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Kent Keough (left) and John Jenkins battle during the 5 litre race at the Dayton Hydroplane Regatta qualifying races on Saturday.

By Dave Lance

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Fitzgerald helping women make waves in racing

Her female peers call her a pioneer, but hydroplane racer Ann Fitzgerald shrugs it off saying they're just being nice.

"That means I'm the grandmother or old fart," said Fitzgerald, a resident of Rio Grande, N.J.

Actually, Fitzgerald is 55 and has raced hydroplanes for 24 years, much longer than her female counterparts at the Dayton Hydroplane Regatta that began Saturday and wraps up today at the Eastwood Park Hydrobowl.

Fitzgerald has raced all kinds of boats, from the 7.0 litre to the 1.0 litre. She's raced since 1975, was inducted into the Hall of Champions in 1979 and began racing for the Thumann's Deli Best team in 1989.

In 1991 alone, Fitzgerald was the state champion of Virginia and New Jersey, set the one-mile course record and won the Summer Nationals. She was the National Champion in 1996-97.

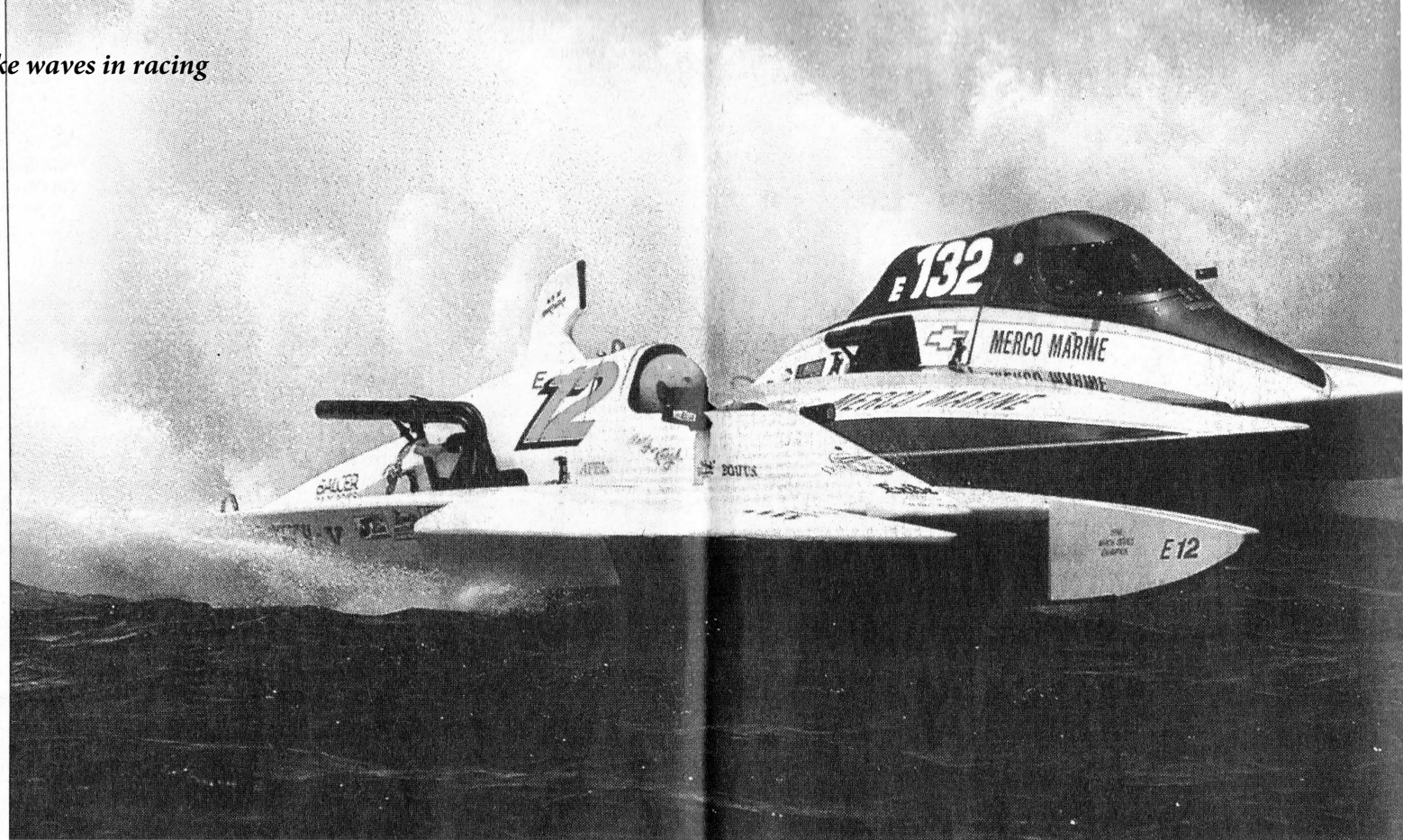
"Ann opened a lot of doors for a lot of people," said fellow driver Alicia Cheezum.

Fitzgerald shies away from talk about being a pioneer. In fact, she said, if it weren't for her team, which includes husband John as crew chief and Robert Bernardon as the engine builder, she wouldn't be involved in the sport.

"I have a crew that believes in me," Fitzgerald said. "I'm not out to prove anything. I just have the financial support and the team support and no one said I couldn't do it."

When Fitzgerald began racing, she was often the only woman participating. The numbers haven't increased dramatically, but there will be three women in one race today, the 1.5 litre competition.

They are Cheezum of Centreville, Md., Valerie Wilson of Hampton, Va., and Jennifer Falcinelli of Sterling Heights, Mich. Wilson is the veteran having



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raced eight years.

There are more than 70 drivers entered in the Regatta, only four of whom are female, which hasn't slipped the attention of Falcinelli, last year's 1.5-litre regatta champion.

"It would be cool if the women finished one, two and three," said Falcinelli, 26. "Hopefully, we can get more women involved."

Cheezum, 32, began racing four years ago, a year after her husband, Joe, took up the sport.

"I didn't know anything about racing, but I told him I was tired of tagging along and I wanted to try," Cheezum said.

So she did and eventually became good at it, winning the

North America Championship in the 1.5 litre. But Cheezum's biggest thrill came two weeks ago when she won a qualifying race in the 5.0-litre Hydro division, the first time she'd ever won a 5.0 race.

She's had her 5.0 boat, Big Jake, for two years, but just began driving it last season because she didn't feel comfortable in it. She's scheduled to race in the 5.0 and 1.5 litre finals today after all race finals were canceled Saturday because of strong wind.

"I still prefer the smaller boats, but I'm not going to give up the big boat either," Cheezum said.

Racing is in Wilson's blood. Her father, Durward, who has

been racing hydroplanes for 25 years encouraged her to get into the sport. Wilson, 30, barrel-raced horses as a teen-ager, but sold her horse to buy a 1.0-litre stock hydroplane when she was 19. "It's addictive," Wilson said about racing. "It's a high and I think it's a great sport for women to get into because it's fun.

Racing hydroplanes has become a way of life for her.

"Everyone I know is in racing," said Wilson, who met her Canadian fiance at a race in Virginia. "If they don't know racing, I gotta let 'em go."



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The national modified heat qu...
raced on Saturday. High wind