



You gotta Regatta

Story by Andy Wittry | July 4, 2015 | The Madison Courier

MADISON, Ind. – “So you’re a Regatta virgin,” a giddy Marty Gayle told the reporter on the north bank – the Indiana side – of the Ohio River, upon learning that it was his first time experiencing hydroplane racing in Madison.

Gayle, flanked by Kirk Grooms and Shane Cahall, sat in an old, elementary school-style chair a hundred yards away from the buoys that marked the west end of the boat racing course. They were camped out in the shade provided by their canopy tent, listening to Katy Perry’s “Firework,” an unintentionally fitting song for Fourth of July weekend.

The trio was positioned down an embankment, away from the hoards of racing fans, vendors and speedboats that flooded Vaughn Drive. From their vantage point, they’ll get to see the boats make the 180-degree turn and head east.

It’s not the best view – Grooms said fans who watch from the boat docks that jut out into the river get to see most of the race – but it’s a spot where only a Regatta veteran would know to set up camp.

And all three most certainly qualify as Regatta veterans. This year marks Grooms’ 54th Regatta. Gayle has been coming since ‘79, and Cahall is attending his 38th one.

“It’s just something you do growing up in Madison,” Grooms said. “You don’t know any different. It’s part of your life.

“If you grow up in Madison, you like hydroplanes.”

The reporter didn’t grow up in Madison; he grew up an hour and a half northeast in Cincinnati before spending the past three years at Indiana University.

Living on the hilltop and working in downtown Madison for the past seven weeks, he’s heard all about the Regatta – what he pieced together to be an aquatic version of the Indianapolis 500, in terms of both the speed of the racing and the colorful personality of the crowd.

He stood corrected, quickly encountering giant red underwear taped to a camper that read “PULL UP YOUR BIG GIRL PANTIES U GOTTA REGATTA!” as well as several Fear Fair employees dressed like zombies.

“You know that creature that looks like the Grim Reaper?” an H1 Unlimited official asked a friend after walking past one of the zombies. “I normally see him after three Jack Daniels.”

The official walked to the H1 Unlimited headquarters, just a block from where Big E’s Southern Q and its namesake, Eric “Big E” Smith, had set up shop for the day. It’s Smith’s second Regatta weekend.

Smith, a resident of Columbus, Ohio, had never been to Madison until his friend, Darius, a New Albany native sporting a black cowboy hat, Aviator sunglasses and an ear-to-ear grin on Saturday, suggested they take their business to the Regatta.

“The people have been real nice to us,” Smith said, as Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues” echoed over the Regatta’s loudspeakers. “They’ve accepted us, brought us right in and I can’t say it enough, it’s awesome.”

Big E’s Southern Q offers Texas-style barbeque, where “everything’s smoked slow and low.” Smith bragged about his best dish, his Po’ Boys, as he ripped open a box of Grippo’s barbeque chips, a Cincinnati-based brand that he recently added to his repertoire of ingredients in order to expand his menu.

Glenn and Logan Scott also made the trip from Cincinnati to watch their first Regatta after seeing advertisements for it. They sat outside their camper, parked next to their neighbors, a family of loyal University of Louisville fans.

Glenn’s motorcycle road trips had brought him to Madison in the past and he has watched boat racing on other parts of the Ohio River, but never before had he combined the two at Regatta.

“(It’s) very nice, everybody’s been great, friendly,” he said. “No complaints at all, except for no racing yet.”

After thunderstorms last week, race officials had to wait for the water level to drop before it was safe enough to allow drivers on the river.

Even if the race were cancelled, it wouldn’t affect Madison native Terry Lemm.

“If there’s not a race tomorrow, I’m not going to be all upset, you know?” she asked rhetorically. “I got to see these people I only get to see once a year.”

For Lemm, Regatta weekend is about the people more than anything else.

She believes in a metaphorical Venn diagram into which locals fall in one of three categories: people person, boat person, or both. She considers herself the former, while her husband, Denny, is the latter.

Denny used to work in the pits, preparing for the races, while Terry camped out on the end of West Street.

“Of course, it was time to retire and let the younger guys take over and we just decided to come here,” she said, sitting in a fold-up chair outside of her family’s camper. Her daughter, Erica, and her grandchildren sat to her left.

“It’s a little more mellow,” Lemm said, in reference to their spot on West Vaughn Drive, where there are more children and fewer empty beer cans compared to the rest of the banks. “It’s more family, so that’s why we’re here.”

Lemm can’t recall how many Regattas she’s been to, but she guesses the number is in the neighborhood of 40. She’s had a brother pass away as well as several “dear friends” in that time.

“It’s dwindling,” she said. “It’s kind of sad.”

Despite the shrinking number of Lemm’s family and friends who attend the Regatta, she has been able to pass on the tradition of the weekend to her grandsons, especially Ethan, who is “gonna freak out when he sees them big boats.”

Rain or shine, whether the Regatta happens or not, Lemm will continue to make camp on the north bank of the Ohio River.

“We’ll be here,” she said, “as long as we’re healthy enough to do it.”

Photo taken by David Campbell.