

Gold Cup races deny Black participation



Jerry Bell with hydroplane being finished in shop. / PHOTO BY DIANE BUKOWSKI

Owner-driver Jerry Bell and Golightly students are angry

By Diane Bukowski

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DETROIT – The Eastpointe-based, international American Power Boat Association has effectively banned the only African-American, Detroit-based team from participating in the historic 100th running of the Gold Cup races on the Detroit River this July 11-13.

The races, which require city permits and expenses for police and recreation department services on city owned-property, will take place July 11-13 on the Belle Isle section of the river. They are the boating equivalent of the Indianapolis 500 auto race. The Gold Cup, first awarded in 1904, was first captured by a Detroit driver, Christopher Smith of the Chris Craft company, in 1914.

"I love the sport so much I hate to have to raise the issue of racial discrimination," said Jerry Bell, 33, who has been racing hydroplanes since 1995. "But my team is very excited about being in this race. I've thought about it for four to five years. The APBA knows we have a good boat. It's real fast and runs real light on the water, and they know we have a good chance of winning. I'm speechless about a setback like this."

High school students from the Detroit Public Schools' Golightly Career and Technical Center, along with their teacher Steve Johnson make up Bell's team this year.

"These kids are good," said Bell. "Two are females, and I've seen one of them repair a part

of the boat that neither myself nor the male students could repair.”

Bell himself, who was interviewed in his boat repair shop near East Vernor and Mt. Elliot, said he has won championships including the 1.5 liter MACH series using his boat with a woman driver, and the APBA High Point Champion for Region 6, both in 2000.

He is a contractual worker for the Wayne County Medical Examiner’s office, and is married to Detroit Police Sergeant Erin Stephens-Bell, assistant to Second Deputy Chief James Tate, the department’s communications chief. They have five young children.

Bell said APBA President Mark Weber, who is also vice-president of the Detroit River Regatta Association, eliminated the automotive-powered boat class, known as the President’s Cup, from the races after Bell complained to the NAACP about his difficulties entering the race.

He said Weber claimed his boat was too short, and its F-16 cockpit was not strong enough to withstand a collision. But Bell measured his boat as 18 and one-half feet, big enough to qualify in higher level classes. He also showed his cockpit inspection and module training certification. He said the inclusiveness of the races changed when the APBA took over from the original sponsors, the Spirit of Detroit Thunderfest.

He said he and his teams have experienced racial harassment at many events, including the use of the “N” word by other teams.

Weber, contacted at his office in Eastpointe, said he did not know what type of craft Bell has, but then said that cockpit safety is an issue and that Bell wants to run a smaller boat that can reach speeds of 110 mph in a class that reaches speeds of 150 mph.

Belle denied that latter claim, saying that his boat can easily reach the required speed.

“It was a business decision,” said Weber. “The DRRA had looked at running the President’s Cup Trophy event, but we did not get sufficient participation, so we did not purchase that entertainment.”

Weber denied knowing anything about Bell’s approach to the NAACP. He said that the DRRA emailed prospective participants in President’s Cup class in January, but admitted that racers can register up until the first day of the races. The web site for the race also says that more categories are to be announced.

Bell said the automotive-powered class is run in most other races around the world.

Weber admitted there is no other Black team in the race and could not identify any Detroit resident team either, although he named several metropolitan area participants. He said a Detroit-based business, Edibles Rex, is catering the event.

Edibles Rex has an office at 5555 Conner in the Samaritan Center complex, but is owned by Thomasina Tedesco, who lives in Grosse Pointe Park.

Political consultant Sam Riddle said he has spoken at length with Bell.

"If everything he alleges is factual, then the City of Detroit should reconsider sponsoring and committing resources to that boat race if citizens who are qualified to race and run their boat are not allowed to do so," Riddle said. "I have recommended that Jerry also begin approaching the sponsors of the race asking them to withdraw their sponsorship until everyone has equal opportunity in the race."

Bell said he has spoken with Eddie McDonald of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's office, and received a phone call from Mackinac Island from Deputy Mayor Anthony Adams saying he would look into the matter. However, he said he has heard nothing since.

The Mayor's office had not responded to a call for comment before press time.

The Gold Cup race is sponsored by the Metro Detroit Chrysler Jeep Superstores, with individual boat sponsors running the gamut of the large corporations. No information on a contact for the Chrysler Jeep Superstores, none of which are located in Detroit, was available.