

# Fuel For Thought

Landspeed Louise

## Hurling Rotunda, The World's First Three Bill Brick

No one sets a record at Bonneville all by themselves. Everyone has help. Everyone involved provides some measure of help on the way to a record. And sometimes giving that help gets you some help you never counted on.

So it is with land speed racing's first 300MPH brick, otherwise known as a highboy roadster with a shape that is the



knows how to set up a race car; he is chassis savvy and knows where the weight belongs. John builds engines that will live a long time while under abuse for miles at a time."

Working at NHRA keeping the association's computers running right while completing his studies for Bachelors Degree in Computer Information Systems, he spent all his spare time crewing with Dave and John soaking up everything he could about the sport.

"John and I make all the tuning calls on the engine," he continued, "I read the car's sensors and interpret the data for John so he can make better, quicker engine adjustments and then for Dave so he can make driving adjustments such as eliminating guessing on

inherent antithesis of an aerodynamic streamliner.

Dave Davidson, 68, owner and driver of the fiberglass bodied 911 roadster, whose wife Shirlee tells people that he "never grew up, but did get responsible," inked a significant spot in the sport's history when the car clicked the clocks for a 301.150MPH record in Class A/BFR.

Sure, it was a squeaker average, but it got the job done nonetheless.

Now about that help... Back in 2002, when land speed racer Fred Larsen, the man who spanked Grand Prix driver Rudolph Caracciola's near 30-year record, retired from the sport and his illustrious Larsen & Cummins streamliner took up residence at the NHRA Museum in Pomona, CA, there was this kid on the team just getting started in his hot rodder phase.

Donny Cummins, now 29, grandson of Larsen's late partner, Don Cummins, made his first trip to the salt at age four with his father, Bob, who was crew on the Chevy-powered streamliner.

The kid was drenched with fascination, dipped in speed and has wrung pleasure out of every LSR experience since then. A few minute's conversation with him tells reveals an eloquent, go-fast verve.

It was Larsen and Rick Thayer who got young Cummins hooked up with Davidson and engine man John Beck with his father, Bob, who was crew on the Chevy-powered streamliner.

"I had a strong passion to keep going," recalled Cummins, "Dave really

the optimal shift points, and avoiding wheel spin."

Cummins quickly points out that the number crunching doesn't tell you what to do, it "only tells you what is happening", which allows Davidson to squeeze the engine exactly where he should to get a little more out of the car on each run.

Because this partnership is loaded with trust and respect, an historic 301mph class record with a 6,200-pound brick is on the books. This target was always in the back of Cummins mind, he knew they would get there, but he didn't think they would be first because he recognized there were so many good teams after the same thing.

"There will be others; we know that," observed Cummins, "We were just lucky enough to be first. Without data logging I don't think we could have done it so quickly, it allowed us to get there faster, to maximize every run, and not leave things to chance or a guess."

What about the car being a slippery brick? Cummins doesn't think so.

"We're no more aerodynamic than others, we simply found out how to make the car go faster. You don't want to run out of power so the car starts pushing wind - that makes the car very unstable. You need to keep accelerating so you don't hit that wall of instability. All that power gives you another problem - wheel spin. Because we run on salt and not asphalt, that's where the chassis comes into play and weight distribution becomes critical."

Another critical crewman is John Beck, who owns Pro Machine, a race engine building business he opened in 1983 before moving the operation into Davidson's Chico, California Vintage Hot Rods (VHR) by 2006. Today is has morphed the business into a brand name operating from within VHR.

"Dave is one of the most focused drivers I have ever met," stated Crew Chief Beck, who also drives the race cars, "I knew Dave would be the guy to get this job done; he is great organizer. His ideas are often better than mine. He leaves the engine and tune-up all to me. We have a great mutual respect for each other and more importantly we are good friends."

Beck and Davidson raced together for 20 years and he insists the racing is all about having a good time because it isn't a business; they do it because they love it - just like Cummins.

"Donny is a piece of history already, and he is barely 30 years old," said 55 year-old Beck, "He is a walking, talking part of land speed racing, once we old guys hit our rocking chairs, I'll feel comfortable with the future of the sport."

Then there is "Fast" Fred Dannenfelzer's pivotal contribution: providing the trio with an engine baseline starting point on the salt tune-up that included tips on nozzle area, fuel pump size and degree of ignition. Those performance pearls, combined with Davidson's, Beck's and Cummins's experience, generated brick superiority.

But wait, there's more! Famed engine man Les Leggitt also played a part...

"The intent was to build a 300MPH roadster from the beginning," explained Davidson, "The idea fomented when Les Leggitt wanted to put one of his engines in my car, but it wouldn't fit. Les later began building his own roadster and asked me to drive, but before it was com-

plete he offered to sell me the car."

Just like any other hot rodder, Davidson had his own ideas for the car. He cut off the roll cage, lowered the car two inches and contoured the seat to reduce wind resistance.

Then he changed the steering, made few body modifications and finished off the plumbing, electrical, safety and fabricated the dashboard. The 911 car is 50% Leggitt, 50% Davidson.

In went with one of Leggitt's engines, a late model Keith Black Chrysler Hemi that hovered between 4,500 to 5,000HP. All that energy for a brick? Are your eyebrows raised?

"Les Leggitt taught me things I was able to apply to my racing programs," said a grateful Cummins, "Les would teach me something and then a month later quiz me about it. That helped me retain the knowledge because if I didn't get it right Les would say, "you're not listening" and we would go over it again."

First runs were at El Mirage in July 2009 and the car was restricted to 200MPH but Davidson throttled up to 235MPH and then took it out of gear and pulled the chute coasting through the lights at 197MPH.

The following month, on the salt at Speedweek, they made it to 282 MPH - 25MPH over the existing record - before breaking a blower belt leaving the starting line during the record run. A persistent oil problem ended their racing season and the pair decided to take separate paths for the 2010 season.

"Through the help of the top fuel racer Mike Strassburg I found a drag racing engine," said Davidson, "Mike also helped us source new parts and we bounced ideas off him during the design and build process."

Beck knew that in order to elongate the 4.5-second fuse into a 90 second fuse parts needed to be replaced that could operate efficiently under the increased time load. He understood what caused problems in monster 7,500 HP power plants and didn't want to save a couple bucks at the expense of success.

No one had to tell him that if the engine comes apart at speed it could be life threatening. They added new exhaust valves, springs, rods, even the valve seats got serious attention and everything was double checked.

"We dropped the compression ratio a bit," revealed Beck, "Mechanically you don't change a lot, but we made sure the internal parts would withstand stress loads for minutes, not just a few seconds

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on a drag strip. There are only a few people successful at taking a top fuel engine and making these engines work in land speed racing. Fast Fred is one and Les is another.”

Back on the salt at the 2010 Speedweek the first pass revealed a vibration and fuel leak that spit onto the windshield; he shut-down, but still coasted through at 279 – the same speed of the then-current record held by Duane McKinney set in the Deeds roadster.

The following day the record run pass was enough to bump the record to 281 but they went home to sort out the vibration.

In October, on the rain-soaked, rough course, the 911 car ran 283 but the vibration persisted and Davidson cut a rear tire deeply on the run.

“We didn’t go to impound because we were after a plus 300MPH record,” Davidson explained, “We changed rear tires and wheels and the data told Donny and John they could bring the nitro mix up to 65% and John told me to shift 500 RPM sooner – the car went 297MPH without any vibration.”

This time, impound was in their cross-hairs, once they checked-in for the following morning’s record run parade, Beck and Cummins splashed a wee bit more nitro into the 30 gallon fuel tank.

Davidson estimates the nitro boost added another 600HP to the power curve because he got full throttle sooner, hitting 297MPH at the 2 1/4 marker where it had taken three miles to do the same thing on the previous run.

With 12-ply front tires leading the way from the Larsen and Cummins streamliner and the engine gulping down twenty-seven gallons, the black and red highboy recorded a 304 mile-per-hour giving the trio a 301.150MPH average in class A/BFR.

Stopped, safe and screaming with curiosity, as Davidson was climbing out of the car after the historic run, pal Ed Stuck rolled up and handed him a cell phone. On the phone was the sport’s most gracious ambassador, 409MPH World Record Holder Al Teague who got his start driving roadsters.

“That’s quite an accomplishment,” he told Davidson, “Congratulations. It’s a milestone, just like Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon for the first time.”

Davidson has never spun #911, nor have any of the other drivers in the other two roadsters they campaigned. He believes staying out of the “spin realm” is a matter of weight and balance employing gentle driving habits.

“We don’t have suspension,” explained the guy who won his class in the Baja 1000 a couple of times riding a motorcycle, “When the car moves I move

with it, I want to feel things right away, right now. Living in Mammoth Lakes for decades driving in ice and snow helped hone my driving skills as well.”

Someone had to be first. They knew they could nail 300MPH eventually, but Cummins is adamant that without Dannenfelzer’s help with the engine base line it would have been guessing a lot longer than they did about the ideal state of tune.

“My cell phone blew up coming back down the return road,” chortled Beck, “I heard from friends in southern California and Texas in less than five minutes after we set the record. All our cell phones were going off at the same time, it was a panic. Once in the pits, it was handshakes and back slaps for quite a while. We are all extremely proud of what we accomplished.”

Other crewmembers involved were Jerry Bermudez, Snow Thornberry, Andrew Calkins and Paul Bowman. According to Beck the group has lots of faith in each other, they all check each other and check with each other – none of them assume anything and recognize how important it is to be safe before being fast.

What’s next?


They want to run a few more times in excess of 300MPH to prove to everyone -- and to themselves – that they really know what they are doing, validating all the hours put in on the car. Sure, there is a measure of personal satisfaction involved, but these guys love every minute of it, every aspect of it: the sport, the challenge, the fraternity.

“We’re just glad to be part of it all,” summed up Cummins, “John and I would also like to earn our blue hats with a plus 300MPH record in 2011.”

Beck’s outlet was more pragmatic, “We know it can go faster, Dave never leaned on the engine hard, it is still pretty cherry. The program is still in its infancy, we only have six runs on the car. Our biggest fear is doing something stupid, like pitching the blower off the motor at the starting line.”

Once again, salt success is proffered upon those who hold the sport’s essential qualities dear: friendship, respect and readiness to help others. Well done.

Note: Photojournalist Louise Ann Noeth is the authoress of the award-winning book, *Bonneville: The Fastest Place on Earth*, a complete historical review of the first 50 years of land speed racing. After 11 years in print only a VERY limited number of the author’s special auto-graphed edition remain.


For more details and to order, go to: [www.landspeedproductions.biz](http://www.landspeedproductions.biz). 

## Good News Continued from Page 202

not to be afraid or discouraged because the Lord would be with him wherever he went. And He was!

As I’ve come to know Marcel, I’ve found him to be much the same in strength, courage, and not afraid to tackle life as it comes. The results have been a life worth living, and a book worth writing. I’m of the opinion that the world can never have enough books or articles written about men and women of integrity and upright determination who set out to get the job done while being both pleased with themselves as well as with others. It’s important for a dad to teach their sons that success is an important goal; however, in doing so you must teach them that integrity is even more important.


Marcel DeLey and his business of Marcel’s Custom Metals has established and set an encouraging model...both in business dealings as well as bringing up sons Marc and Luc to continue in the example that’s been set before them. Contact them and you’ll find “There’s More to Marcel’s Custom Metal’s” than what meets the eye.

Are you interested in either sending your son/grandson, age 16 – 19 to the CRA Hot Rod Camp in held at the Goodguys Columbus PPG Nationals, July, 2011? Perhaps you would consider sponsoring a young guy? Call or write CRA for more info: CRA, PO Box 309, Valley Springs, CA 95252; 209-786-0524; [cra@integrity.com](mailto:cra@integrity.com). 

## Flashing Back Continued from Page 203

in 1954. There was also the SAC “Sac-fireboid”, a car built by airmen at the Strategic Air Command; it was a Kurtis Indy car with a turbine engine that was used to start jet engines. The car was slow on the turns, fast on the straights and utterly silent.

We stayed until the last race was over, and then got in a long line for the ferry trip back; it was late as we left the lights of Seattle behind us. We talked about all we had seen, and thought about sports car people who drank Rhine wine and ate cucumber sandwiches. We longed to change our lives, but we agreed that it had been a swell day. We were just past Chehalis when that Chevy six made a couple noises and quit; we coasted to a stop beside the road. We had gas, so I pulled off the distributor cap and saw that the breaker plate had flown apart. There was nothing we could do, late on a Sunday night, so I stayed with the car while Jack hitched a ride to find a phone. A long time later he came back and said that Jerry was on his way. It must’ve been around midnight when Jerry cruised up in the Merc with 30 feet of heavy rope in the trunk. We tied the two cars together and Jerry towed me back at 70 mph, a white-knuckle ride but we made it to Portland by 2:00 a.m. That only gave us time for about three hours of sleep before we returned to our mundane jobs, but we had plenty to talk about.

*Portland Pictorial: The 1950s.* 260 b/w photos of rods and customs. Paperback, 128 pages. \$24 postpaid. Al Drake, P.O. Box 66874, Portland, OR 97290-6874. 

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