

'Thunder' set to boom

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North Tonawanda Mayor Austin Tylec was on hand earlier this week for a news conference announcing that "Thunder on Niagara" would be returning to Gratwick Park.

"We couldn't be more excited for this kickoff," he said.

Tylec called the event one of the biggest seen in Western New York and in New York state.

"There's a lot of noise, a lot of excitement. There's a lot of great organizations involved," he said.

Mike Geblein said the boat whose crew he works on, the Hydro-Fish, aka GP88, reaches speeds of 160 to 170 mph. A big competitor is Ken Brodie of Grand Island, driving GP:50. He said the Hydroplane Racing League here is the premier racing league in the nation.

Roesch said, "This is an international event - there's no question about it. We have boats from Ontario, boats from Quebec, and we even have three boats from New Zealand that will be attending this year's event."

He noted it's a cooperative event with North Tonawanda: "It's a tremendous venue, not only for the boat races, but also for the spectators."

On Wednesday, Roesch also highlighted what he calls "the Grand Island Navy," a flotilla of hometown boat owners, race drivers and crew from Grand Island who are fan favorites of many at the "Thunder on the Niagara."

"You have an individual - his father was racing and now he's racing - Greg Barker," Roesch said. "Between him and his father, there's probably over 70 years of boat racing they've been involved with. Then you have Ken Brodie driving the GP:50. We have Dan Kanfoush - he's driving a boat, and Mike



Hydro-Fish crew member Mike Geblein, left, talks to North Tonawanda Mayor Austin Tylec about the "Thunder on the Niagara" hydroplane races returning this Saturday and Sunday, to Gratwick Park in North Tonawanda.

Geblein, who is pit crew. He's been involved with the boats for over 40 years, and he lives on Grand Island."

Roesch outlined a history of venues for the event.

"The Niagara Frontier Boat Racing Association, who puts the race on, has been racing on the Niagara River for 82 years. They basically started out at the foot of Sheridan Drive in

the Town of Tonawanda, went to the (Buffalo) Launch Club (on Grand Island). Then we raced at the Isleview, then we raced at Niawanda Park, and now we're at Gratwick Park in North Tonawanda" for about 12 years, he said.

Gratwick Park is ideal for boat racing, Roesch said, because you've got the whole park to work with, and they can

allow recreational vessel traffic to proceed at a slow pace along the Grand Island shore, where they can anchor, if they wish, and watch the race.

"Unlike when we're racing at, say, Niawanda Park

Plan to Go

"Thunder on the Niagara" returns to Gratwick Park in North Tonawanda starting at 10 a.m. Saturday and Sunday

or Isleview; we had to pretty much shut the river down," he said.

Roesch said he is excited about the upcoming boat racing: "Probably the most gratifying news so far is the weather conditions. Saturday and Sunday, they're supposed to be in the low to mid-70s and hardly any wind. So, of all the years that we've been putting the boat race on, I'm hoping and crossing my fingers that the weather conditions stay the same as what they're predicting."

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