

June 1930: Another Great Moment In Canadian Boat Racing History

Johnson Outboard Boat & Motor Sets World Records

By Ken Kirk

The U.S. Johnson Outboard Motor Company was established by the Johnson Brothers in South Bend, Indiana, in 1921. By 1928 their business had been so successful that they built a brand new and much larger factory complex in Waukegan, Illinois. Also, in 1928, they set up a Canadian assembly and distribution operation in Peterborough, Ontario. Its corporate identity was the Canadian Johnson Motor Company Limited.

By 1930 they were not only making outboard motors in Peterborough but also building a line of Johnson cedar strip boats. These boats were of Johnson's own design and built in their own boat building shop which was located on the present day site of the Canadian Canoe Museum.

Johnson built and sold what they called *Johnson Matched Units* from 1930 to 1936 when a fire destroyed the boat building shop. Johnson also built and sold *Matched Units* in the U.S., but the boats were significantly different in design and construction from those built in Canada.

So it was in the spring of 1930 that the Canadian Johnson Motor Company was looking for a way to gain publicity for its top of the line *Matched Unit*. The decision was taken to try for the 12-hour World Speed and Endurance Record for outboard motors.

The Johnson boat selected for this ambitious endeavor was the "Imperial". She was 17' long with a beam of 62". Cedar strip construction with oak framing, she had a very unique concave bottom design. The motor was the most powerful Johnson built in 1930, the famed 4 cylinder, opposed firing, Johnson Sea Horse "32". These motors had a massive Vacturi carburetor, and a gear driven rotary valve that greatly improved the precision with which fuel was fed to the four combustion chambers.

The driver was Graham "Jimmy" Oates. Although Oates was not an experienced race boat driver, he had many qualifications that made him

the right man to have at the helm. These qualifications included mental tenacity, physical durability and a total understanding of the 2 cycle engine through his vast experience as a motorcycle racer and endurance rider. It was said of Oates that, "he was one of the bulldog breed who, once setting their mind to a task, however onerous, will see it through".

"Jimmy" was Vice President of Overseas Motors at 133 Danforth Ave. in Toronto. They were Authorized Dealers for Rudge-Whitworth, Matchless and Ariel Motorcycles as well as Dealers for Johnson Outboard Motors and Boats.

Born on the Isle of Man, he grew up where car and motorcycle racing were part of the culture. During World War I he developed his riding skills and exercised his adventurous nature as a motorcycle dispatch rider.

Caught in a gas attack in France, "Jimmy" subsequently lost the sight of his left eye. This did not deter him from competing aggressively during the post war era in Tourist Trophy and Long Distance Trials throughout England, Scotland and Wales

When "Jimmy" immigrated to Canada, a chance meeting in 1928 reconnected him with an old wartime buddy, Charles Dennis Browne. Charles had been dispatched by his uncle, Lord Wakefield, to develop the Castrol Oil business in Canada. It had not been going well for Browne and for Castrol.

"Jimmy" and Charles developed an idea to build awareness and to prove the quality of both Castrol Oil and Ariel Motorcycles to Canadian consumers. They developed a plan for a punishing Cross Canada motorcycle endurance run. With sponsorship support from Castrol and Ariel, "Jimmy" was off on a super human trek. After dipping the rear wheel in the Atlantic at Halifax, "Jimmy" rode solo 4027 miles in 21 riding days to reach the Pacific Ocean at English Bay, Vancouver. The entire trip was done on Canadian soil. There was a 900-mile



Graham (Jimmy) Oates.

stretch between Sault Ste. Marie and Whitemouth, Alberta where no roads existed and "Jimmy" had to use the bone jarring Canadian Pacific rail line.

This was the first ever coast-to-coast crossing of Canada by a rubber tired vehicle. The event was covered by the press in every city and town "Jimmy" rode through and was even covered by a 20th Century Fox Newsreel. It was a great success.

It was hoped by the Canadian Johnson Motor Company and by Castrol Oil that a "Jimmy" Oates World Record endurance run in an outboard boat and motor would have the same publicity value.

In June 1930, a two and one half mile course was set out on Clear Lake, just north of Peterborough, not far from the famed South Beach Hotel which served as the headquarters for the record attempt.

In attendance was Hugh Campbell, the first President of the Canadian Johnson Motor Company, Lorne Ardiel, the founding President of the Canadian Power Boat Association and Harry "Red" Foster, Commodore of the Canadian Outboard Drivers' Association. Mr. S. Williams was also on hand representing the Wakefield-Castrol Oil Co.

After much preparation and anticipation "Jimmy" Oates fired up the Johnson Sea Horse "32" and flashed past the starting buoy at 8:36 a.m.

In order to keep the *Matched Unit* as light as possible, while still keeping refueling intervals to a minimum, the onboard fuel tank capacity was kept to





Bill King and Don Wood set out to refuel Jimmy Oates on the fly.

about 30 gallons. Refueling was engineered by Johnson Service Manager Don Wood. "Jimmy" would slow only slightly while the fuel supply boat, driven by Bill King, would pull along side. Don would jump from the supply boat into the *Matched Unit*. Bill would toss Don the fuel cans, one at a time, which Don would then empty into the *Matched Unit's* fuel tank and then immediately toss the empty fuel can overboard. When the sixth fuel can was emptied then Don himself would jump overboard. Bill King would circle back to pull Don and the empty fuel cans out of the water and "Jimmy" would speed off at full throttle. This system, although primitive, worked very well and kept "Jimmy" and the *Matched Unit* on a fast pace.

At 8:36 p.m. the first ever attempt at an endurance record for an outboard powered craft in Canada, had come to a successful conclusion. "Jimmy" Oates had circled the course one hundred and four times and had covered over 261 miles. He had become

the first person in Canada to drive an outboard boat and motor for 12 hours, nonstop.

Jimmy Oates and the *Johnson Matched Unit* had established a new World 6-hour Record for Outboards at an average speed of 21.89 mph and established the 12-hour World Record at an average speed of 21.75 mph. This was an incredibly consistent result, a testament to both driver and equipment.

Later that summer Oates and the Johnson Outboard team set their sights on setting a 24 Hour Outboard World Record. On July 18, 1930, they covered 492 miles at an average of 20.48 mph to set up the first ever 24-hour World Record for outboards.

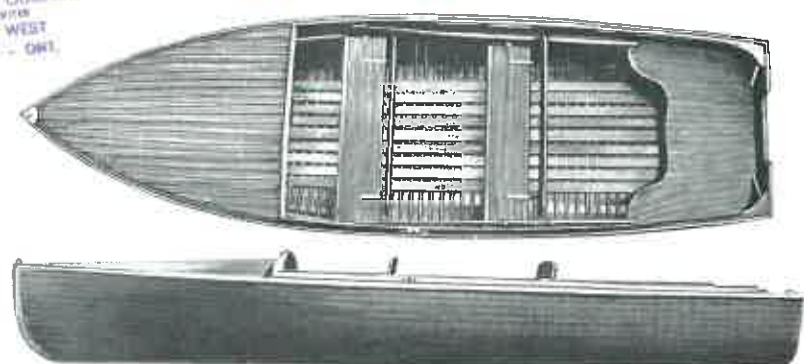
"Jimmy" Oates went on to set many other endurance records in cars and on motorcycles, sponsored by Castrol. He was many times a medalist in International Six Day Motorcycle Trial events during the 1930s. He was also the founding President of the British Empire Motor Club in Toronto and during World War II participated in the development of the military motorcycle dispatch riders training program.

In 2009 Graham "Jimmy" Oates was inducted into the Canadian Motorcycle Hall of Fame. 🌟

Author's Note: The facts and events related in this article were taken from four sources.

1. An article appearing in the July 1930 Issue of *Canadian Power Boating Magazine*, written by Bob Finlayson.
2. The book *Aurora & Ariel* by Bill Snelling who was extremely helpful.
3. The *Canadian Motorcycle Hall of Fame Website*
4. Special Thanks to ACBS Member John Cooper for connecting the dots.

The Imperial



AS A WORTHY ADDITION to its famous line of outboard motors and boats, Johnson presents "THE IMPERIAL" — the ideal, low-priced family boat.

Trim in every line, seaworthy, roomy, ruggedly built, the Imperial is designed to carry up to 8 persons in comfort and safety. The decked-in bow and natural wood finish adds immeasurably to its appearance.

Specifications are as follows:

Length—17'. Beam—62".

Depth—At bow 23 1/4" — at stern 19 1/2" — height of transom where motor is attached 16".

Type—Round bilge. Concave bottom. Weight—310 lbs.

Motor Installation—On transom.

Construction—All wood—oak framing — 3/8" half round ribs— 3/4" ship lap—Prestite construction—copper nailed and clinched.

Finish—Natural wood finish with best spar varnish.

Seats—3 cross seats, 2 sets of folding lazybacks, capacity up to 8 persons.

Hardware—1 bow ring—1 pair polished oar locks —2 pair oar brackets.

Motors used—Sea Horse, 3 to 32.

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