

How a Kid From Brooklyn Put Go-Fast Boats On The Map

By Capt Ken Kreisler (Power & Motoryacht/July 2000)

Herman and Gertude Aronow emigrated from Russia to the Sheepshead Bay neighborhood of Brooklyn in 1900. After a succession of jobs, Herman wound up working in and then owning a gas station and then, in the 1940s, a taxi company. On March 1, 1927, Gertrude gave birth to Donald Joel, the couple's third child, who joined sisters Sylvia and Lillian.

Even as a young boy, Aronow displayed the personality of a highly motivated self-starter by helping out in his father's gas station, where he had a knack for working with engines. So much so that in the early 1940s, the entrepreneurial teen had a nice little side business going: He bought used and junk cars, fixed them up, and sold them at a profit.

But there were other things in Aronow's life, chief among them athletics. By the time he graduated from James Madison High school in 1944, he had been named the borough's all around top athlete, had received the prestigious Wingate Medal for his accomplishments, and was Coney Island beach's chief lifeguard. Little wonder Aronow entered Brooklyn College that fall as a physical education major.

It may have been his restless spirit or the tenor of the times, but 1945 found Aronow leaving his studies and enrolling at the Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York. Shortly after that, Midshipman Aronow was transferred overseas.

He returned to Brooklyn College in 1947 and resumed his studies, getting back his lifeguard job for the summers until graduation. In 1948 he married Shirley Goldin, and by the time Aronow received his degree in 1950, he'd earned letters in football, wrestling, and track. After briefly working as a physical education instructor, Aronow received an offer from his father-in-law that not only changed his life, but also helped him transform high-performance powerboating.

The offer to take Aronow into his southern New Jersey construction business could not have come at a better time. The strong post-WWII economy meant lots of work for the company. So much work that Aronow struck out on his own in 1953, by establishing the Aronow Corporation. Within just seven years the Aronow Corporation became one of the most successful builders in the state and made its owner a wealthy man.



Aronow, at the helm of the new Maltese Magnum, took second place, moments behind a Donzi, in the 1966 Gateway Marathon race

But there was a price to pay for all the sleepless nights, long hours, and anxiety. At 34, Aronow, burnt out and suffering from ulcers, decided to pack it in and moved his wife and three children to Miami Beach. For a while he enjoyed the sunshine and slower pace of life and spent much of his time aboard his 40-foot sportfishing boat. She was berthed at a small marina on the Miami River that happened to be located next door to the Prowler Boat company. And Prowler built race boats.

Getting friendly with Prowler owner Forest Johnson, Aronow began to pick up on all the talk about the upcoming 1962 Miami to Nassau powerboat race. It didn't take long for his competitive spirit to kick in, and he soon found himself with ace mechanic Dave Stirrat in the Shop of celebrated custom boat builder Howard Abbey designing *Claudia* -- named after Aronow's then-nine-year-old daughter. Aronow was about to get his first taste of powerboat racing.

The 28-foot, semi-V wooden boat, equipped with triple 327-cid Chevy V-8s, did 60 mph during sea trials, a prodigious accomplishment at the time. With the race a few days away, Stirrat asked Sam Sarra, another marine mechanic with a stellar reputation, to have a look. Sarra thought the boat would do better with a pair of 409-cid Chevys he had just modified. Aronow agreed..

Claudia as in the lead with about 10 miles to go when one of the engines blew a clutch. Aronow and crew managed to finish fourth. But the near victory had him hooked. Applying the same determination that had propelled his construction business to the top, Aronow built *Claudia II*, a 27-foot deep-V fiberglass boat designed by Peter Guerke and powered by a pair of 427-cid Ford Interceptor V-8s. In early 1963 he rolled her out of the facility he had built on a deserted corner of North Miami Beach's NE 188th Street. The boat, designated the Formula 276, became the prototype for Aronow's first boat company, Formula Marine, a name he chose because it utilized the talents of such soon-to-be legends as Stirrat, Jim Wynne, Walt Walters, Buddy Smith, and Jake Trotter. For Aronow, this was the right formula. The shop would be the first of many that would make NE 188th Street known as Gasoline Alley and Thunderboat row and Don Aronow as its reigning monarch.



Aronow sits on the bow of Claudia, his first raceboat, as she crosses the finish line in the famous 1962 Miami-Nassau Race

Formula Marine's race-tested production boats were an immediate success, and in 1964 Aronow sold the molds to Thunderbird while he and his team were busy moving on to the next phase of making racing history.

Aronow kept a 17-foot hull mold after the Formula sale and trimmed it to 16 feet. Launched early in 1964, the *Sweet Sixteen* prototype became the first boat from Donzi Marine, which got its name when record producer Morris Levy ribbed Aronow about the new boat being another "Donzi," a critique of the Formula 23's less-than-macho plush interior. By the end of the year, Donzis were a force in powerboat racing.

After making Donzi a success, Aronow sold it and moved on to Magnum Marine, where he built 35-footers in a new factory next to the formula and Donzi plants on NE 188th Street. Using the same "formula," he then started and sold Cigarette -- named for a famous prohibition-era rum runner -- with Squadron XII, Cigarette II, and USA Racing Team.

By 1987 Aronow had become an acquaintance of celebrities and leaders the world over and even had a personal relationship with President George Bush that reportedly helped secure a contract to build catamaran patrol boats for the U.S. Customs service for USA Racing Team. It all came to an abrupt and tragic end on February 3, when he was shot to death while sitting in his car on the very street he had made famous. Theories abound regarding the cause -- many surrounding Ben Cramer, who had been a partner in USA Racing and was later convicted of smuggling-related irregularities associated with another boat building company -- but the case has never been closed.

Over the years Aronow's powerboats won more than 350 races both at home and abroad, accumulating more than 11 world championships and 25 U.S. championships. They have also held 25 world speed records. Whether serving as a driver or a builder, Don Aronow was the kind of guy who left a wake others could only hope to follow.