



FUEL FOR THOUGHT

FEBRUARY 2003

Copyright 2003 "LandSpeed" Louise Ann Noeth All Rights Reserved

DON VESCO

April 8, 1939 – December 16, 2002

Because I crashed my FJ1100 Yamaha motorcycle 11/03/02, damn near killing myself in process, many might think I'd spend time talking about the adventure. Not a chance. After all, since I was only traveling 25 m.p.h. when the incident occurred, its altogether shameful for "LandSpeed" Louise to waste space on the subject except to publicly thank all you fine folk who called, sent cards, flowers and visited me while I was laid up and chewing pain meds like popcorn because such support helps you heal faster.

What will never heal is the hole in my heart that came when Don Vesco passed from this world on December 16th, 2001, the victim of prostate cancer. I was still too fragile to make it to the funeral, so Don is still very much alive and mischievous in my mind. It was my honor, my pleasure, my joy, to serve as his publicist and team member with all the Turbinator family. Of all his numerous records and championships, what's most important is to know he was the first (and only thus far) person to ever hold both the world land speed record for motorcycles and automobiles and yet never displayed an arrogant moment in his whole life.

I didn't see the casket, so I'll always have the memory of our last visit together. More to savor is recalling his last ride on the salt in Max Lambsky's twin engine Vincent streamliner. The designated rider, WLSR holder Dave Campos, had asked Don to take the bike for a shakeout ride.

Don's brother Rick normally helped him suit-up, but this time the duty fell to me. Jacket first, then head sock, helmet, neck brace and finally the gloves. I don't know how fast the darn thing finally went, but I do recall getting Don out of the bike after 30 minutes waiting on the starting line in the sun. Most folks would cook like an egg. Not Donnie boy. Cool and calm; he never complained yet was always ready to be of assistance.

Don Vesco was one of the worlds most accomplished racecar drivers as well as an outstanding motorcycle rider. Anyone who knew him, even for a short time, knew he was racing's proverbial, "Beaver Cleaver," a 63 year old guy with the adolescent spirit of the collective All-American kid. He first ran a motorcycle at Bonneville Salt Flats at age 16 in 1957. At the time of his death, he held 18 motorcycle and five automotive records, including the ownership of the Motorcycle LSR record for 19 years at 318.598 MPH.

A factory rider for Honda, Yamaha and Kawasaki, he won the 1963 U.S. Grand Prix Open Class at Daytona Beach riding a Yamaha 250cc, providing Yamaha its first ever American victory. That same year he became a member of the exclusive Bonneville 200MPH Club with a 222 m.p.h. average for automobiles. He was also the first person to drive a motorcycle at more than 250, then 300. In 1974, it was a 281.702 m.p.h. AMA record and in 1975, he and his handcrafted "Silverbird" streamliner, set another AMA record of 303.928 m.p.h.

Vesco was so speedy no one could catch him and he was forced to break his own records. *ABC's Wide World of Sports* was on the salt when he not only broke his existing Motorcycle Streamliner record with "Lightning Bolt I", but turned in the highest speed during 1978 Speed Week meet at Bonneville. Outpacing all the cars as well with 333.117 m.p.h., he became the first motorcycle to earn the HOT ROD Magazine Top Time Trophy. There were plenty more accolades over the years, but Vesco never kept track; he had no time to look back and only focused on "what's next."

He "whoa'd down" his bike racing in 1996 when Turbinator was ready for development runs at Bonneville. By 1999, he broke the SCTA/BNI record for turbines at 427 m.p.h. and was later inducted into the AMA Hall of Fame. In 2001, he set a new World Record for wheel-driven automobiles at 458 m.p.h. bringing the record home to the United States of America for the first time by topping Britain's Donald Campbell's 403 m.p.h. record set 37 years prior in 1964.

Ignorant of who all the 400 plus people were at the memorial, I recall the legions of the speed faithful who showed up to watch him nail a record, snag a championship, win a race. With Don, everything was a race, right down to the drive to the grocery store. Humble as he was fast, you can be sure every life he touched was changed for the better.

It still hasn't sunk in, I've already tried to call him twice -- once remembering the awful truth before I finished dialing and the next time I just let it ring before I hung up, tears welling with the goofy hope that he'd pick up the receiver and say, "LSL, what's happening?"

I can still see the shop out back in various stages of disarray. Motorcycles are everywhere, ready to run and some never to run again. Saleen's fancy road race motors might still be around, Don had such fun putting them together, especially when he would ship parts to a race track complete with live or frozen snakes in the package. Was he trying to tell them something? Always the practical joker, if you within eyesight, you were fair game.

Turbinator is also out back and ready to run. Don had stretched it a tad to breathe easier and run cooler, ensuring it would go 500 m.p.h. but now someone else will have to get it there for him -- and Rick. God Speed my friend. The rest of you guys over 40 get your saggy butts down to the doctor and get your prostate checked -- NOW!