

Fuel For Thought

with "Landspeed Louise" Ann Noeth

Grumpy old men find happiness in speed!

Photos courtesy of Joe Law

If Joe Law has had one recurring problem all his racing life, it's been going too dang fast. No joke. This God fearing retired coal miner from West Virginia builds such scorching machinery for the salts of Bonneville that he has been forced to trailer his "Grumpy Old Men" lakester several times because it was simply making too much power.

Like a wild beast that needed to be kept at bay, Law recognized that brute strength doesn't always translate into safe, usable power and figured some head scratchin' and chin rubbing was in order before he brought the open-wheel car back to the starting line.

No boasting here, the guy has earned some enviable 'titles' including:

* World's Fastest Lakester Record: 349.873 C/Blown Fuel Lakester (C/BFL) Class & a 357 exit speed whistling past the last timing lights

* World's Fastest Gasoline Powered Vehicle (C/BGL) 337.133

* World's Fastest Single Pontiac Engine 355.833 mph, no hemi motor here and Mickey Thompson had 4 engines in his car

* World's Fastest Rookie driver (Tricia Kisner) at 325 mph who also happened to be a freckled face strawberry blond engineer.

What needs to be understood with land speed racers is that they carve out niches for themselves by dreaming up goals, working like crazy to achieve them and don't care if they ever make the evening news. It's all about personal achievement. What's strange about Law's case is that he has been simultaneously wildly successful and totally ignored by the motoring press.

Although I'd seen the bright red lakester on the salt, these guys were always so busy working on the car that I chose to keep a respectful distance and never got to know them. That changed when Law put Tricia Kisner in the driver's seat and she proceeded to spank all the boys, all the streamliners, all the comers at the 2003 SCTA Speedweek in August by

taking Top Time of the Meet (325mph) and earning the HOT ROD Magazine trophy – the first time a lady has done so in more than 50 years! It was time to meet these folks.

A coal miner for 20 years, Law explained while you do get dirty it isn't bad job and it paid for his Mechanical Engineering Degree at Fairmont State College. Now 67, he may own the car, but Law readily admits that without the crew, none of the accomplishments would be possible, "There were many that helped in one way or another and their help was greatly appreciated, but the main group is Ed Vasicek, Bud Daugherty and Sonny Slate from Fairmont WV; Dave Merashoff, Farmington, WV; Bob Beatty and Nick Raynal from Salinas, CA; Carl Brown, Salt Lake City, Utah."

Land speed racing is such a remote hobby, it begs the question, "How does one get started?" I mean how does a fellow go from busting black coal in tiny holes a quarter-mile under the earth to smashing speed records on the expansive sparkling white salt beds thousands of miles away?

It all started in 1965 when Law took up drag racing and spent three years competing with a Competition Roadster. The car set a Top Speed of 177 mph and 8.60 elapsed time while setting nearly 20 national records and winning the NHRA Spring Nationals and US Nationals. In 1968 they entered the car in the 1968 Winternationals held in California, but broke out against Gene Snow. "It was a long tow home," lamented Law.

He returned in 1969 with a new B dragster sporting an injected hemi running on gas and earned the NHRA Division 1 Comp Eliminator Championship. That car turned in a career Top Speed of 180 and Elapsed Time of 8.19 seconds, but the constant strategy required to be competitive quickly lost its luster for Law.

"We owned the record," Law pointed out, but because of the hand-capping, "We always saved a little to do better the next time out but had to watch it when running on a really good strip otherwise you would break out and be disqualified."

When the 70's rolled in, pal Jim Minnick gave Law a 496" late model hemi and the car ran in Top Gas class. "We qualified everywhere," recalled Law,

"But never won anything because we were in a 1/4 race with a great 1/8-mile car. Our single engine competed against double engine cars that would pass us about 100 feet from the lights." Disillusioned, when the season closed, he sold the car and played with real estate for a while.

It was 15 years later, in the company of Miss Suzanne Belch, that Law first crunched salt beneath his feet. Driving out to take in the USFRA World of Speed event, the couple ended up getting married right on starting the line. Racers Mary West and Burke LeSage graciously acted as witnesses.

"We drove out in my '29 maroon highboy street rod," noted Law, "This was its longest excursion and the wind blew horribly all across Kansas. The car had no heater, or side curtains." By the time they reached Silverthorn Colorado it was a bracing 19 degrees one morning so Law cut a hole in the floorboards rigging up a makeshift manifold heater. Joking about the experience, he also admired Suzanne's stalwart constitution, dead-panning, "That's the way you test 'em to see if they really love you, but you only have to test 'em one-way." They drove back to West Virginia via the southern route.

By the 1987 Speedweek Law had retired from the mines and thought it would fun if he turned his '29 high-boy into a salt roadster. In his first year the car ran 202mph against a 209 record in A Street class using a blown mouse motor. Pretty good for a bunch a hillbillies their first time out.

The switch to the supercharged destroyed Pontiac came in '89 and by the 1990 season they ran 218mph. Unfortunately, racer Tony Piner had laid down a 226 in street roadster class using a pro stock motor. One of the crew framed Piner's picture and hung in Law's shop over the workbench (its still there) and told him, "That's what you have to out run next year."

Looking at the photo all winter inspired the change to turbos and the old coal miner set a 244 mph C/blown street roadster record in 1991 that still stands to this day – more than a decade later. "My crew worked their hearts out for me and the least I could do is give them a little recognition," explaining the string of names in the

record listing under "entrant" as Vasicek-Slate-Daugherty-Law. This also signaled the start of the "too fast" saga of speed.

When he left home in 1992 Bud Daugherty forgot to tell his wife (big mistake) he would be the rookie driver that year. In four passes the virgin hot shoe set a record (238 mph in C/BGR), which still stands, joined the 200MPH club and because it was October nippy weather, never took off his fire suit.

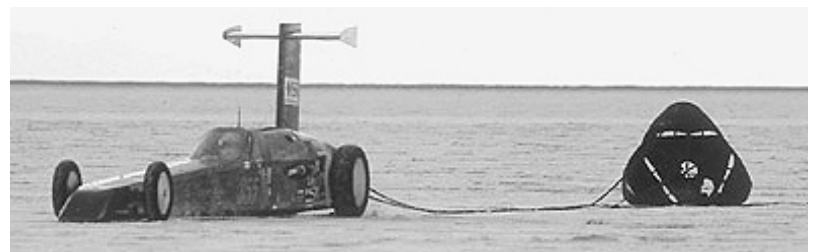
"We just kept getting back in line," remembered Law, "On the last run, at 244mph the tranny broke and I think it saved his life cause we might have gone crazy fast if we would have changed the gears and gotten back in line. The salt was temptingly good."

On the long haul home the boys decided to retire the car and build a racer that knows which end is supposed to be in front. "Roadsters are a lot of fun up to 190mph, past that the fun goes away as the car tries to swap ends giving you white knuckles," cautions Law.

Around Christmas 1992 he started to build the lakester, and it made its first run in 1994 at USFRA's World of Speed. "Talk about a depression," he moaned, "Speedweek was rained out, the salt deteriorated and I began to wonder if I'd ever get a chance to run the car."

The next case of self-inflicted "trailer queening" came on the car's fourth pass when in the second timed mile the car recorded a blistering 309 miles per hour. "I was learning to drive it," confessed Law attempting to break the standing 265 record, "I was going too fast in the middle mile. The car was handling good, but the parachutes were wrong and tried to tear themselves off. The transmission was acting up and I thought it might lock up, so I put it on the trailer, took it home and fixed everything over the winter."

Motor failure was the story in 1995. The front wheel came off roaring through the timing lights at 331mph in '96. Law got the laundry hung and stopped straight, but tore up the body panels. The entire front end was reworked that winter. It was a wet year in 1997, but he managed to squeak out a 305 record despite the engine sucking in wet salt flying up



and off the front tires. The team was still running the "C" motor, a destroyed big block topped with Pontiac Pro Stock cylinder heads. He was now a member of the elite 300MPH Chapter of the 2Club.

It's quite a feat to wind up a car over three bills, especially running on pump gas yet when Law turned in the 313mph record in 1998, he grumped about it because they had upgraded to Class "B" — a bigger displacement engine of 433. "The B motor should have given us more speed, but the smaller engine, the "C," has been the star."

The next year Bob Beatty, running the car on fuel, set a 323 record, parking another name in the 2000 3Club roster. Joe, that wily underground mole, then siphoned off the fuel, and on gas bumped his record to 334, Bob finished things off at 338 that year, again running on fuel. These boys stay busy.

"We stopped after that and put the car on the trailer," admitted Law, "Bob and I felt the car had acquired a mind of its own and the front end wanted to lift once we were running in the 340 range." Once again — too fast, a problem that most racers wish they could have.

To control front end lift canards were added to the car after the millennium rolled over, they changed the engine back to the "C" class of 370 cubic inches and Law set another gas record at 338, with Bob setting fuel record at 330 during the August Speedweek. By the October World Finals Law punched up the fuel record to 349 — startling for an open-wheel car.

The Institute for Scientific Research (ISR) came aboard as a sponsor in 2002 using the car as a test bench for some of its test and analysis products, but it suffered a double engine failure almost ending Law's racing program financially. ISR stepped up to finance the building of a new "A" class engine spitting 493 terrorizing inches and set their sights on the salt.

When Law first met the spry young lady who would take the "grumpy" out of a bunch of old men, he made the awful mistake of thinking she was a secretary. The computer engineer who was working on an intelligent flight control system for the F-15 had been sent to figure out how to best utilize the company's sponsorship of the racecar. Kisner is still making him pay for that goof.

He was further dazzled when the group walked out to the parking lot and Kisner opened the driver's door of her silver Mustang GT. Law, visibly shocked, asked, "Is that YOUR car?" It was at the very next meeting when Law turned up with page after page of printouts for ISR to study that he first mentioned to Kisner about driving his

car. "I figured he was joking," she chuckled, "Actually, until the day I sat in the car on the starting line I thought he was joking."

It was while working together on the car's fuel injection system that Law laid down the driving terms: help me get the sponsorship money to prepare the car for Bonneville and you can drive the car. Kisner, who had never raced, but whose childhood was populated with many high performance cars and bikes in the family, accepted the challenge. A little over six months later she made her first licensing run.

Kisner sailed through her rookie runs, absorbing every scrap of information and advice offered while Law and his crew worked like crazy after each run to keep the twin-turbocharged Pontiac in tip-top running form. They changed gears so often the crew thought they actually might wear out — themselves and the gears!

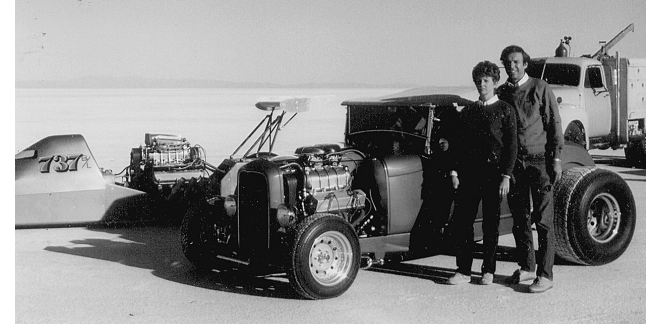
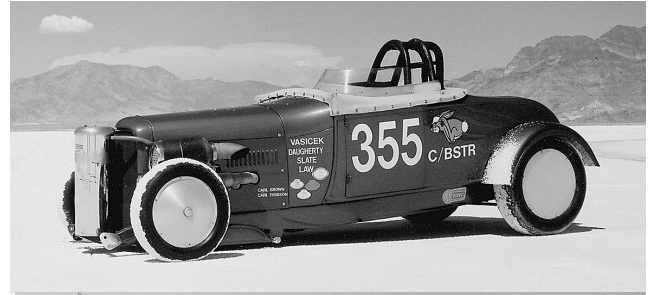
Kisner, 27, grew up in Duncannon, Pennsylvania, a small town near Harrisburg. An avid reader, she also owns and gingerly rides a high performance Buell Lightening, but prefers John Shaffer's Dyna WideGlide Harley. She and Shaffer will marry on June 5th, 2004. She may be the third woman in LSR history to set a plus 300 record, but no doubt the first former piccolo player in the University of West Virginia's Mountaineer Marching Band to do so.

Law and crew watched in gleeful satisfaction as Kisner became the first rookie to earn an unlimited license over 300 mph and earn entrée to the 300MPH Chapter of the 2 Club, but also became the first woman to set Top Speed of the meet to earn the HOT ROD Magazine Top Time Trophy.

When Kisner felt settled in her new "ride", she admitted that she actually tried to break the rear wheels loose a bit to make sure she was driving the car as hard as it could go. Not something you expect a rookie to think about, let alone execute well. But she did. Punch that loud pedal lady!

So there you have it, a speed odyssey finally set down in print. A brief, condensed taste of what happens when you catch "salt fever." Joe Law and crew, no longer "Grumpy Old Men" are only one of hundreds of stories that percolate up from the salt's lure. Imagine what all the untold tales have to say. 🚗

Louise



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Southern California Timing Association						
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2003						
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Goodguys Goodtimes Gazette

Bruce Horkey

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