

FURIAS MAYDAY!

MATT JACKSON EXPLAINS A SERIOUS SITUATION IN A HIGHLY-MODIFIED SEA FURY RACER — THE LAST OF THE “SUPER UNLIMITEDS” — WHILE ALSO REFLECTING ON HIS QUARTER-CENTURY BATTLING AROUND THE UNLIMITED PYLONS

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by Matt Jackson



I had just landed in the Sea Fury *Dreadnought* after completing the Gold final at Reno when I was approached by Chuck Greenhill and Dennis Sanders. Chuck asked me how the race had gone and I recall saying that I wished I had a bit more smash to get around the leaders. Second place had become the norm for the race plane we call the “Buick Race 8” — the mighty R-4360-powered *Dreadnought*. The next words Chuck said caught me by surprise. He asked if I had my wish, then what would I like race to win the following year?

As we walked back to the Unlimited pits, I pondered the question for a

moment only to blurt out “a slicked-up *Dreadnought* should do the trick.” Within 30 minutes, a plan was devised where Chuck would purchase the “other” R-4360 Sea Fury named *Furias* from owner Bill Rogers. Sanders Aeronautics would rebuild the plane into what would be considered the ultimate Sea Fury racer. *Dreadnought* had proven that the Pratt & Whitney R-4360 was up to the mission as a race engine after having shown its strong durability in the last 20 years of Unlimited air racing — making the silver and red beauty the highest purse-winning racer in history. So, we

had the engine and the decision was made to modify the airframe with a *Dago/Strega* canopy, modified engine cooling system to include a Pete Law-designed oil boil-off system, along with a Sam Davis’ custom exhaust system. All this was now top priority with several other aerodynamic modifications to be carried out in the process.

Upon my return from Reno that year, a deal was struck with Bill Rogers to purchase *Furias*. The plane was disassembled and trucked to the Sanders facility at Lone, California, for a complete makeover. Well, as usual, the plans made by man don’t always go at the projected pace. After getting the plane back, Dennis uncovered several serious issues with the airframe. A decision was made to hire two seasoned mechanics to spearhead *Furias*’ development. William “Bill” (or “Kerch” as most called him) Kerchenfaut and David Fagoaga. Bill was the winningest crew chief in air racing history and Dave was a master fabricator and systems designer extraordinaire that had helped propel *Dago Red* into the victory column on several occasions. I had simply the best team, best restoration shop, and best owner/sponsor a race pilot could ever want.

Work on *Furias* proceeded at a breakneck pace only to eventually run into personality issues between Kerch and several of the other participants on the crew. Bill had a way of reinventing the wheel when it came to powerplant modification considerations and the Sanders team tried to explain that we already had an engine that could produce more power than had ever been seen on the race course. At some point, his feelings were hurt and Kerch got up and folded



Right side console in *Furias* with the emergency landing gear control at the bottom. (MW)



Furias instrument panel. (MW)

his *Furias* tent — only to show up in the *Voodoo* pit with Bob Button and his talented team. The loss of Bill and the reorganization around Dave Fagoaga took a few weeks. This meant we lost the opportunity to have the plane ready for 2010 Reno. The good news was that Dave pushed on with our remaining crew and finally got the airplane ready for testing just prior to the 2011 September battle around the pylons. Dennis made the first flight and then I did all the others. Flight testing went without a hitch and we were able to enter Reno 2011 — although the plane would be in yellow primer and not in its planned bright and distinctive race scheme.

As we all know, 2011 was when we lost the *Ghost* with its owner/driver and friend Jimmy Leeward. So, *Furias* didn’t have the opportunity to show its stuff since the tragedy abruptly cancelled the event. I can tell you that *Furias* exceeded all my expectations and we clearly had a racer that could have taken it all, given the opportunity. In the cockpit, I witnessed sustained speeds during testing that had reignited my dream of winning the Gold Unlimited Championship.

Reno 2012 was going to prove to be my greatest opportunity to win. The Sea Fury had its new slick paint scheme that just said, “I’m fast!” Dave had the engine and all systems running perfectly. The

Matt Jackson heads down the chute for a qualification run. Note how the doors for the tail wheel are open. (DF)