



Driving the Dead Rise

by A. Craig Copetas

A mistake at 90 miles per hour is finito time for you," quipped Don Aronow, 51, the designer of the 24 Degree Dead Rise Off-Shore Racing Hull.

Often imitated but never equaled, Aronow's high-performance speedboats—capable of exceeding 90 miles per hour in six-foot seas—are not only coveted by racers; they are the assault



"None of our boats has ever been caught in a high-speed chase."

craft of the multi-billion-dollar marijuana industry.

"We are indeed flattered, but have torn emotions about marijuana importers using our boats," he said. "The authorities have come around asking questions, but we don't know anything."

"I'll tell you this, though. None of our boats has ever been caught in a high-speed chase."

Aronow's office is lined with trophies. Before retiring from racing in 1970, he won over two dozen world-class races. In world championships in 1967 and 1969, his classic Cigarette boat destroyed the competition, winning

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Master of the doomsday Dead Rise, Don Aronow cranks his Cigarette past 95 mph.

the inland waterways of Florida, so the story goes, the Signature Dead Rise was made for one purpose alone: smuggling."

To keep up, the Coast Guard, Secret Service, CIA and even Ringo Starr all maintain Dead Rise fleets. "There are thousands of Cigarettes out there," said a smiling Aronow.

Burning 50 gallons of gas an hour at 70 miles per hour, the Dead Rise is not for everyone. Prices start at \$20,000, and can exceed \$250,000, making the Dead Rise not only the pride of smugglers but the plaything of millionaires. Richard Nixon owns six of them, Ayatollah Khomeini owns five, and the Sheikh Saud al Mulla of Dubai owns two. Other satisfied customers include Robert Vesco, dolphin expert John Lilly and Ambassador George Bush.

Most Dead Rises take off with two pilots. One drives the two 350-plus-horsepower engines while the other operates the trim planes, which control how high, how low and at what angle the hull will travel. There is absolutely no room for error. The Signature Dead Rise is a combination of brute speed, awesome power and such delicate balance that even a sneeze during a turn can send driver and passenger into the water with bone-crushing force. Nonetheless, I decided to take a ride.

The speedometer read 75 miles per hour as the driver climbed out of his leather-lined cockpit and told me to take command. As I settled into the pit, the water scout grabbed my waist and attached two hitches to my belt with a long, heavy cord.

9 of the 11 races it entered.

Aronow's inspiration was the original Dead Rise, which belonged to a Prohibition rumrunner in New York City. Nicknamed the "Cigarette," it would stalk offshore and wait for a competitor to off-load some booze, then strike with deadly speed and disappear. It took the Coast Guard over three years to capture the first Cigarette.

Nearly 50 years later, Aronow's Cigarette and the more advanced Signature Dead Rise have become the PT boats of the marijuana navy, combining speed, mobility and, if necessary, firepower. Explained one water scout: "On

"That's in case you flip it," he said calmly. He clipped the other end of the cord to the ignition system. "If you fall out, the cord will pull the ignition and we'll stop." It is impossible to sit down in a Dead Rise—the pressure would suck you away like a chicken in a tornado—so you stand, locked to the leather-encased wheel by the force of the wind.

Once behind the wheel, I told the water scout, now in control of the trim planes, to slow it down. Instead, our speed leaped. The sea salt began condensing on my face, gouging small holes in my cracking lips. Needles of water pelted my body from every side. I felt as if I had been exploded out of a howitzer into a full gale hurricane. My only thought was to maintain as straight a line as the five-foot seas would allow.

Then I caught sight of the freighter. "All right, lean to the left and turn this sucker away from that freighter!" screamed my copilot above the blast-furnace roar of the engines.

As I began the turn, my body slammed up against the side of the pit. I could feel the boat beginning to tilt.

"Work the wheel! Work the wheel!" yelled the copilot, laughing at whatever terror he could make out through my salt-caked eyelashes. "Just work the wheel and we'll come out of this okay!"

He was right. Dead Rise pilots must become one with the wheel, giving and taking as the sea demands. I steered the Dead Rise out around the freighter and took a compass setting for Bimini, some 60 miles east.

Thirty miles off the coast, the sea began to churn into six-foot waves that chopped our bodies as the Dead Rise bounced from swell to swell. Smacking the top of a cresting wave, we blasted off four feet into the air, coming down hard and fast, only to be propelled into the air by another mound of churning water. Our bodies were battered and the bruises began to show.

On a long run, the bow of a Dead Rise will be packed with Goodyear rubber bladders filled with extra fuel, giving some boats a range of 700 miles or more. "Those bladders give us a lot more freedom out there," said the water scout, as we headed back into Florida's Intracoastal Waterway, the marijuana highway of America. "There is no way that anyone is going to get a hold of us with that kind of fuel capacity."

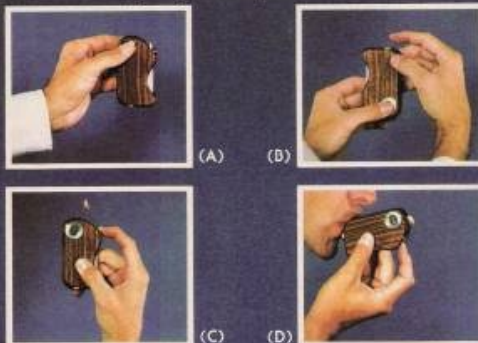
We had been out for over three hours when we made the turn into the Intracoastal at 60 miles per hour. The copilot pointed to the wreckage that decorated the coral reefs guarding the entrance. "Couple of kids in a Dead Rise tried to get in here a bit too fast last week. They had to scrape one of them off the coral with a putty knife." ■

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