

Intell/Aug 20/99 p. 6

*Waterski kite flier
led Canadian team
to world domination*

By Paul Svoboda and Tom Gavey

The Intelligencer

Tell Rollie Bonneau to go fly a kite and he's likely to comply. Happily.

In fact, he'll even strap one on his back.

More than 30 years ago, Bonneau and a group of fellow Canadians were the best waterski kite fliers in the world. Next month, he'll be among three 1999 inductees to the Belleville Sports Hall of Fame.

A pioneer, an innovator and perhaps most importantly, a daredevil, Joseph Thomas Rolland (Rollie) Bonneau helped revolutionize a sport that still captures the imagination of spectators at waterski shows across North America — not to mention provides plenty of thrills, and sometimes spills, for participants.

"I once fell from about 70 feet when my tow rope broke," recalls Bonneau. "I managed to kick my skis off before hitting the water but I couldn't sit down for a week. Luckily, my voice didn't get any higher."

It may sound hard to believe coming from a man who routinely sailed high above the water with a large kite on his back, but Bonneau insists he was so excited to hear about his Hall of Fame induction that "the hair on my forearms stood straight up."

Hooked on waterskiing when introduced to the sport by a friend in the 1950s, Bonneau attended an aquatic show at Cypress Gardens while vacationing in Florida and caught his first glimpse of waterski kite flying. One glance was enough. Bonneau wanted to do it.

"I said that's for me," says Bonneau. "But there was nowhere to buy a kite so I built my own. Eventually I started manufacturing them myself and sold them all over the world."

Bonneau became very adept at his new sport. So talented, in fact, that French officials phoned him one day in 1963 to invite him and a handful of other Ontario waterski kite fliers to a first-ever World Championship in Vichy.

"I said I'd love to go but I couldn't afford it," says Bonneau. "They said no problem, the whole thing was on them. So I said okay."

The Canadian team finished first overall with Bonneau placing third, individually.

Thus began about five years of utter domination of the sport by Bonneau and his Team Canada compatriots. Eventually the Canadians were so good, promoters — mostly Americans — lost interest in setting up events.

"Most of the competitions were in the U.S.," says Bonneau. "We were winning so many trophies, about 75 per cent of them, that the Americans stopped hosting them. Then the sport sort of petered out."

Today, says Bonneau, waterski kite flying is restricted to boat shows and aquatic festivals. He says he last took to the air about five years ago, just for fun.

Trophies lining one wall of his rec room at his West Moira Street home attest to Bonneau's skill and nerves of steel:

— First place at the North American finals in 1961, 1962 and 1963.

— First place at the Canadian championships in 1962.

— Third place at the 1960 North American finals.

— Captain of the winning Canadian entry at the 1969 continental championship in Texas.

Later, Bonneau coached and sponsored waterski kite flying at the national and international levels. Then, together with Doug Smith, he organized the now defunct Belleville Waterski Club.

Waterski kite flying isn't practiced locally anymore, but Bonneau's son Paul, now living in Seattle, has at least carried on the family tradition of reaching for the sky.

"He para-sails which sort of evolved from parachuting and kite flying," says Bonneau. "He must have my genes. He likes getting high."

Looking fit and trim at 70, Bonneau insists waterski kite flying wasn't as dangerous as it looked.

"We never got anyone killed," he says. "Once, however, a guy on our team was so excited to win a competition that he bit the bar on his kite and broke all his teeth."

Bonneau was born in Montreal and moved to Belleville in 1969.

He'll be inducted into the Belleville Sports Hall of Fame, Sunday, Sept. 12 at 1 p.m. at the Market Square.