instead of a boat, including a 24 deep-vee that soon became the 24 Banana. Charlie got a 24 rigged, painted it black with white lettering and called it the *Top Banana*. In spite of some good-natured ribbing by his competition, Charlie did okay with the 24, winning some races. A couple of years later he decided to build a 38-foot version of the *Top Banana*, and sure enough, it was a winner too, especially in the rough water.

Charlie's admiration for Don has never waned. Although Don was a master manipulator in many of his business dealings which eventually contributed to his early demise, he always treated Charlie right. By the early 1980s, Charlie didn't have time to continue his offshore racing career. Business and personal/family demands were just too great. Eventually, Banana Boat closed

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its doors and Charlie continued to pursue making a real living.

But some things just never die. And for Charlie, he can't exist without getting his hands dirty in the boat business. He's now on a mission to rekindle some of that Aronow mystic by re-introducing the 24 Banana in a Don Aronow 80th Anniversary edition, still black with white and red trim. With so much interest in nostalgia and vintage cars and boats, I'll bet that there'll be a few takers for this. No, it won't be a super ventilated progressive step-bottom high-tech piece designed on some CAD system like today's deep-vees, but Don wouldn't have wanted that anyway. Just a plain-old 24-degree deadrise made Don happy. For those who knew Don, he liked things simple and right to the point, and that's the way he raced. Regardless of the water, the shortest distance on the race course between two points was always a straight line. If Charlie has his way, the commemorative-edition 24 will make its debut at the 2008 Miami Boat Show this coming February. Just the way Don would have wanted it.

Reason number two for the trip down memory lane is to recommend a visit to a relatively new Web site. Point your browser to historicraceboats.com. Again, this is the work of Charlie McCarthy, and it's pretty darned interesting if you happen to like offshore racing history and are perhaps contemplating a restoration project of an old offshore race boat.

Charlie actually found the old 35 Cigarette *Benihana*, owned and raced by Rocky Aoki and is in

the midst of bringing it back to life. You can browse the site for free, or if you're motivated enough, actually sign up and become a member. If you opt for the Diamond membership status (just \$29.95), you get a bunch of stuff, but in my opinion, the real jewel in the package is a DVD copy of the movie *Run Sunward*. In my opinion, this was the greatest documentary film ever made about offshore racing. It dates back to the 1960s era of offshore racing and covers it on all the continents. If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it. Anyone with an ounce of love for offshore racing will watch it over and over again.

And speaking of movies, there is a Don Aronow flick in the can—an actual 90-minute documentary which previewed at the Cannes Film Festival this past May. It's called *Thunder Man* and its a life story of Don and his racing career narrated by Andy Garcia. I haven't seen it, and I'm almost afraid to recommend it since I was so disappointed with the final cut of the *Miami Vice* big-screen release about a year ago. (I'm still trying to get my nine bucks back!) But from what little I've heard, the Aronow film got excellent reviews. I can only hope that something bad doesn't happen to it if it goes back into the edit room before the final release. If any more boat-racing sequences end up on the edit room floor, I'm going ballistic! I don't know when it's scheduled to come out, but I'll pass the word as soon as I hear something. For Don's sake, I hope it's a blockbuster. If you want more info, log on to donaronowfilm.com. ■