

Lester Johnson Memory

The Marine Stadium really started with an assist from the Orange Bowl Committee. At the time (late 1950s,) Ernie Seiler was the mad genius of the Orange Bowl Committee. His goal was to make Miami more attractive to visitors and tourists and he would do anything to accomplish this mission.

His right hand man, Dan McNamara was a big fan of Unlimited Hydroplane racing. The Unlimited Hydroplanes were the largest and most exciting of the racing boats. Dan ultimately went on to become Head of the Orange Bowl Committee

Dan tried to establish South Florida as the ideal place for Unlimited Hydroplane racing. But to do this, you need flat water as these boats rarely even touch the water and are not very stable. So the idea became "Why don't we build a place to watch Unlimited Hydroplane Racing and this will help accomplish the Mission of the Orange Bowl Committee."

Ernie Seiler was not a bashful person, and he went to work. He had a friend in the Maritime Business-Alex Balfe. Alex was Head of the large boatyard Merrill Stevens and he knew everything about the water. So Ernie enlisted Alex to help come up with a plan to create a racing venue for Unlimited Hydroplane Racing. Alex worked with some people who were smart, engineering types and they looked at a location near Crandon Park filled with mangroves. This was at a time where there were no environmental restrictions and people just did anything. So Alex and his group developed a North-South Course adjacent to Crandon Park.

The Unlimited Hydroplane people were in favor of it-so Ernie and his group figured it would be possible to do.

At the time, Melvin Reese was the City Manager, and he was one of the most contrary, difficult characters I ever knew. A Napoleon figure, he liked to dictate. So here they were, Ernie and Alex, two guys who thought it would be great to have a facility to for boat racing, and they presented it to Melvin Reese.

They showed the North-South layout to Reese, he studied it for a few minutes, and then replied: "I think Unlimited Hydroplane racing would be good for Miami, but the course has to be East-West, not North-South."

Ernie and Alex reasoned with Mel Reese and tried to show him why that layout would not work as well. But Reese loved to use his power in an "either do it my way or not at all" manner. And that's the way the Stadium was built-East/West.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the City was not able to manage the Stadium successfully and it kept going down. Hurricane Andrew came and the political wolves were waiting around to benefit from it. They had ideas-and there was a political bag man who worked with City Commissioners who put together an array of other uses for the land adjacent to the Marine Stadium. He brought in engineers to say that the Stadium had been damaged by the Hurricane. I knew Jack Meyer, the original engineer of the Marine Stadium. I asked Jack if anyone had asked him about the Stadium since he knew more about it than anyone else. Jack said "No, no one has talked to me. The building is overbuilt and it will last 100 years."

I remember going to the Marine Stadium many times-either by boat or sitting in the grandstand. You would have boats 15 deep by the floating stage. The bigger boats would stay in the back.

I also remember the Easter Sunrise Services. I've got kids 50 years old and they still remember it. We would wake up early, when it was still dark and they would say to me "where are we going?" I especially remember Corrie ten Boom, a Holocaust Survivor talk about her Christian Faith, at a Sunrise Service. It was just inspiring to be there at the amazing setting of the Marine Stadium and listen to her.