

Fuel For Thought

Landspeed Louise

Rank Cheaters or Innovative Speedsters?

Every now and again I hear aspersions directed at a land speed racer or team implying they are cheating. What would anyone gain by cheating in a sport that has no financial reward?

Some people believe that cheating is a victimless crime. Some people are stupid. Cheating is lying, a perpetration of a fraud to gain an unfair advantage at the expense of others. That has a corrosive effect on the sport.

I'm not trying to tackle the roots of morality here, but when racers compete against the clock on the Bonneville Salt Flats, rules of competition are in play that makes cheating the equivalent of moral sabotage. Why? In a sport where so many heavily rely on the help of others, the entire community is wounded when someone cheats.

Motorsports does have some segments where cheating is practically expected. I still shake my head thinking about stock car champion Richard Petty's a matter-of-fact public comment, "If you ain't cheatin' a little, you ain't likely to be competitive."

What excrement. Cheating is betrayal. Some people cheat to become famous, others to get rich, but to get your name in a record book?

embarrassment was inconsequential compared to the heartache of a daughter.

What about the accidental cheat? These are the racers who earnestly play fair, while at the same time strive for improvement. Here begins the grey area: interpretation. Two people read the same rulebook and come away with two distinct, different impressions of how to construct and operate legally.

Enter the sanctioning body technical committee. The SCTA/BNI, USFRA, ECTA and DRLA volunteers all labor unselfishly to provide the finest amateur racing experience on the planet. The rules and regulations written protect and provide a level competitive playing field.

"Cheating is a deliberate deception to get some kind of gain by not following the rules," observed 2008 SCTA/BNI President Roy Creel, "Land speed racing is all kinds of ego-driven fun, it is worth nothing, so how can you feed your ego by operating surreptitiously?"

"Fast" Freddie Dannenfelzer, 71, is a 51-year salt veteran who is building a streamliner still shares construction photos with other tech committee members to make sure nothing has slipped by him.

"Anybody that cheats," said Dannenfelzer, the salt's version of human traction control for his envious ability to hook-up and keep charging down the course even in questionable conditions, "I just don't see how they can look at themselves in the mirror."

SCTA Vice President Don "Brunswick" Ferguson, the eternally jovial third generation land speed racer, does not believe clerical error or mental mistakes are cheating.

"There is no reason why people should lose a record due to a minor paperwork error. That's not cheating, that's a simple case of misunderstanding," noted the fair-minded emerging leader, "People push the limits on and off the course; strategy is just as important as horsepower but cheat? There isn't anything to gain, why bother? There will always be that

cloud that covers everything you would do afterwards"

At times, cars that might not be physically correct are spotted during inspection, but nothing is said until it comes to impound, cruelly leaving the racer to labor under the delusion they can still set a record.

"I have a problem with people who won't help a competitor stay legal up front," flatly stated Alan Fogliadini, 61, who has driven dozens of cars, "Our system is at the same time self-policing and self-serving. We all have a duty to ensure that their dream is not set aside because we foresaw a problem that we didn't bring to light."

Not long ago permitting traction control was a hot topic, and because it can be deftly hidden in on-board software coding, the rule was axed because the officials simply couldn't enforce it.

"Were people breaking rules?" said tech inspector Lee Kennedy, "Probably, but we had no way of catching them. We can't analyze the code after every run, the coding sophistication was far beyond our capabilities, we don't hand out sealed black boxes like F1."

Kennedy noted the biggest problems arise out of rule interpretation where the issue is non-compliance, not cheating, in body classes.

"That's why we want people to read the rule book and call us before they build," cautioned Kennedy, "We have multiple steps in place to help the competitor comply, our staff of highly qualified volunteers want everyone to have great racing experience. We welcome anyone to join a committee; we can always use the extra help"

"Kiwi" Steve Davies, the 2009 SCTA/BNI Chief Tech Inspector for cars adds, "Body classification arguments don't belong in the technical inspection area, those situations need to be sorted out by the specialized committees."

There is no grey area when it comes to safety, entrants must see it our way, or they cannot compete. Just because the rulebook doesn't say you can't do it, that doesn't mean you can do it. With 500 vehicles in line on the first day, we only catch the blatant stuff in tech because we are focused on competitor and crew safety."

Something for unprepared competitors to remember who get in the tech inspection line with parts missing, a driver without a firesuit in the truck, or a fire extinguisher, or parachutes left back in the pits.

Dan Warner has been involved with

the sport for 46 years, much of it as the Record Certification Officer, a critically important position that can be tedious and thankless at times since he acts as the gatekeeper of the SCTA/BNI land speed records.

"Our rules are liberal compared to other forms of motorsports," said Warner who certified 175 records during Speedweek, "You can pretty much do what you want within the wide parameters we set down. I haven't seen outright cheating, but there has been plenty of stretching the rules, with the biggest stretches happening in aerodynamics. We add rules to place limits on the stretching, because we don't want overlap into other classes, we want a clean break."

Warner explained there are three levels of penalties that escalate depending on the severity as well as audacity of the malfeasance that range from losing a record, or points right up to being banned forevermore.

"Land speed racing is all ego driven," noted 2008 SCTA President Roy Creel who presided over Speedweek's three courses and 2,488 runs, "It is worth nothing, its all kinds of fun and ego driven so how can you feed your ego by operating surreptitiously?"

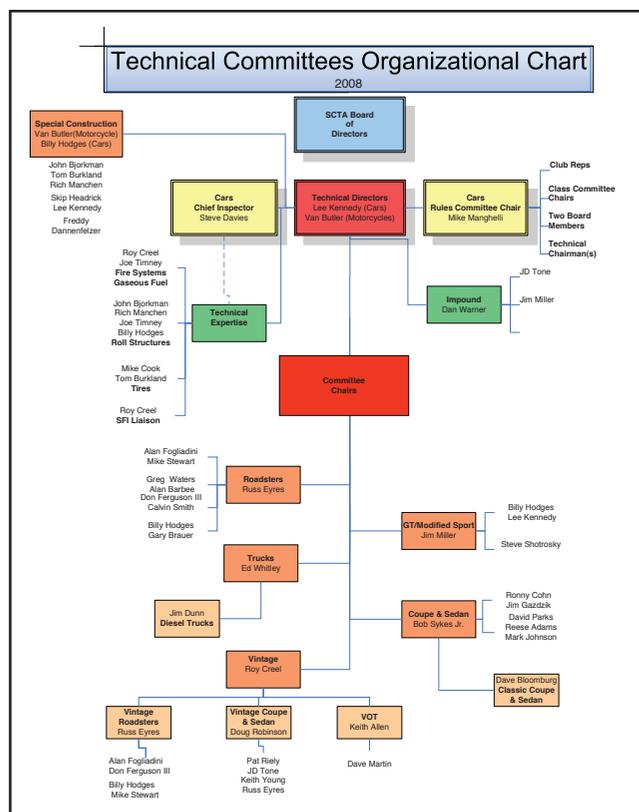
He pointed out that there are times when Draconian steps are taken to keep a record intact by filing a protest that may or may not have merit.

"This grievance procedure compels the association to investigate and draw a conclusion if the vehicle complies with the rules," he said, "but some use the protest process to keep from losing a record to another. It is a mature system run by amateurs trying to do professional a job, yet we prove over and over again that we are amateurs."

Some racers get rather annoyed when protested, yet make the changes and then come back to set a record at an even faster speed.

"That's the spirit of the land speed racing," Ferguson said with confidence, "that's the innovation." **LF**

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 now in its 7th and final printing. Publisher MBI has informed Noeth when the current inventory is sold the book will not be reprinted. For more details and to order, go to: www.landspeedproductions.biz.



What about the kids? NASCAR driver Darrell Waltrip publically apologized after being caught cheating. He became distraught when his 9-year-old wondered why her father had cheated. Realize the

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