The people who got the most out of their land speed racing experience come into a “Bonneville state of mind”, a state of being that affords a rapture of the being, a shedding of all sense of physical age and being truly joyful.

At the 2016 Speedweek I witnessed a complete mind, body and spirit immersion of this condition with Dennis Varni. His joy overflowed and washed through the lives of his entire Speed Nymph racing team, burning their existence with a patina of gratitude that can only come from being part of something bigger than yourself.

You can’t get to this head/heart place without starting with the right attitude. Varni came to the salt this year with a new car, a streamliner, after years of running his famous yellow belly tank, built and run by Markley Brothers in the ’60s. The goal was for runs north of 300, but the team said little and hoped much.

It was in the tech inspection line, after his 317MPH record run that Varni’s jaunty blue jeans capitated. He wasn’t near his car, several positions back from the front of the line, so I went looking for him. I saw him before he saw me. Wearing a white Deus car hat, you could plainly see the guy was “in the moment” and wore an endearing, happy-stupid grin as he wandered through the other teams in the tech lines. I watched as he spoke to one racer after another and the effect was almost immediate, each got swept up in Varni’s euphoria, nothing to do but enjoy the trip as they talked.

Finally, I approached him only to get walloped with my own dose of speed joy. Doubtless this was part of the reason people contract salt fever and I’ve ventured a guess that no race won for money could ever approach the amateur self-satisfaction experienced when one’s idea, dream and labors with friends return the ultimate expression of “ya done good!”

Attitude Brings Gratitude

At the 200MPH Club banquet, as the program neared its end when new members of the 200MPH chapter stepped to the podium, Varni was still awash with the joy that had swaddled him down at the eight-mile turnout road.

He thanked his wife Kathy for letting him have so much fun with his own rod when he was 13 - a running 1930 Model A for $45 - with money he earned working as a fruit picker during the summer, selling his train set and even some of his clothes. He took the car completely apart and finished his first hot rod by his senior year in high school.

A 45 year member of the Bay Area Roadster club (and President on three different occasions) he revamped his 1929 Ford Roadster in the early ’90s, winning the Grand National Roadster Show’s ‘Worlds Most Beautiful Roadster’ – he continues to drive that car today.

On the salt for the first time in 1961, then again in 1964, family and business kept the salt-sprayed guy away until the ’80s. The first dream was to drive a roadster in excess of 200 MP and with some partners he built a 32 Ford Roadster - #333 (still competing). Earning life membership in the Bonneville 200 MPH Club at 225MPH, he took off his shoes and had them bronzed! He purchased the Markley’s bluebird in the 1980s and ran until 2006 when streamliner thoughts entered his head.

The racecars and went onto the list of people who had helped him reach this intoxicating level of happiness. As he struggled to get the necessary to express that heartfelt gratitude, raw emotion got the better of him. Varni cried tears of joy that spread out over the audience and touched a great many of the assembled - the glorified and the gritty, the tough and the rough, the blowhards and heroes.

No one laughed, or took a pot shot, they all knew where Varni was because most had been there as well, some long ago, and others more recently, but the feeling was the same and they were happy for him. Such joy is the kind money can’t buy.

Varni has been a vibrant part of the car culture for decades. Hooked on hot rods since the early ’50s, he was a voracious car magazine reader who bought his

Talking Race Cars

Everyone was sitting idle by the track waiting for the crew to drive the car. There was a crew chief who sensed my curiosity and said flicking his thumb towards the side door, “Go take a look, you’ll see.”

I stepped at least two engines torn apart completely, even some of the parts were taken apart, and one look at the gear case told the tale – at least three of the gears were bent. The two shooters snapped clean off at the hub.

The car, built by a dedicated and fastidious land speed racer who never let the car go to the starting line with so much as a fingerprint on the paint, had been sold to a European guy who came to the salt damn sure that he knew EVERYTHING about going in a straight line.

I shook my head, the parts were screaming at him about what was wrong, but the guy simply wasn’t ready to listen and by week end had gone through more parts in a week than the previous owner had gone through in all the years he owned and set records with the car. What an expensive, stubborn learning curve.

What “Mr. Cocksure” had needlessly destroyed and replaced at “overnight” prices was more than some racers spend all week, travel money included.

It was obvious that the guy needed his attitude button reset because the more he tried to impose his will, the louder the salt laughed and the car cried. Sigh. I’d seen it plenty of times before, the ridiculous mind-set so stubbornly held that it brings down the happiness of the entire crew.

Last year I watched a couple of guys with lots of drag racing experience arrive with new cars and then pour about the changes the SCTA tech folks wanted before the cars went to the starting line.

One grumbled so petulantly in front of his volunteer crew that I gave him a speech about the safety rules being paid for with the blood of those who came before him, so quit moaning and get busy on the “to do” list because he was pummeling morale.

Back back back this year, one had digested an appropriate portion of humility and the other still oozes a sense of entitlement which translated into another bust year.

Speed Nymphs Speak

This is the exact opposite of what Varni had done for his Speed Nymphs.