



GOOFY, NOT CRAZY

Crossing Lake Michigan to prove a point, and get free breakfast.

Never underestimate a man in a pontoon boat. It was late summer of 1999 when I walked into the Lake View Inn and found Malcolm “Goofy” Sohm hunched over a Wisconsin highway map spread out on the faded blue Formica bar top.

“I’m going to cross Lake Michigan,” explained Goofy when I asked what he was up to, “on my new pontoon boat.”

Down the bar, two strangers in Cubs caps guffawed.

“You crazy hayseed,” said one, “you’ll never make it in a pontoon. We just ran to Ludington in a 29-foot Formula and had waves breaking over the bow. That lake will bust a pontoon in two.”

Goofy had commissioned the GS26 (Goofy Special 26) to test his now-patented T.A.P. fin system, devised to smooth out the ride in rough water.

Cue bartender Wally humming the song “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.”

What these two tourists didn’t know is that Goofy had just taken delivery of a pontoon custom-built for him at Muza Sheet Metal in Oshkosh. Twenty-six feet long, it rode on 26-inch diameter tubes and had a Merc 200 on the transom, quite something when the biggest production pontoons available were 24-feet long and had 21-inch tubes. Goofy had commissioned the GS26 (Goofy Special 26) to test his now-patented T.A.P. fin system, devised to smooth out the ride in rough water. Say, for example, if you wanted to cross Lake Michigan.

“I think I’ll make it easy, but I need a witness,” said Goofy as he leaned over the bar. “Maybe you’d like to tag along in the Formula. You can either pull me out of the water or buy me breakfast in Michigan.”

Cue Wally, humming the theme song to Gilligan’s Island.

Later Goofy confided that engaging the Illinois boys at the bar was a stroke of good luck. He really didn’t want to make the voyage without a chase boat.

Using the highway map, Goofy determined that the shortest distance across the lake was from Sturgeon Bay to Frankfort, Michigan, roughly 87 miles as measured with a bar straw and the scale on the map. And at dawn on August 28, small craft warning be damned, the GS26 motored out of Sturgeon Bay with Goofy and his pal Terry Kiser aboard with a cooler, dry clothes shoved in a trash bag, and six jugs of extra gas. They trailed the Formula because Goofy neglected to rig the GS26 with a compass. Or a radio.

“The Illinois boys had some kind of chart plotter,” said Goofy, “but they’d also been out drinking all night and pretty soon were puking over the side and got off course.”

Seas of 2 to 4 feet increased to 6 feet, enhancing the misery aboard the Formula. The GS26 was just the right length to confidently span the waves, and the big tubes and fins kept it riding high and happy. When the boats reached Michigan, they were 15 miles south of Frankfort and Goofy had just enough gas to make it to the marina. Goofy and Terry got their free breakfast and everyone made it back to the Lake View for the Friday fish fry that night.

Turns out Goofy had an accurate vision; the mighty GS26 was a precursor to the big pontoons and fin systems that have captured the market today. He might be Goofy, but he’s not crazy.