

The National Yacht Club... Birthplace of Outboard Racing in Canada

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In 1921, major engineering advances swept through the fledgling outboard motor industry. Two new manufacturers emerged, *Johnson and Elto*. Both introduced a revolutionary new Motor platform...an opposed firing, two cylinder design with extensive use of a lightweight aluminum alloy for both powerhead and lower unit components. Other established manufacturers such as *Evinrude, Lockwood* and *Caille* quickly followed suit. The lumbering cast iron and brass single cylinder outboards of the teen's, turning at a lethargic 700 RPM, were a thing of the past. Although initially low in horsepower, the new engine platform turned 2200 RPM with ease and the design provided great potential for ongoing development, greater horsepower, more speed and racing.



Lou Marsh, founding father of outboard racing at the NYC.

Photo: National Yacht Club Archives

At the National Yacht Club, (NYC), in Toronto, there was a Sailing Section and a Power Boat Section. Several members were involved with large inboard and Gold Cup powerboat racing. This was a very expensive sport. A small group of young adventurers saw great potential in the new outboards for affordable racing, fun and excitement. The outboard also attracted the attention of long time NYC member and avid sailor, Lou Marsh. Lou was a sports-writer for the *Toronto Daily Star* and later would become The *Star's* Sports Editor. He was a prolific sportsman, top-notch sprinter, played football for the Toronto Argonauts and was regarded as one of the top boxing and hockey referees of his era. He officiated in the National Hockey League including Stanley Cup Playoffs and at the 1932 Winter Olympics. Marsh is immortalized by the trophy bearing his name, presented annually to Canada's top athlete of the year, The Lou Marsh Trophy.

Lou became absolutely fascinated by outboards and outboard racing. Early in 1922 Marsh approached the NYC Board proposing they provide facilities for this new class of boat. The Board agreed. The Outboard Motor Boat Section of the NYC was launched May 2, 1922. Bill Landrigan owned hull #1 while Lou Marsh's hull was tagged #1b as he was the second in the water. Several days later Don and Jack Rogers launched their boats, hulls #2 and #3. Marsh named his boat *Pick 'n Shovel*, the name he used for his long running sports column in the *Star*. Marsh nicknamed these little outboard race boats "Sea Fleas" in his articles in the *Star* and *Canadian Power Boating Magazine*. He was the



Photo: ACBS Toronto Archives

Bill Landrigan, the first to launch a Sea Flea at the NYC in 1922. A prolific winner he raced this Hans Sachau built rocket in 1929.

first to use the term. The tag stuck, spread to international acceptance and the term is still widely used today.

The NYC outboard racing program grew rapidly and received a further boost from Lou Marsh when he became NYC Commodore in 1924. The same year, the American Power Boat Association had devised Outboard Racing Rules and now sanctioned outboard racing events. The NYC under Marsh immediately adopted the APBA rules for its Club outboard races.

These races were crowd pleasers and attracted large numbers of spectators. In heavy seas off the NYC, the Sea Fleas often flipped over and the Toronto Life Saving Service boats were always on hand. "It was like riding a plank with a motor attached to it," one racer said. In fact Doug Farrow's hull #22 was named *Flying Plank*. Other boat names reflected the noise and action associated with outboard racing. Names like *Roaring Romeo, Jumpin Jimminy, Syco Wiz Bang, Wild Cat* and *Whoopee*.

Marsh himself won numerous races and generated strong public interest by promoting the sport regularly in the pages of the *Star*. Marsh hailed outboard races as "undoubtedly the most sensational form of water sport developed in twenty years...To see these tiny little craft tear through the water is a revelation to landlubbers."

The leading outboard motor companies began to recognize that success in outboard racing was an important marketing tool. Consequently the horsepower race was on and boat speeds began to increase dramatically. In 1926 the largest motor of the day was the *Johnson Big Twin*. Rated at just 6 HP this motor held the APBA outboard record at 23.38 MPH. Two years later, in 1928, the largest outboard was the *Johnson Giant Twin* at 25 HP and the APBA record was at 41.75 MPH. By 1929 four cylinder outboards up to 32

HP were available and in 1931 Evinrude and Elto topped this with their 4 cylinder, 59 cubic inch model 4-60 putting out 45 HP.

With the increase in outboard horsepower and refinements to hull design...the increased speeds attracted more racers and more spectators. Sea Flea builders were experimenting with "steps" the full width of the hull in order to reduce the wetted area and reduce friction or drag. The concept seemed to work. By the spring of 1928 there were 20 Sea Fleas at home in the NYC basin including famed Toronto Argonaut football player Harry "Red" Foster. Later in life Foster was owner and CEO of one of Canada's largest and most successful advertising agencies. He was inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall Of Fame in 1984.

The NYC held its first "open", (non NYC members could also compete), outboard race on Victoria Day, May 24, 1928. "Red" Foster took home a trophy donated by Charlie Turnbull, a NYC board member and race officer. Foster's boat, *Galloping Ghost*, finished with most of its bottom



"Red" Foster, seen here in 1928, off the CNE, in the first of his many successful race boats. Photo: Canadian Sports Hall of Fame Archives

planks either cracked or split. Half full of water, it sank just as it reached shore at the NYC sea wall. Foster, however, borrowed another boat for the Free-For-All race and finished second. After the days racing Foster said he could have played the entire Ottawa Rough Rider football team single-handed and come out in better shape than he did from the pounding he took in a Sea Flea.


The NYC racing committee started a full program of weeknight racing for Sea-Fleas and held them on a 5-mile triangular circuit off the NYC as well as 1-mile dashes inside the sea wall. The races drew thousands of spectators over the summer of 1928. The NYC "hell drivers", as the racers were called, also travelled around Ontario putting on exhibitions in resort areas including the Kawarthas, on Clear Lake, and in Muskoka. The Grand River at Caledonia was another popular venue. Sea Flea racing ultimately

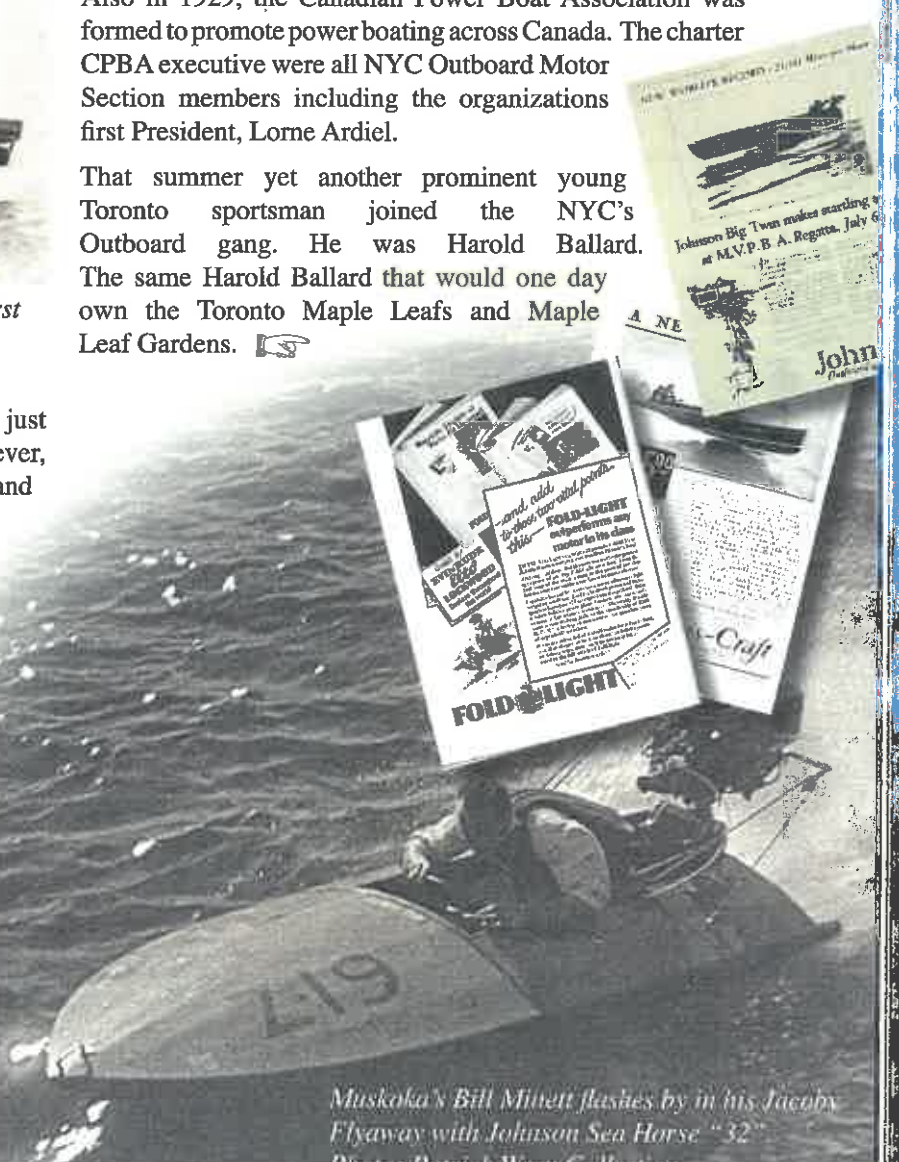
became an immensely popular spectator sport in these areas as well.

1929 was a big year for outboard racing in Toronto. The vigorous enthusiasm and leadership of the NYC's Outboard Motorboat Section convinced the Canadian National Exhibition Board to include outboard racing in their motorboat racing program. The NYC was to run the CNE outboard events. They attracted \$10,000 in prize money together with a silver trophy donated by England's Sir Thomas Lipton. The outboard races were run for two days during the '29 CNE and attracted an international field. Harry "Red" Foster won the Lipton Trophy symbolic of the International Championship. This success provoked an even greater interest in outboards that prevailed along the Toronto waterfront for many years, often eclipsing the interest in the more powerful inboards which had been racing at the CNE since 1910.

Interest was now so high at the NYC that the Club erected two additional sections of boat-houses to provide the necessary accommodation for the Sea Flea fleet. The boathouses were constructed of metal because of the fire hazard and the area received the nickname "Gasoline Alley".

Also in 1929, the Canadian Power Boat Association was formed to promote power boating across Canada. The charter CPBA executive were all NYC Outboard Motor Section members including the organizations first President, Lorne Ardiel.

That summer yet another prominent young Toronto sportsman joined the NYC's Outboard gang. He was Harold Ballard. The same Harold Ballard that would one day own the Toronto Maple Leafs and Maple Leaf Gardens. 



Muskoka's Bill Minett flashes by in his Jacoby Flyaway with Johnson Sea Horse "32"
Photos: Dennis Wynn Collection



The National Yacht Club Continued

Boat racing was a perfect sport for Ballard. He loved the water, knew the lake from cruising on his father's cruisers, *Torcan* and *Torcan II*. He was a first-rate mechanic. Ballard craved excitement and loved the risk. "We were of that age," "Red" Foster would say, "It was a new sport, it was thrilling. It seemed natural for us." Foster remembered Ballard's talent for repairing outboard engines in short order. "If anything went wrong, he would yank the engine off the boat, throw it over his shoulder and be back in no time with the problem solved". He became a valuable member of "Gasoline Alley".



At 26, Harold Ballard began his exciting and successful racing career at the NYC in 1929. Photo: National Yacht Club Archives

In August Ballard faced his biggest and most dangerous challenge to date. A 21 mile race from Toronto to Oakville for the Ellsworth Flavelle Cup. Twice the race was postponed because of bad weather. Finally, on a Saturday night at 7:30, they decided

to go, despite the fact that a strong southwest wind was kicking up two metre waves. 28 Sea Fleas took off anyway, the drivers fearing they would disappoint the public if they did not try to run the race. Only nine reached Oakville and as midnight approached the Toronto Life Saving crews and other motorboats were on the water still searching for seven lost boats. No lives were lost, but one boat sank and three or four others were badly damaged. Early on, it developed into a five-man race with Ballard among the leaders. At Port Credit, as the swells got higher, Ballard and Wesley Kelly of Peterborough broke away from the pack and began duelling for the lead with only seconds separating them. By the time they approached Oakville, Ballard had a 15 second edge. But then both drivers crossed the finish line on the wrong side of the pier. Ballard went back out and crossed properly after a warning from the officials, but Kelly just watched from the pier because his boat, battered by the waves, had sunk.

One of NYC's most memorable performances in Sea Fleas came in the spring of 1930 in the most prestigious long distance outboard race in North America, the third annual 183 mile Albany-to-New York Marathon. Though totally inexperienced in long distance racing of this magnitude four NYC racers decided to enter.

The NYC Team consisted of:

- J. R. Ardiel, a 15-year-old Upper Canada College student who had done well in B and D class races in 1929. He entered a brand new *Peterborough Hurricane* with a 32 HP Johnson. He was the youngest contestant to enter.

- Harold Ballard in his *Century Cyclone* with a *Johnson B* Class engine.
- Frank James, at 31 years of age a consistent winner in Class C. He entered his self designed and built boat with a 32 HP *Johnson*.
- Harry "Sonny" Slemin Jr. a 21-year-old university student driving an *Oshawa Blue Streak*.

Their support team was a cast of NYC members including Lorne Ardiel, President of the CPBA, Sydney Ballard (Harold's father), "Red" Foster and Lou Marsh. All officers of the CPBA.

April 25th brought a snowy daybreak with strong winds blowing as the racers faced a 6 AM start in Albany. Wrote Marsh, "the wind tossed, tide ripped waters were made doubly dangerous by mud banks and floating driftwood which lay in front of those intrepid drivers of the leaping, tearing somersaulting little cockshells - a race for the stout hearted and courageous - a test of stamina skill and nerve as well as speedy boats and speedier motors."

J. R. Ardiel who had been expected to do well for the Canadian contingent had bad luck right at the start - he struck a log and not being able to get the engine restarted within a half hour, was forced to retire from the event.

"Sonny" Slemin had a badly balanced boat having placed his auxiliary fuel tank to far forward. He was forced to lag at the start and nurse the craft carefully until his fuel load burned down. Then magneto problems cost him 45 minutes to repair. When he did get going though he was impressive as he picked off one competitor after another and finished third in the highly competitive Class C.

Ballard ran with the leaders for the first 40 miles. Then he hit a log and lost his propeller. Ballard pulled the motor into the boat, jammed on a new propeller and took off. The delay cost him 30 minutes but he had moved up considerably by the time the race neared its completion. Then, as he approached the stretch run, a large runabout passed in front of him. When he hit the large wake, his boat went vertical landing hard on its stern and throwing Ballard onto the deck. He was somehow able to hang on...scramble back into the cockpit and grab the steering wheel before the boat went out of control. Ballard finished second in B Class for amateur drivers.

Frank James however was the Canadian hero. He got off to a great start and ran consistently fast, beating the previous amateur record by over seven minutes. He finished second overall and was the first amateur. He was also the C Class overall winner. Frank received a shield from the Yacht Moteur Club de Paris, three silver cups, a runabout worth some \$600 and other prizes worth over \$2,000. Touted the *Star's* headlines "Frank James now the King of the Long Distance Amateur Drivers of America!"



The NYC's Frank James, 2nd Overall and 1st Amateur in the grueling 1930 Albany-to-New York Marathon. Photo: Ken Kirk Collection

With well over 150 top competitors from North America and Europe the Canadian NYC contingent had performed extremely well. Three of the team were in the prize money, a truly unexpected achievement. The New York dailys gave front-page coverage to the event, referring to NYC's contingent as

"the Canadian Polar Bears." Back in Toronto, papers also carried large front-page photos and write-ups in the Saturday editions. When they returned to Toronto, Mayor Bert Wemp realized the city had received a million dollar boost with all the publicity. He arranged a parade, a motorcycle escorted cavalcade displaying the teams battered boats, from the Humber River to City Hall where they were officially received on the steps. A city banquet was also held at the Royal York Hotel in their honour.

The NYC team's success in New York brought major concessions at home. A few days after their return, an NYC contingent met the Toronto Harbour Commissioners to discuss outboard racing conditions in Toronto. With the Commissions agreement a new two and a half mile course was established just off Sunnyside with buoys within 100 feet of the seawall. If the water was rough, provisions were made for dashes inside of the seawall. Police boats were made available for races each Wednesday and Saturday evening to keep all other craft out of the racing area. Crowds estimated to be 10,000 people or more would come out regularly to watch these races.

The CNE Board again asked the NYC to run the outboard races for 1930. The NYC added the Lord Wakefield Trophy Race to the CNE event roster. This was a 15 mile race for the Class C Outboard Championship of the British Empire. Young J. R. Ardiel became the first winner of the Trophy in a gruelling rough water battle with "Red" Foster. A spectacular accident on the first lap eliminated both "Sonny" Slein and Harold Ballard. Slein was thrown from his boat when he collided with a large wave. His boat continued on at full speed without its driver, then turned sharply and ran over Ballard's bow causing both boats to flip in spectacular fashion.

Later, in November, young J. R. won the Class F World Amateur Championship in Middleton, Connecticut and established a new world record speed for both Class and Division.

Spurred on by their success in 1930 a sub group of NYC members met and organized the Sea Flea Association of Toronto. They and the NYC affiliated themselves with the Canadian Outboard Drivers Association. "Red" Foster was elected the first Commodore of the Association and Harold Ballard Treasurer.

Ballard's summer time passion for boat racing was matched by his wintertime interest in hockey.

About 1930 he organized a hockey team with the core players coming from the NYC. He called the team the National Sea Fleas. Under Harold's leadership the team got better and better and in 1932 they won the Allen Cup. In latter years the Championship banner hung from the rafters in Maple Leaf Gardens and today it resides in the NYC archives.

In the early 30s outboard racing continued to flourish in spite of the stock market crash of 1929 and the looming economic depression. Forty-one Sea Fleas still called the National their home in 1931 and the NYC's continued survival was in large part attributed to the outboard racers.

Lou Marsh however had been diagnosed with heart problems and was forced to reduce physical activity on "Doctors Orders". He remained in the thick of things with a Sea Flea he owned called, *Canada Flyer*, which was driven with great success by D'Arcy Carter. Other emerging stars included Bill Minett of Muskoka in his *Johnson* powered *Jacoby Flyaway*, Bill Butler who drove *Miss Guelph* to the 5 Mile Canadian Championship at the CNE in 1930, and Andy Cleland of Hamilton who would win both the Wakefield Trophy and the Lipton Trophy in the early 30s.

In 1931 the NYC returned to the Albany to New York classic outboard race and put in another strong showing. J. R. Ardiel continued his record setting ways establishing a new C Class speed record of 48.22 MPH in *Miss Windsor VIII*. And the top NYC racers and record holders were invited to



Photo: Ken Kirk Collection

Bill Butler's Miss Guelph, a Peterborough Cyclone powered by a Lockwood Speedibee. The 1930 Canadian 5-Mile Champion.



The National Yacht Club Continued



Andy Cleland, winner of both the Lipton and Wakefield International Trophies, in his Peterborough Bullet with Johnson Sea Horse "32". Photo: Ken Kirk Collection

participate in the Lake Garda International Outboard Races in Italy.

Although Sea Flea racing remained popular, many of the early racers were now outgrowing the punishing little boats. Many shifted their interest to the development and racing of the larger more comfortable inboard hydroplanes. In 1931 "Red" Foster was the runner-up in the World Championship for 225 cubic inch inboards. As the 30s progressed interest in the outboards began slipping away and the public's prime interest swung back to the larger inboard classes.

In March 1936, Lou Marsh died suddenly and a large body of support for outboard racing passed with him. Although Lou had heart problems his death came as a surprise to the sporting world. No group missed his organizational skills and prolific promotional efforts more than the Sea Flea Racers. In fitting recognition of his importance to the sport, a large floral Sea Flea was the dominant tribute at his funeral.

Outboard races continued to be part of the exciting CNE motorboat racing program until Canada entered World War II. The CNE suspended all racing competition as a wartime fuel conservation measure. However, when motorboat racing resumed at the CNE in 1947 the Sea Flea outboard classes were not included.

The early era of outboard racing in Canada had been wildly exciting for the participants and highly entertaining for thousands of spectators. On an international level it had brought pride and recognition to Canada and to Toronto. And outboard racing had become the passion of prominent and influential Canadian athletes such as Lou Marsh, "Red" Foster and Harold Ballard. Outboard racing had truly experienced a golden era.

With the dawn of the 1950s Outboard Racing in Canada was poised to make a roaring comeback.