



Fuel For Thought

with "Landspeed Louise" Ann Noeth

The Lady Is A Champ!

Photos by: Paula Burns, Derek McLeish

Derek McLeish made it a point to find Paula Burns, introduce himself, and graciously offer congratulations by saying to her, "You did it, you're in first place," Burns was perplexed by McLeish's comments and replied, "But it's you who won the championship, you have more points." McLeish was insistent that she was a champion and he deferred, "No, you're the number one car, I'm number one bike."

Of course Team McLeish Bros of the Gear Grinders Car Club were the overall 2004 SCTA Points Champion with 972 points campaigning the #760B "SilverRod," but this was a shining example of the human jewels that compete in land speed racing. McLeish's humility percolated up to give a gift of praise to his competitor. Look for more about Team McLeish Bros later in the report.

It was McLeish who also tipped off this writer that Burns was the first female points champion in the history of the sport - car or bike. We're talking about more than a half-century here folks - going back to 1938. That's big, really big, and Derek wanted Paula to understand the importance of what she'd accomplished. "Derek was wonderful," said Burns, "telling me that he wouldn't ever go after one of dad's motorcycle records, but if someone did, that he would, 'go after it in his name.'"

Paula Burns, 44, drives the #203 Callaway & Warnock roadster and is a member of the High Desert Racers Car Club. Her fascination with the sport began with her father, the late Mike Burns, a career fireman, whose racing pedigree traces back to records he set with the Rusetta Timing Association in the 1950's; he is still on a variety of top-time drag racing lists, competed in the Baja 1000 and dabbled in circle

track racing before becoming a motor-cycle sidecar overachiever.

If you crewed with Paula's poppa you might have been the one whose duty it was to pick up Burns at the top end of the course and drive him back to the starting line so he could ride the next of several bikes competing concurrently every day of Speedweek. Each was easily a 10-mile trip.

"Dad bought a Hayabusa, but he never got a chance to race it," explained daughter Paula of her career fireman father. A true racer to the end, Burns, 65, suffered a fatal heart attack a short time after arriving on the salt in 1999. "I didn't expect this," said Burns who had not digested the far-reaching meaning of her "feminine first" when we spoke, "I knew we were doing well, but I concentrated on maintaining a good starting position." Burns understood that late in the day the course degrades and the car can "hunt and seek", which makes your heart climb into your throat as you think, is this going to be it? Will I spin?

It may appear odd that a 140MPH car won the championship, but strategy and speed are equal partners in the SCTA points race. Even though some vehicles were consistently faster, it is brainwork combined with breaking a record every time the car left the line. Of course we are talking about the brain of car owner George Callaway and partner Monte Warnock. Callaway is adamant this triumph would not have happened without Warnock's help. "He's a tremendous asset to the team." Other crewmembers include Robert "Bonneville Butch" Reynolds and Scott Gregory, holder of two land speed records, who also races a motocross sidecar. "I enjoy being part of racing," said Warnock of Callaway, President of the El Mirage Liars Association, "I enjoy volunteering and helping behind the



Monte Warnock, left, George Callaway, right, Lady the Border collie

scenes, but winning the championship is a real source of pride. It's been a real joy to watch Paula mature as a versatile driver."

Callaway reminds the whole team that racing is something they are doing for fun and tells Paula that if she ever feels uncomfortable on a run to just back off until she's at ease. "Paula does exactly what I tell her and once I step back from the car, the car belongs to the driver," he said, explaining he only wants feedback from the driver so that he can make adjustments.

Interestingly, this is the same mantra I heard from Grumpy 'Ole Men lakester owner, Joe Law, who put rookie driver Tricia Kisner in his car during Speedweek in 2003. She repaid him by bagging the top speed of the meet - another female first. Some have labeled Callaway "the old sand bagger" because he didn't push the car - and Paula - to the limit every time out. "This was a chance of a lifetime. I didn't want pressure her," he explained, "Paula has a natural talent, she can shift the car beautifully through all the gears." Although Phyllis, her mother, supports her at the races, Burn's driving coach is still her late father. On the surrounding hillside there is a big rock professionally chiseled with dad's name, birth and death date in between two other rocks facing directly down the course. "When I really need a way to focus before I drive," explained Burns gently, "I start talking to him, and it's like I channel dad just before I leave the line."

It is no revelation that the sport is populated by a generation that was raised in an era that frowned on female racecar drivers. Although there remain today a few stubborn mules that are mired down by their own prejudice, they are thankfully few. "I had some pre-conceived notions about this testosterone filled hobby," confessed Burns, "It was very pleasant to be proven wrong. For the most part, land speed racing is a non-sexist environment. I've had a ton of encouragement from tech inspectors, registration folks, other racers, course workers and other club members."

What does this significant historic milestone mean to Miss Burns? Not only is it the first time a woman has sped off with the SCTA Points Championship, but it is also a virginal experience for car owner Callaway who first went racing in 1954. "I am still reflecting on the past year,"

observed Burns, "My driving skills improved, no spins, no wrecks and I didn't blow up the motor, so I'm looking forward to the new car with a full season - no rainouts." When the weather started to become a factor and the last speed meet was rained out, Burns was annoyed about winning by default because she wanted the extra days to test and tune. To counteract some of the end of season weather woes, the SCTA has altered the 2005 schedule expanding the May meet into a two-day event.

It is also noteworthy that import engines dominated a blueblood American sport in 2004. I made a call to American Honda's corporate offices to inform them about this little milestone and was amused, but not surprised that land speed racing was way under its radar; they were blindsided by the grand news. Well, heads up all you Honda suits, Callaway has plans. "This championship feels pretty good, but I haven't had time to savor the win because we are thrashing on building another roadster, a '34 Ford body with more room to house a supercharged version of the Honda 2000 engine."

Burns will drive the new car and Callaway is interviewing additional female drivers for the '29 championship car. A Honda coupe is also under construction to compete in the GT class. Utterly sold on Honda reliability under racing conditions, Callaway revealed his "speed secrets." "I haven't even changed a spark plug on the engine," cackled Callaway, "It's bone stock, just like it was when I pulled it out of a wrecked car with 30,000 miles on it. All we did was install larger tires and pushed the rev limiter from 8,300 to 9,000 RPM. When we went to Bonneville all I took was a toolbox I could carry in my hand and laptop computer."

If he will allow me, I do have a bit of advice for the "Mayor of El Mirage" in '05. This brilliant strategist damn near torpedoed his own championship by dropping the TMI (Too Much Information) bombshell on his driver during the July meet, a pivotal point in the 2004 points chase. Here's how: Multi-year champ, and always a serious threat Rick Yacoucci, developed engine problems that dropped him out of the top ten reshuffling hopes for about a dozen teams that suddenly had a real shot at the crown. Callaway, without thinking of the importance of what he is about to do, immediately marches back to tell Burns - strapped in the car and seconds away from making the run. "When George told me that Rick turned out of his run it was a heart stopper," recalled Burns, "It put a lot of pressure on me to turn in a good run, otherwise I would have let down everybody on the team. It was very difficult to focus on what I was about to do and I felt like George was sitting on my head all the way down the course." George, George, George . . . next time, if you must tell someone, make it the push truck driver, not the racecar driver. 🚚

Louise



Mike Burns, left, instilled the wondrous passion of land speed racing in his daughter Paula, right, who became the first woman to win a SCTA Points Championship since the group was founded in 1935.