

For the Record

When Jeff Rodgers became the first person to run 41 off, the pressure was off of him. It landed squarely on the shoulders of Tommy Harrington on that Labor Day weekend, Aug. 31, 1997. It was up to his boat path and times to make Jeff's record stand up and pass approval.

It was nothing new to Tommy. It wasn't the first time he had pulled a world record. But his margin for error was so small, the slightest blip could wipe out Jeff's work. And since no one had ever gotten into 43 off before, the boat paths leading up to it were going to be scrutinized to the limit. Not to mention the times. It was the last world record achieved with manual driving, so there was no computer spitting out dialed-in times. It was all on the driver.

That's part of what makes Tommy the most sought-after driver in the Southern Region and one of the best in the country – or the world for that matter. He has pulled 10 world slalom records – five men's and five women's, and at one time he had both simultaneously (Andy Mapple in 1994 and a Kristi Overton/Susi Graham tie in '95). The men's and women's pro tour slalom records are currently in Tommy's hands (Andy and Karen Truelove).

Tommy handles a boat smoother and better than anyone. He can sit behind the wheel for hours on end, and his last pull of the day will be as good as his first or his 25th. No matter the boat, no matter the boat crew, no matter the distractions.

"I don't think there's any doubt he's in the top five (in the world)," said Mapple, co-holder of the world record. "... If you ask any skier, one of the top drivers in the world for slalom would be Tommy Harrington."

Tommy has put North Carolina on the map by developing his talent and helping others develop theirs. He has done more to change our sport than any official out there. Skier performance is his priority. As Andy said, Tommy listens to the skiers and does whatever he can within the rules to accommodate them.

Tommy is driven by his genuine care for the skiers he pulls, and that rubs off on those around him, whether it's the boat crew or the skier. It shows in skiers' performances. He's probably pulled more 39 off passes than anyone, and although such a record would be hard to quantify, consider the results Tommy got at the MasterCraft Pro in 2003, when 12 of 16 men ran 39 in the semifinals. He pulled Kris LaPoint, Mike Morgan and Drew Ross

when they ran 39 for the first time – back when running 39 was more of an elite accomplishment.

It really is all about the skier for him.

“He has a good feel for the skier,” Andy said. “Any good driver has a good sense of feel for where the skier is behind him at all times. Some drivers just drive purely to drive absolutely dead straight, right on dead tolerance. There are some drivers who can drive the same tolerance, the same straight course, and yet have a feel and know where the skier is. With Tommy, I think a lot of it is because he is a skier himself. ... It’s not that you have to be a good skier to be a great driver, but I think that’s one of the things Tommy senses in that group of people. He understands where the skier is and what the skier wants.

“Another thing that’s good about Tommy is he’ll listen to the skier. If the skier wanted something different or if the skier told him something, like ‘Hey Tommy, you don’t feel very good here or you don’t feel very good there,’ he’d try to do something about it within his parameters. He’s not a case of ‘I’m the driver, you’re the skier.’ ”

When speed control was first being developed, Guy Haggard’s Accuski system was the leader. Haggard patterned Accuski after Tommy and Miami’s Rocky Pasqua, trying to replicate the touch they have with the throttle.

“Originally when we came up with speed control, it was to provide a training device. Period,” Haggard said. “It was to provide people the ability to train under consistent conditions in driving so they got the feel of Tommy Harrington and Rocky Pasqua. Those are the two drivers we patterned it after.

“The idea was to have a training device that mimics the very best, and that’s Tommy and Rocky. That was our goal.”

After Accuski came Perfect Pass. How many people in North Carolina realize speed control was originally patterned after one of our own?

Tommy drove the last world record set with manual driving, Jeff’s 1 at 43 off in 1997. Tommy was also the first to pull a men’s world record using speed control when Andy tied Jeff a year later. Their record still stands.

Before either could pass approval, they had to go through the International Water Ski Federation’s video review. In that review, the driver is allowed a maximum of 20 centimeters of deviation – about 8 inches – at any single point in the course. That doesn’t mean he can take 8 inches at every buoy. The cumulative total for the entire course is 49 centimeters of deviation, or 19.29 inches. Think about that: 19.29 inches of side-to-side movement for the entire length of the slalom course.

Here's what Bob Corson, chairman of the IWSF tournament council, said after reviewing the video of Tommy's boat path in 1997 and giving Jeff's record the official stamp of approval:

"The boat drivers who do this are extremely skilled. They do a fabulous job. The total deviation on Jeff's previous pass (41 off) was pretty close to zero actually – maybe 5 or 10 centimeters total deviation."

Tommy does that pass after pass, skier after skier.

As his reputation developed, his schedule bulged. He became a senior driver in 1981 and was the second from North Carolina to do so, after Lawrence Bradley. He was the first from North Carolina ever invited to drive in the nationals. He drove at the regionals and nationals for the first time in 1990 and he's been a regular at both ever since.

He was getting invitations to drive in professional events as early as 1993. Even before that, he drove the prestigious SuperStars competition in Groveland, Fla., and was invited to a team competition in Destin, Fla., where professional skiers representing their boat companies went head-to-head in the MasterCraft vs. Correct Craft challenge. After Tommy pulled one round in Destin, a driving problem surfaced in the next round and the skiers got together and decided Tommy should drive thereafter.

"The skiers voted they wanted Tommy and I was elected to be the one to go get him," Andy said. In a sense, a star was born.

One of Tommy's endearing qualities is his silence. No chatting up the skiers between passes. No unsolicited ski tips. No interfering with their thought processes – unless they initiate the conversation.

"I always enjoy skiing behind him because I like to harass him a little bit, because he's always so quiet, disciplined," Andy said. "He never wants to interfere in anything and I like to try to get him to interfere, just to mess with him at the end of the line. He would never interfere with anybody, especially the skier and what they're doing. ... He's the kind of guy who would get on his bicycle and ride away from controversy, even though he seems to have been in quite a bit – not through his own doing but just because when you do something good, people think you're doing something wrong. If you're good at something, people think you're cheating. Unfortunately, that's the politics of sport. And I admire him because even if he was getting harassed, whatever it was, he never got vocal about it. He just went about his business."

Going about his business earned him invitations to drive at the U.S. Open (three times), the Canadian Masters, the U.S. Junior Masters and multiple pro tour stops in Camden, S.C.; Greensboro; Charleston and Akron, Ohio. He was also the driver tournament director Greg Davis insisted on

having to help insure the success of the inaugural Big Dog tournament near Cleveland last August. That tournament has drawn rave reviews for its innovation ever since.

No one got complimentary plane tickets to fly in and pull a tournament – until Tommy. The Miami Ski Club has flown him in and made him a critical part of its Record tournament schedule for more than 10 years. And records do fall at Miami; that’s where Andy tied Jeff in the fall of 1998. With Tommy driving.

With the invitations he gets, Tommy could spend every summer pulling nothing but Record and pro events, but he doesn’t. From youth clinics at the Cobles’ to Class C tournaments at Clear Lake and Records at Ahoskie and Skyview, he’s there. He’s loyal. His state comes first.

For a sampling of his schedule, try keeping up with this stretch in 2004: seven Carolinas tournaments leading up to the Southern Regionals in Mulberry, Fla., followed two weeks later by the nationals in West Palm Beach, Fla., then the Pro Tour in Akron, Ohio and the Big Dog near Cleveland, Ohio on successive weekends. That’s four plane trips in five weeks. He took another one a month later for Miami’s Record tournament.

Over the years, he’s worked some 310 tournaments, starting in 1977.

If you need more proof of Tommy Harrington’s impact on water skiing in North Carolina, look at other senior drivers he has nurtured and for whom he has opened doors. Talk to Pat Bloodworth, Dana Reed and Darnell Almond. In Florida, talk to Becky Lathrop, president of the Ski Club of the Palm Beaches and a rising driver of note. Ask her if Tommy has had an impact on her driving career.

Or just let the world’s undisputed all-time greatest slalom skier say it all.

“Whatever (honors) he gets, he’s deserving of,” Andy Mapple said. “The guy has a lot of passion and a lot of enthusiasm for the sport and the athletes. He has tremendous respect from all the athletes. I don’t know that there’s a single slalom skier who wouldn’t want to be pulled by him. That’s very creditable – to have his talent, to have any athlete in the world who would choose him to pull them slalom.”

*Submitted by Marjo Rankin
February 2005*

North Carolina
Water Ski Hall of Fame
Nomination in the Officials category

Tommy Harrington
Sanford

- * 1st from North Carolina to be invited to drive at nationals
- * 1st from North Carolina to be invited to drive a pro event
- * Invited to drive:
 - Pro Tour stops in Camden, Greensboro, Charleston, Akron (Ohio)
 - U.S. Open (three times)
 - Canadian Masters
 - U.S. Junior Masters
 - SuperStars
 - Numerous regionals and nationals
- * Pulled current men's and women's pro tour slalom records
- * Pulled last world slalom record set with manual driving, and first men's world record with speed control
- * Has pulled 10 world slalom records
- * Simultaneously held men's and women's world slalom record pulls in 1994 and '95

*** Has pulled national records for the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil and Italy**

*** Has driven in some 310 tournaments, an average of 11.48 a year for 27 years, starting in 1977 (That average is closer to 15 per year since about 1990)**

*** Was model for Accuski speed control system**

A Driver's Perspective

by Dana Reed

Tommy has been instrumental in the development of excellence in all NC drivers. He has taught me and several other senior and regular drivers the true meaning of performance. Performance, that is the word that describes Tommy. If the performance is not there, he will figure out the reason. It may be the boat, the course, the cruise, or the driver. But, performance is what he is all about. He is extremely critical of anything short of perfection.



A quick story, I was just beginning to drive, we were in Raleigh and I was pulling practice, and Tommy was skiing. I turned and looked over my shoulder as he was going around 5 ball. He saw me glance at him. When we got back to the dock, he chewed really hard on me, asking me how could I drive straight if I was looking @ the skier. To this day, if I even think about looking @ the skier, I can hear Tommy's voice. I almost quit that day, but he talked to me later and that was my 1st lesson in performance.



Tommy has taken NC drivers to a level of respect that is unsurpassed. He was instrumental in Pat Bloodworth's development, our first chief driver of the 2004 Nationals. I guess the biggest reason Tommy is so special to me is he shows no jealousy among the drivers. He demands that of all of us and I hope we've responded well. Finally, he enabled me to have the opportunity to pull not one but two world record open men performances in 2003. He gave me the chance to succeed or fail, luckily I didn't fail. He wants success for me and all NC officials. He's a great guy, a perfect driver, and a very good friend.