

The Dave Villwock Story

By Fred Farley - ABRA Historian

A boat racer since age 16, Dave Villwock accepted his first Unlimited Class assignment in 1989 as crew chief for Bill Bennett's MISS CIRCUS CIRCUS. Chip Hanauer was its driver. In 1990, Chip and Dave emerged as National High Point Champions with six wins in eleven races.

Following years of success in the flat-bottom inboard category, Villwock was High Point Champion in the 6-Litre Hydroplane Class in 1988 with Jerry Yoder's SUNSET CHEVROLET SPECIAL and set a 6-Litre heat record on a 1.25-mile course at 104.320 miles per hour.

At San Diego in 1992, Villwock made his Unlimited driving debut aboard an experimental tandem-wing boat, COORS DRY, owned by Ron Jones, Jr. Dave scored an upset victory and became the first driver since Howie Benns in 1974 to win his first-ever Unlimited race.

Between 1992 and 2007, Villwock won a total of 55 first-place trophies. Only the late Bill Muncey (with 62) and the retired Hanauer (with 61) had more in the Unlimited Class.

The transition from crew chief to driver wasn't easy at first. According to Dave, "Sometimes I thought I had too much of my old job as crew chief in me. I worried too much about the equipment when I was out there. I finally got it in my head that my principal job was to run the boat as hard as I could and bring back what was left."

Hired by Bernie Little as driver and team manager for the MISS BUDWEISER team in 1997, Villwock went on to capture seven High Point Driver titles and won 37 out of 58 races entered over the next eight years for sponsor Anheuser-Busch.

Joining Dave in his duties at the MISS BUDWEISER team's facility in Tukwila, Washington, was his wife, Pam Villwock, who would serve as office mainstay in the years ahead.

Dave's best pre-BUDWEISER year was 1996 when he won his first APBA Gold Cup and the National Championship with Fred Leland's PICO AMERICAN DREAM. Villwock won a total of eight races for Leland: Seattle and San Diego in 1994; Phoenix, Detroit, Evansville, the Tri-Cities, Seattle, and Kelowna, B.C., in 1996.

Said BUD owner Little, "Dave brings a lot to the party. He's a tough competitor and very strong technically. Dave has a great desire to win and he's become a top driving talent."

Many also consider Villwock to be the best propeller designer in the business.

Dave is in many ways a throwback to days of old when an Unlimited pilot not only drove the boat but also ran the team on a day-to-day basis. Like Villwock, champions of yesteryear such as Danny Foster, Dan Arena, Bill Cantrell, and Chuck Thompson oversaw the total operation of their hydroplanes.

"Super Dave's" first season with the MISS BUDWEISER emerged as a fascinating blend of the dramatic and the unexpected. Half a dozen teams arguably had a shot at winning and the 1997 National High Point Championship wasn't decided until the last day of the season.

Villwock and BUDWEISER were really on a roll during the first two months of the season. They won four races, including the Gold Cup at Detroit. But then the team suffered a horrifying setback at the Tri-Cities, Washington. Dave sustained serious injuries--and the loss of two fingers on his right hand--when MISS BUD blew over in the first turn of the Final Heat.

From his hospital bed, Villwock notified his crew, "Don't send flowers; send points." His own situation notwithstanding, the team's top priority was still in winning the National Championship.

Relief driver Mark Weber finished the season and did a commendable job. Mark kept MISS BUDWEISER in the High Points lead, qualified fastest at Seattle, San Diego, and Las Vegas, and scored a victory in the Las Vegas Cup on Lake Mead.

When the starting gun fired for the 1998 season-opener at Evansville, Indiana, the big question in almost everyone's mind was whether or not Dave Villwock still had what it took to drive the MISS BUDWEISER safely and competitively, following his accident of the year before.

But when the checkered flag dropped in the Final Heat, Villwock was the winner by six seconds over second-place Steve

David and ARC CONSTRUCTION, 137.013 miles per hour to 133.864. It was as if Villwock had never been away.

From there, MISS BUDWEISER grabbed another Gold Cup at Detroit, the third for Villwock and the twelfth for Bernie Little.

By season's end, Villwock and crew chief Mark Smith had eight victories in ten races. No team in history had ever won more than seven Unlimited races in a single year. MISS BUDWEISER finished first in 36 out of 41 heats entered and won the High Point Championship hands down--15,923 points to 8,524 for second-place HARVEY MOTORSPORTS.

After having had things pretty much their own way the year before, the MISS BUDWEISER faced a serious challenge in 1999. Villwock's former teammate Chip Hanauer had returned to racing after an absence of two and a half years as driver for Fred Leland's MISS PICO.

Despite having to re-qualify as a driver, Hanauer scored a victory at the first race of the season at Lake Havasu City, Arizona, while MISS BUDWEISER and Dave Villwock finished second.

After the first five races, MISS PICO had three victories (including the Gold Cup) to MISS BUDWEISER's two. Then Villwock and MISS BUD scored a decisive win at Norfolk, Virginia, and there was no stopping MISS BUDWEISER from then onward.

The Anheuser-Busch team won the last six races in a row for a total of eight victories for the year. Villwock and the MISS BUD also set a world lap speed record for unrestricted turbine boats at 173.384 miles per hour during qualification on San Diego's Mission Bay, a record that still stands.

The team of Bernie Little, Dave Villwock, and Mark Smith would not be denied in 2000. They claimed a 20th National High Point Championship for Anheuser-Busch on the strength of six victories in seven races, including the Gold Cup. They scored 9,576 points for the year, compared to 6,410 for second-place YORK HEATING AND AIR CONDITIONING and driver Mark Weber.

MISS BUDWEISER's only defeat occurred at the Tri-Cities where damage to the right sponson during a preliminary heat forced the BUD team to withdraw.

Villwock and Smith were especially adept at setting up the boat to offset the horsepower lost due to the fuel restriction rule.

At Detroit, Villwock set an Unlimited Class record for consecutive race wins with ten in a row, including the last six of 1999 and the first four of 2000. This broke Bill Muncy's long-standing record of nine victories with the ATLAS VAN LINES team during 1978 and 1979.

The highlight of 2001 was a victory in the season-opener at Evansville. Reflecting on the win, "We always hope to start the season with a win. But after seeing how tight the field was in qualifying and in the preliminary heats, I had my doubts about our chances. This team did a tremendous job preparing for Evansville and I could not have won that race without all of their efforts."

It was a hard-fought campaign all summer long. But Dave and MISS BUDWEISER hung tough, won 60% of their heats, and clinched the High Point Championship on the last day of the season in San Diego.

It was difficult for any of the teams to stay focused at the San Diego race, coming as it did only a few days after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the East.

"Physically, we were in San Diego," said a subdued Villwock after the race, "but emotionally we are in New York, Washington, D.C., and in Pennsylvania. Our hearts go out to those people who are grieving as a result of these tragedies."

Regarding the 2001 championship, he reflected, "We didn't have the fastest boat, but we sure had the most consistent. And that's what wins championships. This definitely is the most difficult championship that I have been a part of."

The 2002 season box score read three wins in six races, a 14th APBA Gold Cup for the team and a fifth for Villwock, victories in 14 out of 24 heats entered, and a host of local and national speed records.

In summarizing the 2002 campaign, Dave chose his words carefully. "We have an excellent team with a lot of talent and experience. My job is to make sure that we all focus on the same plan. Throughout the year, the guys worked their hearts out and never let me down."

Not even the death of the team founder could derail MISS BUDWEISER's competitive momentum in 2003. With Joe Little, Bernie's younger son, assuming the ownership role, MISS BUD kept right on winning.

According to Villwock, "Bernie was a mentor, a friend and a family member all at the same time. Everyone, through the years of the MISS BUDWEISER team, looked to Bernie for guidance and stability."

No one team won the majority of races in 2003 or dominated for very long. Competition was indeed the keyword that season. For the 23rd time since 1969, the Anheuser-Busch-sponsored MISS BUDWEISER captured the National High Point Championship with victories at Madison and Seattle.

At Madison, Villwock piloted the MISS BUDWEISER (Turbine-6) hull to first place in all four heats of the Indiana Governor's Cup. In the Final Heat, Villwock led Mark Evans and LLUMAR WINDOW FILM by one and a half roostertail lengths after lap-one and then pulled away to a decisive lead.

At Seattle, Villwock and the MISS BUDWEISER (Turbine-5) hull averaged 139.323 for the 10-mile Final Heat distance, almost a full straightaway ahead of second-place Mike Weber and MISS GRAND CENTRAL CASINO, which did 132.459.

Following the conclusion of the 2003 season, the MISS BUDWEISER team announced that the upcoming 2004 campaign would be its last, after 42 years of participation. Owner Little, driver Villwock, and crew chief Smith did themselves proud by going out a winner. They won a 24th--and final--High Points crown for Anheuser-Busch and took first-place in five out of seven races.

Also, in 2004, the BUD team finally achieved one of the few accolades to consistently elude its grasp over the years--the world propeller-driven straightaway record.

On March 13, Dave Villwock piloted MISS BUDWEISER (Turbine-5) to a world kilometer record of 220.493 at Oroville, California. This bettered the previous mark of 198.168, set by Roy Duby in MISS U.S. I in 1962, by better than 22 miles per hour.

Team founder Bernie Little would have been proud inasmuch as the MISS BUDWEISER team had failed in two previous attempts to set a straightaway record--in 1966 at Lake Tahoe with driver Bill Brow and in 1979 at Seattle with driver Dean Chenoweth.

On the last day of the team's brilliant career, September 19, 2004, the mighty "Beer Wagon" went out a winner. Pilot Villwock steered the BUD to victory one last time in all four heats of the Bill Muncey Cup.

The thousands of spectators lining Mission Bay had the rare privilege of witnessing a competitive powerhouse in perfect running attitude. Even members of rival teams applauded this final performance of an American sports legend.

Villwock was obviously pleased that his association with MISS BUDWEISER ended on a victorious note. In his parting words, he gave: "Thanks especially to the BUD crew. They're the best there will ever be. And thanks to all the fans for coming out to watch us."

After the 2004 season, Dave Villwock found himself an unemployed boat racer with an uncertain future in the sport. Not to worry. For a driver of Villwock's caliber to languish on the sidelines for very long was unthinkable. The midway point of the 2005 campaign saw "Super Dave" back in the cockpit of another top-notch hydro: Erick Ellstrom's MISS E-LAM PLUS (U-16).

The Ellstrom team had been a competitive presence in Unlimited racing for a number of years. Since 2000, the E-LAM boats had won a total of seven races with Mark Evans, Nate Brown, Terry Troxell, and J.W. Myers as drivers. But they had never won a National Championship. With Villwock, they achieved that goal.

The U-16 had run second, first, and second at the first three races of 2005 with Myers driving. Villwock kept the momentum going. He won his first race with the team, the Tri-Cities Columbia Cup, and went on to place second at Seattle, fourth at Nashville, and first at San Diego.

Villwock and Ellstrom were favored to repeat as National Champions in 2006. They won the first two races of the season at Evansville and Madison in fine fashion and appeared en route to another season triumph. Then, at the third stop on the tour at North-of-the-Border Valleyfield, Quebec, disaster struck. During a qualification run on St. Francis Bay, MISS E-LAM PLUS lost a skidfin. It ran up on shore and into the rocks.

The left sponson was destroyed and the bottom was severely damaged. Villwock was injured painfully but not seriously.

A back-up hull, piloted by Nate Brown, stood in for the primary hull at Detroit and finished an overall fourth. But the team was way down on National Points.

Villwock and the repaired primary hull were back in the winner's circle at the Tri-Cities Atomic Cup but engine trouble at Seattle and San Diego conspired to deny MISS E-LAM PLUS a back-to-back High Points crown.

Be that as it may, the Ellstrom crew nevertheless demonstrated their professionalism in 2006 and proved that--in the tradition of MISS BUDWEISER--they too could keep cool under pressure and achieve results. This was especially the case at the Tri-Cities when Villwock and MISS E-LAM PLUS rebounded from a spectacular flip during a preliminary heat at the Tri-Cities to win the Final Heat.

The boat had caught air while leading in Heat 2-A. The E-LAM did a complete turn in the air and started into a second revolution when the tail section caught the water and the boat landed right-side up. Dave refused transport to the hospital, radioed his crew that he was okay, and started the repair effort even before returning to the pit area. The propeller, the gearbox, the canard, the rear-wing and stabilizer would all have to be replaced. And they were.

Only once before in Unlimited hydroplane history had a boat flipped and come back to win the race on the very same day. That was PICO AMERICAN DREAM at Seattle in 1997 with Mark Evans as driver.

MISS E-LAM PLUS would not be denied in 2007. Owner/crew chief Erick Ellstrom and driver Villwock, claimed a second National High Point Championship for the Ellstrom Manufacturing team. This was on the strength of four victories in six races.

MISS E-LAM PLUS scored 8794 points for the year, compared to 7859 for second-place OH BOY! OBERTO/MISS MADISON and driver Steve David, who won two races.

At the season-opener in Evansville, Villwock won his tenth "Thunder On The Ohio" race in the previous twelve years. But it was no ordinary win. Dave had to hold off Jean Theoret and MISS BEACON PLUMBING in the Final Heat. MISS E-LAM PLUS averaged 140.167 miles per hour to MISS BEACON PLUMBING's 136.167 in the five-lap finale. Theoret, in lane-one, fought Villwock until late in the second lap when Jean cut the corner a little too close and almost took out a buoy.

MISS E-LAM PLUS made it two in a row the following week at Madison, Indiana. But unlike Evansville, it wasn't a clean sweep for the Ellstrom team. The new OH BOY! OBERTO/MISS MADISON defeated E-LAM in preliminary Heat 1-A at Madison.

"He (Steve David) beat me fair and square in Heat 1-A," admitted Villwock. "That's racing. In the end, I was able to beat him. But what he did today was amazing. This was a great race."

David and OH BOY! OBERTO won all three of their elimination heats to garner a spot on the front row for the Final Heat. But it was the defending champion Villwock who was able to pull away from David on lap-two of the five-lap heat race. Villwock averaged 139.641 to David's 137.684.

The APBA Gold Cup is the traditional highlight of every racing season. First contested in 1904, it is the ultimate prize that every boat racer strives to win at least once in his career. In 2007 at Detroit, driver Dave Villwock claimed his sixth Gold Cup and team owner Ellstrom won his first.

After winning all three preliminary heats, MISS E-LAM PLUS, in lane-one, led out of the first turn and throughout. OH BOY! OBERTO, in lane-two, stayed within E-LAM's roostertail length until the backstretch of lap-three. E-LAM went on to win by one and a half roostertails over OBERTO, 147.687 miles per hour to 146.526.

The fourth stop on the 2007 Unlimited tour marked the fourth straight triumph for MISS E-LAM PLUS and driver Villwock who scored a come-from-behind victory in the Final Heat of the Columbia Cup to defeat Steve David in OH BOY! OBERTO, which led for the first lap and a half.

E-LAM averaged 145.013 for the 12.5-mile distance, compared to 142.164 for second-place OBERTO. This marked the third race in a row where Villwock and David had finished one-two in the Final Heat.

MISS E-LAM PLUS qualified fastest on the 2.5-mile course with a speed of 165.687 miles per hour. This was a course record for the turbine/restricted era.

Villwock increased his victory total in the Unlimited Class to 55 at the Tri-Cities. He is the winningest among active drivers and now had won seven times on the Columbia River since 1996--once with PICO AMERICAN DREAM, three times with MISS BUDWEISER, and three times with MISS E-LAM PLUS. Ironically, it was just ten years earlier in 1997 when Villwock crashed in the MISS BUDWEISER and lost two fingers on his right hand. He was told at the time that his driving career was over.

Bad luck halted the Ellstrom team's win streak at Seattle. Villwock was illegally watered down by another boat (which was disqualified) prior to the start of the Final Heat and had to settle for a distant fourth-place.

At San Diego, MISS E-LAM PLUS experienced mechanical difficulty and failed to finish the Final Heat. But no matter. Villwock and Ellstrom had succeeded in their primary goal of clinching the National Championship for the second time in three years.

In summarizing 2007, the team of Erick Ellstrom and Dave Villwock must be applauded. They won the majority of races and the U-16 finished first in 18 out of 24 heats entered. Villwock had now won nine Driver Championships in the Unlimited Class since 1996.

At the conclusion of 2007, Villwock stood seven victories shy of Muncey's mark, which has stood since 1981. But even though Muncey led Villwock in total wins, "Super Dave" exceeded Bill in another important category. And that was winning percentage.

True. Bill Muncey won more races than anybody else. But he also lost more races than anybody else. Between the MISS GREAT LAKES in 1950 and the ATLAS VAN LINES in 1981, Muncey won 62 out of 191 races entered. That's a percentage of .325.

Chip Hanauer, between 1976 and 1999, won 61 out of 160 races for a percentage of .381.

Dave Villwock had 55 wins in 111 races for a percentage of .495, the highest of any driver in the post-World War II era.