



NEXT TO the boat ramp at the Tench Reserve on the Nepean River in Sydney's west is a big red sign. "No Wash Zone," it blares, "Idle Speed Only." Twenty metres away, 12 boats are tearing around an inflatable orange buoy at unearthly, astronomical speeds. Of course, the word "boat" does no real justice to these machines. They're long and sleek – covered, winged catamarans with glassed-in cockpits and outboards the size of kitchen fridges. Give them a clean stretch of water and they can nudge 250km/h in a handful of seconds. There are no brakes and they take corners like leopards angling on tiring gazelles. No, "boat" won't do at all. Perhaps "spaceship" is more apt.

The spectacle at the final leg of the Australian Formula One Superboat Series is something akin to war. There's the thunder of engines working at their limits,

the scream of metal moving fast, the bass thrum of water being hacked, pummelled and torn to shreds. It's a cacophony that consumes everything: the microphoned prattle of the commentators, the bellow of the crowd, the traffic on the nearby Western Motorway. It even chews up the roar of rotating blades from an overhead chopper. It's the din of war.

Then there's the sight of the beautifully elegant machines skimming across the skin of the old, brown river, trailing 100m plumes of water. It's the sight of men – helmeted, goggled and tiny in their cockpits – moving across water at a velocity God never intended. These are speeds that could snap your neck in an instant if something goes wrong.

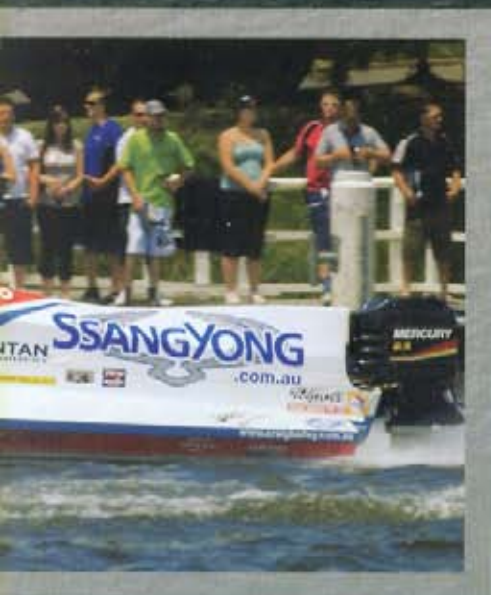
And once the chequered flag falls and the boats are jostling at the ramp – the drivers standing like conquering Romans on the



THE POINTY END

AT THE FINALS OF THE AUSSIE F1 SUPERBOAT SERIES, METHOD RATHER THAN BREAKNECK MADNESS IS THE KEY TO GETTING YOUR BOW OVER THE LINE FIRST.

BY AARON SCOTT



decks of their boats with their helmets in the crooks of their arms – the river looks beaten. A ghostly, blue-grey pall hangs over the water – shades of *Apocalypse Now*.

And on a burning summer's day at Penrith, with Rhys "Rev Counter" Coles and Craig "Beetle" Bailey neck and neck for the title of Australian F1 Superboat Champion, it's all you can do to stop yourself humming "The Ride of the Valkyries."

Of course, these spaceship-boats are nothing more than toys. Indulgent? Probably. Phallic? Certainly. But they are so shiny, so lithe, so damn fast. How does it feel to have the muscle and sinew of 380 horses bulleting you across water at meteoric speed? And how do you explain

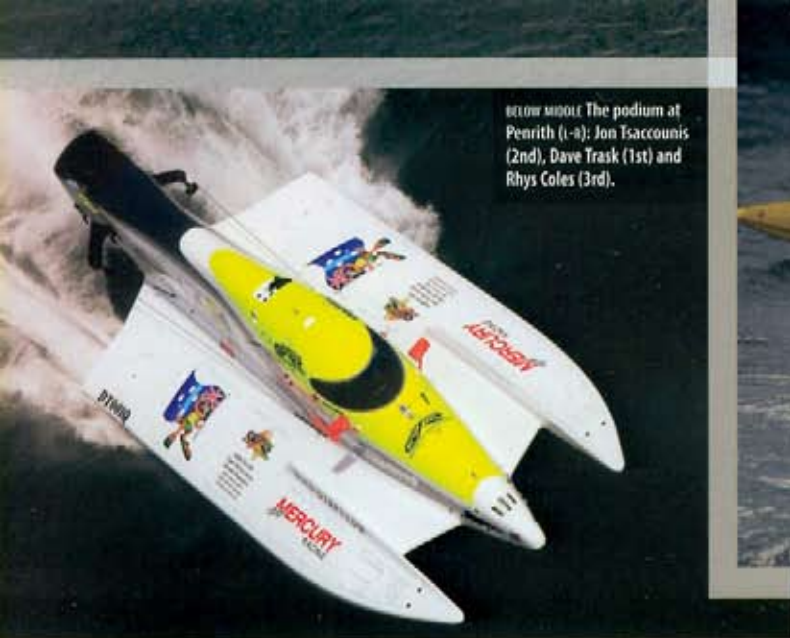
the sensation to the kind of timid journo who feels a lip-biting thrill when his Ford Laser cracks 140km/h going down a sharp hill? Ask the drivers what it's like and they're grasping at air, rolling out empty superlatives: "amazing ... unbelievable ... awesome ..." But that doesn't help. How does it really feel?

"Well, I guess the closest thing I can think of," says Dave Trask, last year's Australian champ, "is that it's like pulling a wheelie on a motorbike at 200km/h plus. You're in control but, you know, not totally in control."

Okay, pulling a wheelie at 200km/h plus ... that's about as easy to imagine as, well, hitting 240km/h in a space-boat.

"Look, no-one realises what it's like out ►

The Australian F1 Superboat Series is a cacophony that consumes everything. It's the din of war.



BELOW MIDWINTER The podium at Penrith (l-r): Jon Tsacounis (2nd), Dave Trask (1st) and Rhys Coles (3rd).

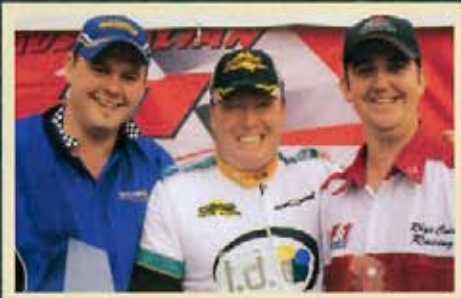


there," says Coles. "Two hundred and forty clicks on the water is completely different to anything else."

It's as true an answer as I'm likely to get, but it does the sport a disservice to brand it as nothing more than a buzz, a rush, a sure-fire fix for adrenaline junkies. It's all these things, but it's also tactical and meticulously skillful. As the day's races play out, there are recognisable patterns in the boats' movements – the lines they take, the water they aim for.

"You've got to be at the pointy end of the field," says Michael Page, a wily, 47-year-old veteran of the game. "If you're not getting clean water, it's a long way around the buoys. At the outside of the turns, you've got the crappy water, so your tactics are to squeeze your opposition on the corners, to get the corner first without breaking the rules or having them ride up over your decks."

"If you can get far enough in front and



then move over a bit, to shut them down, to make them change course, then that's strong tactics. These days, some of the guys go hard to put water under you, to put water on the outside of you – that's another tactic. But you've got to get a good start. If you don't get a good start, you're history."

Races are decided, it would seem, at the blocks and at the buoys.

During his first race of the day, Trask is strong off the mark, superb at the turns. The

water is "corky", but Trask's lines are impeccable. By lap four his lead is comfortable. Bailey swings in at second. Coles is fourth.

However, even on the straights – when feet are on the wood and wheels locked tight – there's an inordinate amount of skill at work.

"It's like getting into an aeroplane and trying to fly it a foot off the water," says Bailey. "Basically, you've got aerodynamics and hydrodynamics working together. You've got both air and water going underneath the boat. Realistically, you've only got the last 18 inches of the boat in the water. Any more than that and you're washing off speed. So it's really a balancing act."

Balancing act? The phrase is as watered down as boarding-house coffee. Walking a tightrope of fishing line might be more appropriate. Sit low and safe in the water and your boat will putter along like your average tinnie. But get up high and get too



The boats nudge 250km/h in seconds and have no brakes. These are speeds that could snap your neck in an instant if something goes wrong.





much air under the thing – just a whisper – and it will go up like a newspaper in a thumping southerly buster.

"Yeah, look, the guy who's fearless and goes in there flat out, well, he could end up on his head or he could end up a hero," says Bailey. "It just depends."

"If you're racing out there and you've got no fear, then you'll come unstuck," says Coles. "If you try to drive to your limits, and your senses, then you'll generally have a good weekend."

There's not a driver on the circuit who won't admit to being just a tad afraid. But it's how they work their fear, how they let it fire them, that can decide a race.

"Look, I'd be a liar if I said fear didn't come into my mind," says Trask. "It has to because that's what keeps you sane enough to keep it in control. How fast you go is just a matter of how insane you are prepared to be."

Trask smiles as he coins what could be the

F1 Superboat motto. But his mirth seems tissue-thin. He knows how fine the line can be. The boat nudges into a breeze, a puff of air gets underneath, and then ...

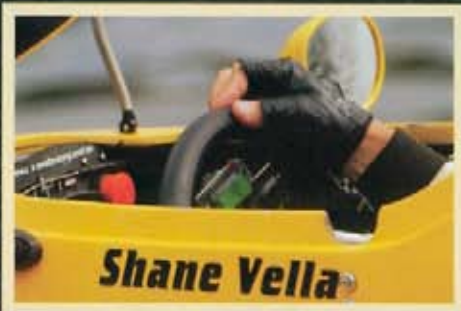
For much of last year's series, Coles, Bailey, Trask and Page fought it out at the tip of the championship alongside Craig Truslove. But then, at the stage held at Port Macquarie last July, things unravelled.

"Yeah, I just went up like a kite," says Truslove. "It was an unusual flip, because

you normally go over quickly. This one sort of went up and glided there, flopping from side to side. I was just sitting in the boat bashing the wheel shouting, 'Come down, come down!' Anyway, I thought she was going to; she seemed to settle down. Then it was just *bang!* Over backwards.

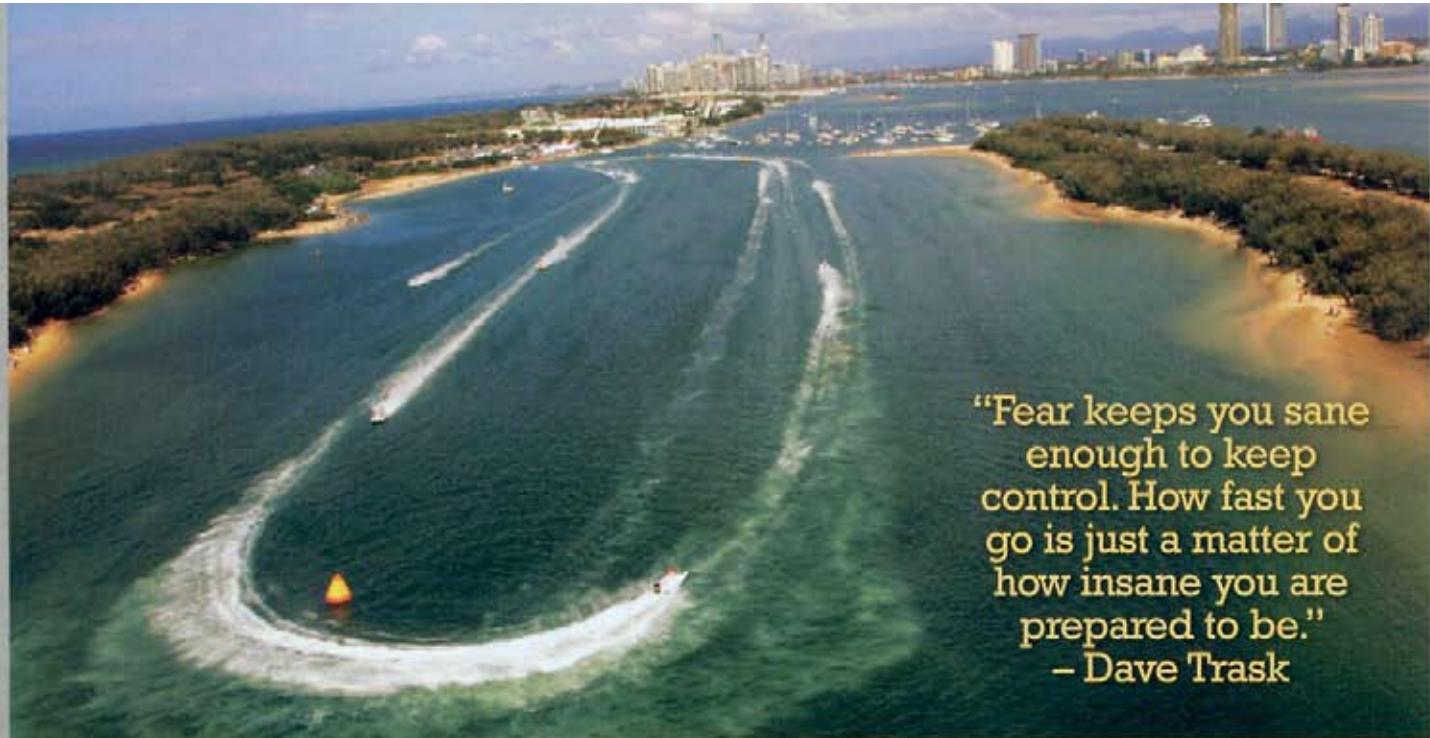
"The most daunting part isn't so much the flip, it's when you come down. You're completely disoriented. You're upside down and strapped in. The boat's full of water and you've got to release your belt, get away from the steering wheel and get yourself out. You don't know which way you're supposed to be moving. I went straight into panic mode."

Truslove, of course, did get out. It took him close to 20 seconds, which is a long time when you're wearing a helmet and a full-body driving suit. His boat wasn't so lucky: the engine was shot, the wiring wrecked, the hull water-logged. It bumped him right out of the chase. ▶



The right way: Team Trask celebrating their Penrith win. **RIGHT** The wrong way: Craig Truslove takes to the air in Port Macquarie.





"Fear keeps you sane enough to keep control. How fast you go is just a matter of how insane you are prepared to be."
— Dave Trask

Truslove's accident still fresh, nobody treats the final event of the year as a place for daredevil theatrics. The drivers push hard and look for clean water, but above all they strive to finish the races and take maximum points. Consistency is the catch cry. Ask Bailey. In the second race of the day, he snaps an engine rod. His boat comes out of the third turn, noses the air, flutters briefly, then drifts to a halt. Off to the side of the course, belching smoke, hanging low in the water, the boat looks utterly helpless – a cheetah pumped full of buckshot. Coles powers through in third place. It's a disaster for "Beetle." Coles opens an 11-point lead and the DNF means Bailey starts at the flabby end of the field for the last race.

He looks a broken man. He slumps in the team tent, his driving suit stripped to his waist. He was only on the water for a lap and a half, but his face is grimy with sweat.

"We have to go for broke now," he says. "It's our only hope of winning the championship." As his boat is backed into the tent by a 4WD, he stares at it like a father might look at his criminal son.

Coles, on the other hand, shows a kind of tight-lipped jubilation. No-one wants to glory in an opponent's misfortune, but ... "If I can stay out there and circulate," he says, "I should be right." There's the

tiniest of smiles. It's so close he can almost scratch it.

In the end, Bailey's last roll of the dice is wonderfully audacious. His start is explosive, his aggression searing, his lines faultless. He slices his way through the field. With a handful of laps to go, he moves to fifth place.

But Coles' task is simple. There's nothing reckless about it. Like a fine craftsman, he sits in behind Trask, carves out 15 unspectacular laps, finishes third and takes the title.

"It's awesome, just awesome," he gushes, before his crew lifts him up and upends him into the river.

At least I think that's what he said, because it was difficult to hear. As his team cheered and the crowd bellowed in celebration, the "Ride of the Valkyries" started to run through my mind once again ... the din of war ... the din of victory. ■



Whether held in Sydney's western suburbs, or on the Gold Coast (top), the Aussie F1 Superboat Series is always very GC (misole).

