

Detroit Hydroplane Legend Fred Alter Passes Away

Fred Alter, one of the great names in Detroit hydroplane history and a World War II veteran, serving in the U.S. Navy Air as a pilot, passed away Saturday, January 9th, at the age of 94.

Even though Alter drove many different classes of boats, he is best known for his role with the unlimited hydroplanes. Alter piloted more unlimited boats in competition than anyone else (19), winning three primary races. After retiring as a driver, he served the sport for three years as APBA Unlimited Commissioner (1981-84). In 1999, he suited up once again to be a driver in the filming of the MADISON movie that was a dramatization of the 1971 Madison Gold Cup Regatta.

A sales representative for the William P. Young Company in Detroit, Alter's first unlimited ride came in 1955 with Bill Stroh's 'Miss Detroit.' His most successful seasons were between 1956 and 1958. He was the fastest 1956 Gold Cup qualifier and won the 1957 Detroit Memorial Regatta with Jack Schafer's 'Such Crust III.' He captured the 1956 Indiana Governor's Cup driving George Simon's original MISS U.S. I and the 1958 International Cup in the second MISS U.S. I.

"I may not win, but I'm spectacular," Alter would joke with his boat crew. And he was spectacular enough to be nicknamed "Fearless Fred."

In the 1957 Silver Cup Race on the Detroit River, Alter was thrown out of the Miss U.S. while leading Gold Cup-winner Jack Regas in Hawaii Kai.

"Fred shot out of Miss U.S. like a rocket," Regas said. "He hit the water and tumbled like a rag doll." Regas drove to Alter's aid only to be greeted by "Thanks, Jack" before swimming back to his boat and driving it back to the pits.

He did an encore four years later in the President's Cup on the Potomac River in Washington D.C. when he survived a 130 mile an hour disintegration in the 'SUCH CRUST IV.' The right side of the entire boat was sheared off. Alter was thrown out of the driver's seat, bouncing onto the Allison engine, before rebounding back into the driver's seat. As Alter struggled to free himself from the sinking boat, Bob Schroeder shut down his boat the Gale VII, leaped aboard the quickly submerging SUCH CRUST IV and rescued the stricken Alter.

The two accidents did more for Alter and his fellow drivers than all of his victories or daring feats on water.

He became a crusader for driver safety. Bright colored helmets to make the driver more visible in the water, smoke flares and the stopping of a race when a driver was in the water became mandatory.

Alter was inducted into the Unlimited Hydroplane Hall of Fame in 1983, the Michigan Motorsports Hall of Fame in 2013, and was Honorary Race Chairman of the Detroit Hydrofest race in 2016.

In lieu of flowers, memorial donations can be made to Great Lakes Maritime Institute/Pioneers of Power Boating, P.O. Box 1990, Dearborn, MI 48121. (GLMI/POP is a 501(c)3 organization). A Celebration of Life is being planned for late spring.