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Chasing Tales: Part V

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Chasing Tales: Part 5

Runnin' with Outlaws

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Photos courtesy Traci Cottle

POLLS

What's your idea of the perfect PWC getaway?

- A week exploring the Colorado River, camping out each night under the stars.
- I want to circumnavigate New Zealand on my own. Anything less is for wimps.
- Chasing glacial waves in the Arctic Circle. Got a dry suit and tow board?
- Cruising around a nice resort, like Golden Eye or Atlantis, taking breaks for the occasional massage.
- I already live this vacation: It's called the National Tour.
- It doesn't matter where I go, as long as I get to ride my ski and leave everything and everyone else in my wake.

Vote

Result



I skipped out of work a little early on Friday to get a head start on the stack of boxes containing the Kommander Limited package that had so handsomely adorned my front porch the prior evening. I had a long night

ahead of me, reacquainting myself with the complexities of PWC mechanicals.

By 11pm, I was rubbing bubbles out of stickers, the once-virgin SX-R now looking more like a race boat, her engine compartment beaming with anodized Kommander and Blowsion goods. If all goes well, I'll be racing buoys tomorrow, first time in fourteen years. I figured it better to get a race behind me before jumping into an IJSBA race with the added challenge of surf at SurfSlam.

I loaded her up in my little b-van as I went over the mental checklist trying to predict what I would need for tomorrow's Outlaw race in Suisun City Harbor. The lights went out at the stroke of midnight with hopes that my chariot of an SX-R wouldn't turn into pumpkin tomorrow.

I arrived early for this 'night race' format to test the boat. I slipped the SX-R into the water and blasted it around a bit. With all systems go, I wrestled her out of the water to give her the once over. I re-torqued the head, checked the clamps, you know...the drill. With everything good, I guess I was actually gonna have to race this thing.

At signups they asked what class I'd be racing. I said I didn't know and that I had a Limited SX-R. They asked if I had ever raced before. I said, "Yeah, I used to race a lot but not since '95." They decided to put me in their Super 800 class. These 'Outlaw' races don't subscribe to traditional formats or classifications, so I was going with whatever they said.

At riders' meeting, the jubilant promoter, Jim Lambert, went through the usual meeting agenda: safety, flags, passing rules, safety, and then goes on to make a special announcement:

"We have greatness among us today gentlemen," he says. "And I want to thank you guys from the old days that've come out today to race with us."

Aw man, I'm thinking, That's nice, somebody must have recognized my name off the roster. I start getting a little embarrassed.

Jim continues, "We have former Pros and World Champions racing with us today, genuine legends of the sport." I start shuffling back and forth, "*Aw c'mon Jim, shucks, a legend? I dunno about 'Legend.'*" I'm thinking to myself.

"I'd like to introduce you guys to...."

I start raising my hand and can't help but get a big old smile going...

"...Doug Smith, former Masters World Champion, we really appreciate seeing you guys out here."

I act like I was reaching up to adjust my sunglasses, yep that's better, a little crooked there. I look down hoping nobody caught me while I clap for Doug. I can see my ego lying down on the ground bleeding. At the end of riders meeting, the head score keeper wants to speak with me.

"Hi Robby," she says with a warm genuine smile, "Since it's your first race with us, Jim would like you to wear the beginner ribbon, it just lets the other

racers know there is a beginner on the track and that they should give you a little more room when they pass you." With that, she tied a three-foot length of fluorescent orange surveyor's ribbon to the back of my lifevest. "We're all about safety," she says cheerfully.

Now fully humbled, I make my way back to my van where I meet up with "Goggles," who had just shown up. Goggles was one of my mechanics back in the day. He's been like a brother ever since. I called and told him about the race knowing he just couldn't help but come out, if there is something fast to be worked on, he's in on it. This guy has wrenches for fingers, "Edward Ratchet-hands."

"What's this?" he says fingering the ribbon on my vest.

"Beginner's ribbon," I tell him, "so they know to give me a little more room when they come around to lap me."

He starts laughing and pulls the hood off my boat. "Lap you?" He says before being distracted by all the Kommander bling. "Whoa, when did you do all this?"

"Last night." I tell him. He gets a little irritated.

"Why didn't you call me? How's it run?"

"We'll see," I shrug.

Practice only went about one parade lap for me. I fell in the wash coming off the concrete sea walls that surround the track and the ski started running foul. We frantically went to work trying to uncover what was certainly my late night mechanical mishap. We tinkered and scratched our heads and twisted carb screws but couldn't get it to rev up. Then some kid comes up and asks what class I'm riding. I tell him Super 800. "Oh, OK," he says, "cut that white connector off that the stock pipe heat sensor and tape it up, it's grounding out and forcing the ski into safe mode."

"Safe Mode?"

We cut it off and the ski barked like a pissed off Rottweiler. None too soon, my race was next.



(Above: Perched on the dock, racers had to discover the best way for gain the lead. Robby's signature "Nearly-eat-it-and-gun-it" combo seemed to work perfectly.)

Being the newbie, I got the outside. With the dock being far left of the first turn, the boats were pointed at a 45-degree angle toward the first buoy, which meant the guy on the outside (me) was about two boat lengths behind before even starting. The guy next to me, who turned out to be famed racecar driver Memo Gidley, had a drop nozzle and blasted out to a huge holeshot while I porposed off the start, losing five lengths. I thought I'd just hold it pinned around the outside right up to the point where I unloaded in spectacular cartwheeling fashion. I have no idea how I lost it, but when I stopped skipping, my boat was about 30-feet away headed for the tulies and that damn beginner ribbon was stuck to my goggles. "And so it begins," I thought and started swimming as the pack motored around the first turn without me.

"You OK?" Course Marshall John asks, grinning as I finally reach the boat.

"That didn't go so well," I said as I'm hooking up the lanyard. He motioned for me to hurry up as the leaders were coming around for the first lap.

I got up and decided I'd at least charge the whole race for practice sake. I rode hard and caught up to the pack, then started picking guys off. When the checkered flew I ended up third. Goggles was stoked.

The next moto had me lined up closer to the pole, but Memo with the damn drop nozzle got out flat again and took another holeshot. I kept my composure this time and followed into second. I chased him around for a few laps noting his lines. He kept taking the inside split, so I'd take the outside, making up a little ground each time. He wasn't making any mistakes, but on the back straight going into the split I was closing the gap.



(Above: Taking the outside on Memo Gidley and his infamous drop nozzle, Robby takes the lead to win his first moto in over a decade.)

The wakes were bouncing off the sea wall of the harbor sending waves in all directions and generally making a soupy rough mess of that section of the track. On the next lap, I rolled the dice through the rough and charged right up to his tray on the outside knowing he would take the inside split. I

carried a little more speed into the outside split and rode those five buoys as good as I have ever done five buoys in my prime.

I came out of the split with the lead and carried it through the white and checkered flags to the win. I would be on the pole for the final moto of the three moto format with a chance to win it.

"He keeps getting you on the start," Goggles coached me as if I had somehow forgotten having to chase him down.

"Friggin' drop nozzle," I mumbled.

"We're gonna have to make one of those," he says, oblivious to the fact that you can buy them off the shelf now.

For the final moto we decided to fill the fuel tank up to put as much weight in the nose as possible in an effort to keep it down on the start. If Memo gets in front he may try to pinch me out (because that's what I would do) which could put me down or way back.

I had to beat him and that stinkin' drop nozzle to the first turn.

Lining up, I kept fooling with different ideas of how to get into the tray without the ski leaping out of the water. I decided I'd try dragging one leg behind me as if I was doing a regular start but when the starter told us to start them up the boat pulled me off the dock. Just as I landed in the tray the horn blew and I pinned it. Somehow the combo of falling off the dock, letting off the throttle momentarily and then pinning it got me out in front of Memo.

I drifted over his way a bit just to be sure he got a little spray - a little trick I picked up compliments of Slasher.

With the holeshoot, I charged through to the checkers clean taking the wire to wire win. I didn't even get my hair wet.



(Above: Loaded to the gills with Kommander and TBM gear, Robby leads the pack for an overall win.)

I had one little piece of unfinished business: I swung by the starter/promoter Jim after the moto and returned his beginner ribbon to him. He got a good laugh out of it and he handed me the checkered to run along the sea wall. It felt good to have a few seconds of victorious celebration banging that checkered on my Kommander-stickered hood. I forgot how delicious that sweet taste of victory is.



(Above: Giving Jim Lambert his "Beginner's Ribbon" back, Robby takes the checkered flag out for a victory lap.)

After the races, there were all kinds of questions, "Who was I?" "When did I race?" "Where've you been?" Then, one guy remembered the stories and it all caught fire. "That was you?" "Are you gonna write more stories?" "Are you gonna write one about today?"

"Man, you looked good today," Goggles said all stoked on the day's turn of events. "You looked just like you did in '92, you didn't miss a beat, I can't believe it!"

I sat down on the liftgate and watch as Goggles wiped down the SX-R, just beaming with pride. It felt like '92 and I lost myself for a moment in the memories of all the good times we had racing together. It seems like a lifetime ago.

"Thanks, Goggles," I finally replied, snapping out of my walk down memory lane. "What can I say? I guess it's just beginners luck."



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Justin

“ Great friggin read Robbie. Don't let that checkered parade lap go to your head ”

with the race groupies. Reminder- You got a wife and kids now... Thx for the
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