

FUEL FOR THOUGHT

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Inaugural Column

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Why would more than 100 volunteers work like dogs for a whole week in the middle of a superheated godforsaken dry lake? Not just once, but for more than 50 years. What's the attraction? Speed – pure, nerve chattering, bone tingling speed. Legions of dedicated workers addicted to ISO's (identified speeding objects) swarm the Bonneville Salt Flats to make speed happen. It's why the 54th Annual SCTA/BNI Speedweek saw more than 300 cars, trucks and motorcycles knock out more than 1600 runs. Score: cars, 92; bikes, 54 new speed records. Zoom.

Some, like me, also come for the geography. As the morning wrestles darkness to the mat, I relish standing silent, alone, gazing with little child wonder at my good fortune just to be there. Without warning, a sassy cackle of Detroit Iron zings my senses from a Zen state into hyper drive, "Let the racing begin!" and the rest of the world falls away as inconsequential. Speed animates, bursting vibrantly alive.

Genuflect, bow down, taste the salt and believe. Listen to the rich baritone reverberation from Rick and Nolan White's Spirit of Autopower/National Parts Peddler streamliner ripping across the saline speedway. Hard of hearing Nolan, 71, of San Diego, CA, was the big dog this year when he pounded out a 413 mph record average from a 422 and 404 run pair. Don't think for a second that Nolan is an "old man." Shake his hand and you'll discover where the Vice Grip people got the idea for a pair of fancy locking pliers.

I caught up with them on the starting line, just before Nolan earned Top Speed of the meet. Rick was strapping dad into the cockpit and going over his checklist. As I clicked off the perfect "father and son" portrait, I called out loud enough for Nolan to hear through his helmet, "Rick, you know if you told people that you had to help your elderly father get dressed in the morning they just wouldn't understand."

Rick chuckled as Nolan's eyes grew big as a pair of Moon discs at the mention of "elderly", but I knew he was smiling to himself under that fireproof head

sock. "Imagine trying to explain 5-layer Nomex," I added. We busted up again and the joke took the edge off the starting line tension. Later, after the double, big block beast lost both parachutes on both runs putting Nolan into the south 40 mud one way and way-too-damn-close to Interstate 80 and the truck stop on his record return run. Nolan was OK, but he had blown a right front tire, melted the brakes and fried the rear wheel bearings trying to put a "whoa" in his "go."

Adding a sweet historical note came from the air-shifting rhapsody played by Tanis Hammond in husband Seth's #77 lakester. Madam Hammond became the first woman among 48 men to earn the 300 MPH Chapter blue hat of the 200 MPH Club. She inspired the entire room of 400 to smile as they watched this mother of three adult children her skip her way up to the podium and bounce off the floor a few times before the 2 Club officials could hand Tanis the arc-shaped crystal plaque commemorating the 304 mph record. Her smile could power New York for a month. That lady drives a racecar proud.

I noticed that Suzuki Hayabusas were everywhere. John Noonan rode to 228mph record in MPS-BG class and according to SCTA/BNI Rules and Impound Steward Dan Warner; those production two-wheelers bombarded the 1650 class. "There were so many plus 200 runs that if it doesn't start a manufacturer's fight, I don't know what will," said Warner who was also feted with the 200 MPH Club Person of the Year award that distinguishes an individual who contributes unselfishly to the sport of land speed racing as well as the club.

Patrick Tone, 34, J. D. Tone's son, nailed 202mph in an unblown XXO Fuel Roadster using a GMC engine they refer to as a "garbage truck" motor. A salt virgin at age six, he drove for the first time a decade later and this year became the first one to earn a spot in the 200 MPH Club driving a stand-up roadster grille shell powered a vintage motor. I understand that the elder Tone, not a 2 Club member, has been told he is wearing the helmet for now on.

One of my favorite vehicles is Carl Heap's elfish green International Harvester semi dubbed, "The Phoenix." Powered by an immense V16 diesel, the team spends more cash on ice than fuel for each run to keep the engine cool. When Phoenix is pushed off the starting line its stream of black smoke turns every head in sight. By week's end Heap nailed a 263 mph record in the diesel truck class. Master hauler, that he is.

Nostalgic brute strength is shepherded by Ron Main, a guy who understands what friendship is all about. Driving his orange streamlined masterpiece, "Flatfire", Main upped his own record of 286 to 296 and then, despite being so close to the coveted 300mph mark, stepped out of the cockpit, detuned the

engine to gas and let his long-time pal Paul Green earn his 200MPH Club honors with a 223 mph average.

Glenn Barrett, taking care of timing duties since 1983, commented that this year's Speedweek was one of the most trouble-free in years, "There was no major down time, no equipment malfunctions, everyone was genuinely relaxed and in a good mood," he told me. It was the same in inspection, on the starting line, at impound, all over. Kudos to the SCTA Board and volunteer crew. The low point, as Barrett put it so aptly, was that it ended too soon.

LATE BREAKING NEWS: Nolan White succumbed to injuries sustained at the SCTA World Finals at Bonneville when his Autopower streamliner parachute system failed after making a 422MPH run as part of an FIA World Record attempt. Look for a full report on this courageous, speed-seeking pioneer racer in next month's column. For those who have labored after one, a land speed record has a flavor the slow will never know. Nolan White led by example, tasting triumph in the speed challenge arena reserved for only a dedicated few. My heart is heavy at his passing and my prayers turn toward the White family asking that their days ahead be given some measure of solace and comfort.