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Monday, June 30, 2003

Police on trail of hit-skip boat

Man says he, other victims are 'lucky to be alive'

By Reid Forgrave
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Darkness sheathed the Ohio River, and the path of Brian Maher's new speedboat was lit only by its lights.

Maher, joined by his wife and 5-year-old son, drove, and Tom Bocson played lookout as the boat trolled east on the Ohio, going less than 10 knots.

"Next thing I remember, I was sitting on the floor and blood was everywhere," Bocson, one the boat's passengers, said Sunday from his hospital room at St. Luke East Hospital in Ft. Thomas, Ky. "The guy next to me had a big gash on his arm. Nobody even heard it coming."

A 47-foot cigarette boat traveling between 40 and 50 mph had struck Maher's speedboat, police said, and the driver Friday night left the boat's seven passengers to be saved by each other and another passing boater.

Cigarette boats are large, offshore fast boats that cost from \$100,000 to well over \$1 million.

On Sunday, police in Dayton, Ky. said they believed they were hot on the trail of the boat's driver.

"We think we know who he is and where he is, but we're just running down all our leads," said Dayton police spokesman Sgt. Raleigh Barnett. "He was out being an ass all day long."

When arrested, the man will be charged with seven counts of wanton assault, a felony, Barnett said.

The Dayton police department, which is investigating the hit-and-run accident, has received dozens of tips during the past two days, Barnett said.

"We've got a lot of credible information about an individual and the boat he's on," he said.

Barnett would not give the man's name until police arrested him, but said the suspect had been kicked out of at least one bar earlier Friday.

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The boat was fairly conspicuous.

Tim Suter, the mayor of Moscow, Ohio, told Clermont County police he saw a white, purple and yellow boat with a severely damaged motor being towed by a blue GMC truck about 1 p.m. Saturday. The phrase "Snap Decision" was written on the boat.

A member of the Boone County Water Rescue team said similar boats are more common on the Ohio River than people would expect.

On Sunday several of the victims of the hit-and-run were still nursing wounds in area hospitals. Only Maher's wife, Debbie, and son, Jesse, escaped unharmed.

"I just don't remember a thing," Steve Abernathy said from a room in University Hospital in Clifton.

Abernathy was the worst off of the group, having suffered facial fractures, skull fractures, several broken ribs and a broken shoulder blade.

"All I know is I'm feeling really bad right now," he said before hanging up as another victim, William "Howie" Wright of Troy, Mich., entered his room.

Bocson, also of Troy, had several broken ribs, a broken ankle, plenty of bruises and scores of stitches on his eye and his knees from shards of broken glass. He also had burns on his right arm.

Also injured were Doug Howard and Maher, who were both taken to University Hospital in Clifton.

The men had ended a motorcycling trip through the hills of West Virginia a couple days early when thunderstorms threatened the area.

Before the accident the boat was traveling very slowly because "he's got a brand-new boat," Bocson said. "You don't want to go fast and hit a 15-foot chunk of lumber."

After the crash, Debbie Maher stood up and accounted for everyone.

"We all started screaming for help, and one of us called 911," Debbie Maher said.

They caught the attention of another boater, Ron Lawhorne, who helped them ashore and made a tourniquet for one of the boaters.

"I'm telling you, we're very lucky to be alive," Bocson said. "It's an absolute miracle. We all could have been hit by the props - that boat had two engines on it."

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