



## Speed Duel Back Chat

Although published in 2010, I only became aware of Samuel Hawley's "Speed Duel" book in late 2011. More puzzling, I had never heard of the guy, yet Tim Arfons, Art's son, tells me the guy's book does a good job of resurrecting the '60s jet drama. I picked up the phone and started dialing folks who were either in, or contributed to the book, to find out a bit more about this story-telling mystery man.

I came away from my "Hawley hunt" duly impressed with how the guy approached the subject – especially someone who I later discovered was not in the least a motor head. The best part of Speed Duel, in my opinion, is that Hawley came to write the book from a fascination standpoint, without any prejudice about the subject matter or its players.

The book is an intricate, refreshing examination about the drama, focusing on the people and not the technical

candid in his replies to all my questions.

"I'm always on the lookout for interesting stories—whatever catches my fancy, in whatever field." Hawley explained, "I had written a book about Canadian sprinter Percy Williams and so had the idea of "speed" in mind as I was casting about for an idea for my next book. I had a vague remembrance from childhood of the land speed record and so I started digging about there, and very quickly turned up the Arfons-Breedlove rivalry. After that it jelled into a book idea very quickly."

Publisher Firefly Books latched onto his proposal and inked a publishing contract – mighty big leap of faith to take with a speed novice, but they must have understood this guy can write. Additionally, from the tone of the text you can tell he really enjoys his subject matter and the story reflects that, sometimes taking on a "fireside chat" of intimacy, you recognize he found the pulse of what drove the 1960s speedsters and honored their speed visions.

"I liked that the characters were so interesting and their motivations so clear (to go fast!) and the rivalry that developed so much like a game of Russian roulette," he told me, "Another criterion I use in picking topics is: 'Can I see this story as a movie?' because I like to write in scenes like in a movie. The Arfons-Breedlove story is of course eminently cinematic."

Hawley stressed that "Speed Duel" is not technical, that he wasn't the guy to write a book like that and for him Speed Duel was all about the people.

"That's what I write about: people doing interesting things." He continued, "How did they live their lives? What drove them to do what they did? What did it feel like? How did it affect their families? The jet engines, the minutiae of tire design, etc., that's the atmosphere, the interesting background but not the

core of the story. "Speed Duel" is about the people."

And so it is. But I'll let him explain: "About me being an outsider to the subject, I don't see that as a weakness. On the contrary, it's strength. I come to the subject without any preconceived notions or assumptions of knowledge. I come with the same wide-eyed wonder of the average reader, who possesses perhaps some knowledge of LSR but not a lot. I therefore have to find out everything. The

process of doing so, of researching and writing, becomes a journey of discovery. It's all new, fresh, exciting – and I think I convey some of that discovery and excitement in the book.

My newness to the subject also means I ask the questions readers typically want answered, first and foremost: "What did it feel like?" Old LSR pros are apt to get tired of that question and, were they to write a book, may not delve into it much, but instead focus on the technical things that interest them more. But the human experience, the feelings – for me and for most readers they're the core of the matter. We want to know how other people lived their lives, what they experienced, what it felt like. In 'Speed Duel' I try to answer those questions."

Fair enough, I thought. Heaven knows people look at me like I just fell off one of the rings of Saturn when I mention what I do for a living. They have a shock, followed by confusion and when they recover sufficiently usually ask a meaningful, probing question about Bonneville. What were Hawley's impressions, I wondered, about the people he "met?" The mile eaters of the '60s I know were an entertaining bunch. What guys impressed him?

"It would have to be Art Arfons first and foremost," offered up Hawley, "He was the quintessence of American ingenuity and get-up-and-go. Unfortunately, I didn't get to interview him; he died a year before I started work on the book. I was also very much impressed with the two guys I interviewed regarding the Glenn Leasher/Infinity story: Vic Elischer and Tom Fukuya. They really opened up and took me out there with them onto the salt, figuratively speaking. Same with Al Bradshaw on the Nathan Ostich/Flying Caduceus story. I am really grateful how these men shared their memories."

The publisher didn't include the bibliography in "Speed Duel," with the list of people Hawley interviewed but he felt it important to share and posted the names on his website: [www.samuelhawley.com](http://www.samuelhawley.com). You'll also find some incredible bits that the publisher made him leave out of the book – big mistake – but thankfully Hawley had the presence of mind to share online.

As you read the book, note that Hawley wrote the entire saga without once setting foot on the salt. Everything in the book is based on interviews, reading old newspapers and books, watching old films, listening to old recordings and his imagination. Hawley and I share a kindred amazement in writing our books: how willing people were to talk and share

their memories with total strangers. It is this part of the Bonneville spell that keeps me coming back.

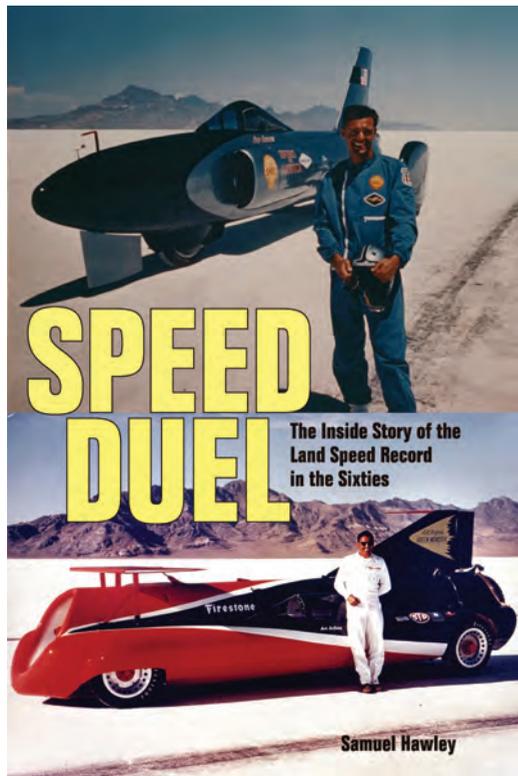
"I was tracking people down and phoning them up out of the blue and they were so willing – often eager – to talk," he revealed to me, "I was very grateful about that. I got very much a sense that I was preserving their memories and so I felt a responsibility to do it right, especially because, for many of them, it was the last chance to tell their stories. I interviewed Craig Breedlove's mother just a month before she died. Bill Moore was dying of cancer but was still eager to talk; we had several long conversations. Soon, they will all be gone. I came away from the whole process with a deep sense that there are so many people out there in all fields, in all walks of life with interesting, inspiring stories that will never get told."

Only one person wouldn't talk to him, but Hawley subsequently received a letter from the man about a year after the book came out, saying that he had read it and was sorry he had blown him off.

"I was touched by that." Hawley confessed, "It was yet another example of the fundamental decency of the LSR crowd. The qualities they embody are ones I very much admire: self-reliance, risk-taking, sharing, teamwork, a refusal to be intimidated by your own insignificance and lack of money, etc. "Speed Duel" is a celebration of all that."

Did the book change him, I asked? "The guys in it were an inspiration. A guy like Art Arfons wasn't supposed to be able to set the LSR with a junk-built car he put together in his back yard. But he did. A guy like Athol Graham wasn't supposed to either. Well, he tried and came pretty close. Writing about real people taking on real challenges like that can give you that little bit of extra push in your own life to try to do something, even when others think you're not supposed to be able to do it."

In closing, all I can say is: Sam, get your butt out on the salt, you will never be the same afterwards.



aspects. You are not going learn about how to tune a jet engine reading Speed Duel. Anyone involved in land speed racing who reads this tome, no matter how much you THINK you know about the era, will come away with a nice pile of "gee whizzes" and "how do you like that" by the time they get to page 344. What's more, the nine pages of bibliography tells you that Hawley did his homework.

So what brought him our way? I asked him and he was very open, generously

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, less than 10 of the author's special autographed edition remain. For more details and to order, go to: [www.landspeedproductions.biz](http://www.landspeedproductions.biz). 