

Sportsman racing is red hot. New classes and events combined with Americans' undeniable love affair with modern muscle cars have invigorated the non-professional segment of the sport.

Factor in the growing popularity of eighth-mile racing and the business discussion widens further, as racers with little technical knowledge and/or mechanical skills join the heads-up elapsed time ranks not long after leaving the dealership.

Sanctions, tracks and engine builders contacted for this report say new, younger racers, as well as "seasoned" veterans, simply want to have fun with their mechanical stallions, and represent upwards of 20 percent of increased pit gate receipts.

Competing in a drag race and autocross on the same day—

with the same car—is gaining momentum, too, just as much as big-buck bracket racing, or the scintillating Pro Mods.

Helping fuel sportsmanship level growth even further, Graham Light of the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) in Glendora, California, explained, "NHRA streamlined the tech inspection process and the simplification of competition licenses, where combining membership with the license eliminated the medical requirement in some classes."

Skooter Peaco of the International Hot Rod Association (IHRA) in West Palm Beach, Florida, addressed several thriving segments. "Our sportsman racers compete all year long at their home track for a chance to go up against teams from differing regions, and for a chance to win the championship title to see who is the 'best of the best.' Top, Modified and Junior Dragster classes average 40 cars in each class at the World Finals, and another 250 racers compete in the Summit SuperSeries Championship," he explained.

The Pull Of **SPORTSMAN**



Pictured here is the Street Outlaw class at the NMRA/NMCA All Star Nationals at Atlanta Dragway.

What makes drag racing so special, according to a source at Maryland International Raceway (MDIR), pictured at right, is the variety of classes and buy-in levels available. He added that further growth is expected for the eighth mile, where fans and racers are gravitating to heads-up 'no-time' racing, which in turn attracts more coverage and future sponsor growth.



By Louise Ann Noeth

D R A G R A C I N G

Catering to the amateurs has become smart business for straight-line product suppliers, sanctioning bodies, promoters and service providers across the US.



Car counts ticked up for multiple NMRA and NMCA events in 2016, as well as in select classes, with fan bases surpassing 20,000 on occasion, according to Rollie Miller of ProMedia in Santa Ana, California. "Our Super Bowl, a dual NMRA and NMCA event in Chicago, had 540 race cars and more than 300 show cars," he said. "The NMRA event in Bowling Green was the biggest to date in 12 years—450 race cars, 400 show cars; and the True Street Class attracted 131 cars that must drive a 30-mile cruise before three runs down the track."

Miller added that his organization recently experienced a resurgence in the Extreme Pro Mod class after rules changes allowed nitrous, turbos and superchargers, which are now contested on an eighth-mile track. As a result, car counts surged past 20, where eight had been the norm. In addition, he noted that street outlaw grew 60 percent in 18 months, while its Coyote Stock Class rose 15 percent, now averaging 19 cars per event.

"Everyone wants to turn on the 'Ws,'" added Bob Harris of the Professional Drag Racers Association (PDRA), Pittsboro, North Carolina, a double-decade bracket racer and former track owner. "The younger generation likes the street outlaw racing, and while street racing is not good, they are showing up at the gate on weekends. We are all going backwards to move forward."

Harris reported PDRA's biggest growth class in 2016 was Top Sportsman, at 20 percent, and welcomed a new \$10 million Galot Motorsports Park facility in Benson, North Carolina, to its track roster this year.

"It may seem modest, but Top Sportsman and Top Dragster each get 40 to 50 entries at events," said Harris. "Both classes have been growing for the last five years. Our Junior Dragsters are blossoming, and some families drive 12 hours to race our events."

What makes drag racing so special, according to Rick Lindner of Maryland International Raceway (MDIR) in Mechanicsville, Maryland, is the plethora of classes and buy-in levels available. "Drag racing's biggest appeal is a combination of interest in fast cars, as well as our human nature to compete," he explained. "A drag racing facility allows consumers to experience both desires in a much safer, controlled environment to

vertically compete, from a local beginner to an experienced touring professional.”

Lindner sees further growth ahead for the eighth mile. “Fans and racers alike are gravitating to heads-up ‘no-time’ racing, which in turn attracts coverage and future sponsor growth,” he said.

Another business perk from the flourishing “outlaw” scene was cited by Broc Porter of Beech Bend Raceway in Bowling Green, Kentucky, who said, “Because these races are eighth-mile competition, smaller venues can take advantage of the demand. I know of several tracks trying to copy the ‘must attend’ events in their own way.

“East of the Mississippi, ‘Big Bucks’ bracket racers have the chance to race for \$5000 to \$10,000 almost every weekend,” he said. “We averaged 150 cars in 2016.”

Meantime, John Ramsey of Pacific Raceways in Kent, Washington, sees “heads up” racing making a strong return. “It is by far the most requested type of racing, even though sportsman classes are still what pay the bills,” he said. “We run ‘Super Saturday’ events, where we have all the NHRA Summit classes and most NHRA Lucas Oil classes. This boosts our car count by 60-plus racers—some buy into two classes.”

On the opposite side of the country, grudge racing and roll racing are on the rise at Thunder Road Raceway Park in Gilliam, Louisiana, according to Nelson Hoyos. “Most of today’s street cars have independent suspension with 20-inch rims and tires—not ideal to launch the car from a standing start,” he noted. “Some tracks host ‘roll racing,’ which allows the participant to gain speed from a rolling start [and] leveling the playing field by not having to be wicked fast off the line.”

Race engine builders like Sonny Leonard of Sonny’s Racing Engines in Lynchburg, Virginia, see similar emerging interests. “If you look in the stands, Pro Modified drag racing and big-dollar bracket races are the most popular forms of drag racing at this time,” he said. “Why? The fans stay to watch!”

In addition, Mike Consolo of QMP Racing Engines in Chatsworth, California,

cited the popularity of heads-up racing for small-tire cars because big money, or big horsepower, doesn’t necessarily rule the day. “These classes are taking off, and have great competition,” he noted. “If you are smart, and can get your car off the line, you always have a shot at the win light.”

It’s New and Hot

Across the US, outlaw-type events are reporting impressive car counts and mounting spectator interest. “These events tend to draw racers who have become disenchanted with the sanctioning bodies; they feel like they don’t matter,” said Bob Beucler of Dragtimenews.com, an online



Sportsman racers participating in IHRA compete all year long at their home track for a chance to go up against teams from differing regions, and an opportunity to win the overall title and determine who is the “best of the best,” according to a representative. In fact, he reported, some segments average 40 cars in each class at the World Finals, while another 250 racers compete in the Summit SuperSeries Championship.

publication covering sportsman and grassroots classes in the mid-Atlantic and Northeast. “[Some sportsman-level racers] also feel like there aren’t classes for the cars they build, so they came up with their own classes and rules, but adhere to the safety rules in place at the track.”

Typical classes are Outlaw 632, Outlaw 10.5 Outlaw Drag Radial and X275. And fans can relate, too, because these machines still resemble regular street production cars. There are limited suspension modifications, but cars often include superchargers, nitrous or turbos.

“These cars are wild, unpredictable and fun to watch,” Beucler continued. “It’s common for these cars to carry the front tires for the better part of the length of the track, blowing flames out of the

exhaust as they do—ideal subjects for social media videos.

“And when videos go viral, more people get hooked. It’s a perfect circle of free marketing—a product that sells itself being marketed in a free medium,” he added.

When live-streamed online, and shared generously, Beucler said these events directly contribute to packed grandstands, citing examples of No Mercy at South Georgia Motorsports Park, and The Yellow Bullet Nationals at Cecil County Dragway in Maryland.

Pacific Raceways’ Ramsey points to the Outlaw 10.5 and 275 tire size classes

“Our Top Sportsman 900 cid naturally aspirated engine develops 2000 horsepower, and was designed for lower maintenance than what forced induction and nitrous applications demand, and yet, can qualify quicker and faster than some NHRA Pro Stocks,” Leonard added.

Solid attendance figures have been reported at NHRA Lucas Oil Drag Racing Series track events, according to NHRA’s Josh Peterson. “These events pack the house with shows that include ET bracket, sport compact, and jet cars. We have found it’s not the type of car, it’s how the event is promoted,” he said.

“Fans and racers alike are gravitating to heads-up ‘no-time’ racing.”

as strong movers out West. “With the size of the street racing crowd in the region it’s a natural to try and bring them to the track,” he said. “We are working on a Friday night series and a large weekend show for 2017.”

Hoyos noted how outlaw-style grudge racing and no-prep outlaws-style events generate huge spectator attendance, which blends with the traditional bracket racing that appeals to hardcore enthusiasts. “Due to massive TV exposure, the ‘now generation’ flock to the tracks hosting an Outlaw race to see the TV heroes face off with one another, and get an autograph or picture,” he explained.

Peaco reported that IHRA’s Modified segment has been a growth driver nationally, and on a member track level within its Summit SuperSeries National Championship program. “The Summit Pro Am Tours events that experience higher attendance numbers are intertwined with national events. The national level hasn’t experienced much fluctuation,” he said.

In the South, Leonard sees Pro Modified and Top Sportsman classes continually building. “I believe it’s due to the variety of cars and engines,” he observed. “The majority of the engines used in the Pro Modified class have NOS, turbos, and superchargers. You will see all sorts of cars, from 1949 Willys to 2016 Corvettes.

However, when questioned on which cars are appearing more often at sportsman events, Peterson pointed to the newer COPO Camaro, Cobra Jet Mustang and the Drag Pak Challenger in NHRA’s Stock and Super Stock classes.

Miller cited the popularity of modern as well as vintage muscle car bodies in NMCA and NMRA heads-up class racing that includes factory super cars.

Switching from domestic to foreign makes, one of Pacific Raceways 2016 grandstand fillers was the HondaFest NW. “It is more a social event to watch the exhibition seven-second Hondas,” said Ramsey. “We get about 100 race cars and 2000 car owners (the majority 20–30 years old) who like to show and socialize with their cars.

In 2017, the track is teaming with veteran promoter Bill Doner to bring in a big Nostalgia Nitro Funny Car race that will be supported with Super Saturday racers.

In fact, not only are racers returning and tracks experiencing gate growth, but the activity appears to have resurrected the American Drag Racing League (ADRL), which at press time was scheduled to host eight races in 2017. Kicking off with a Florida meet in March, the tour is slated to run through the first weekend of November at Gateway Motorsports Park outside of St. Louis, Missouri.

The Here and Now

Nearly every new class or race that sanctioning bodies or tracks add to the event calendar are the result of demand and support by racers, and sometimes even fans.

PDRA’s Harris said the sanction markets itself through creative connections to drag racing. “We want to show families that this is another form of entertainment they might enjoy,” he said. “For example, we provide a free ride down the track for an adrenaline rush. Our Family Pack Giveaways provide access to the starting line—this really amplifies the experience, gives them an insight to the sport.”



The goal at NMRA, NMCA and NMCA WEST parent organization ProMedia is to bring the fun back to racing by simplifying rules, streamlining tech inspection, hosting winners’ circles race appreciation parties, and making gate entry and parking easier. As a result, racer participation has grown, as seen at this recent NMCA WEST event at Auto Club Speedway in Fontana, California.

Peterson described NHRA’s decision process as follows: “Because member tracks are running weekly events, their customers help drive what it is they need to offer, and ultimately, what we need to offer as a sanctioning body.”

Michael Baker of IHRA explained, “We will create a class that will become a bridge from weekly bracket racing to the national event series, or if IHRA wants to enter a specific market.”

“I like to be a leader,” added Harris, “but sometimes you do better being a follower. It’s a constant struggle thinking what your next move might be, and it is always about making the place and experience better. And if you do that, you will make money.”

One unique challenge: Pacific Raceways' drag strip shares asphalt with the road course, and it receives many calls from groups requesting to race at the multi-use facility that has a very restrictive operating permit. "Experimenting with new classes is hard to do because of the relatively small number of dates available," said Ramsey. "With only about 50 drag dates a season, including a national event and two Lucas Oil regional/divisional races, we have more demand than we can fill."

Being an Attraction

So how are the next generation of racers being cultivated? Social media figures prominently in getting their attention; and the push is not just racing, but the promise of entertainment, which means serious attention must be paid to customer service in order to deliver what's being promised, and to keep racers and fans returning time and again.

ProMedia's Miller said his group's goal is to bring the fun back to racing by simplifying rules, streamlining tech inspection, hosting winners' circles race appreciation parties, and making gate entry and parking easier.

Terry Blount of NHRA cites the importance of dedication to core principles. "This year we created a public service announcement by Street Outlaws star Justin 'Big Chief' Shearer, telling all his fans, most of whom are under 30, that they should race legally and to contact local NHRA tracks. Shearer also competed at the US Nationals in his Pro Mod car, bringing enormous attention for us to the culture that we, and law enforcement, are trying to reach."

Thunder Road's marketing slogan, "We are Fast Fun for Everyone," is integrated into its daily operation and policies. "We've made an enormous number of changes to stay on the edge, and not behind the eight-ball," said veteran racer-turned promoter Hoyos, citing a friendly staff, guaranteed prize money regardless of car count, and a level competition field.

Beech Bend's Porter said social media generates new crowds more cost-effectively than TV or radio ads. "Modern

muscle cars have brought 10 to 20 percent more cars to our 'Fun Nights' for those who often just want to make laps with friends, or see if the new aftermarket part they installed improved their elapsed time," he shared.

Last year Pacific Raceways rented a huge tent and hosted a free dinner for more than 300 racers and their families and crew members. "The event cost us right out of our profit, but was worth the goodwill," Ramsey stated. "We have also developed a phone app and live stream of our PA system to try and extend our reach to new customers."

The team at MDIR, quite simply, follows the Golden Rule. "We try to do right by everyone as we would hope to be treated ourselves," said Lindner.

IHRA's Shayna Keller explained that any success attracting the next generation is the result of collaboration with partners and member tracks. "We look at every

aspect—from schedule, location of our main sportsman events, to the payout—[because] we know that the sportsman racers are the backbone of our sport."

The Truth On Youth

PDRA's Harris uses the sport's history to forge pathways forward. "I've been a racer since I was 16, and racing was a dirty word in my house. No one understood it. Racing was viewed as a redneck, wild sport. Today we try to educate people about the sport, teaching mechanics, technical ability, driving skills—all done in a safe environment. We have to go to them so they will come to you, and it is why we live stream our races."

NHRA's relatively new Junior Street category, designed for 13- to 16-year-olds, combines racing and car safety. "Teenagers race against their peers with an approved, licensed supervising adult as a teammate," explained Peterson. "Competitors go through an orientation/

Rules: Help or Hinder Participation?

Rules are intended to generate fair competition in a safe environment while controlling runaway research and development costs. Easy to say; difficult to execute.

"If racers don't abide by the rules, especially safety rules, they will get hurt," emphasized Bob Harris of Professional Drag Racers Association (PDRA), Pittsboro, North Carolina. "The most unpopular ones, those that slow cars down by limiting rpm, cubic inch diameter, or tire size are tied to keeping the costs in check so as many people who want to, can race."

"Competitors resist adding additional expense even with safety-related items," said Skooter Peaco of the International Hot Rod Association (IHRA), West Palm Beach, Florida, "but they are always grateful for the safety rules that are put in place when the worst-case scenario plays out."

Graham Light of the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) in Glendora,

California, explained, "Rules create parity within the classes due to all racers competing with the same components."

But, John Ramsey of Pacific Raceways, which houses a drag strip and road course in Kent, Washington, tries to avoid scaring away street racers. "Some are intimidated by conforming to a rulebook until it is explained with the reasons behind each," he said. "We've turned down business because certain groups do not want to conform to NHRA's rulebook."

However, Mike Consolo of QMP Racing in Chatsworth, California, believes racers sometimes feel innovation tends to attract more attention, and penalties from officials. "Because racers find ways to get the most out of what the guidelines specify, they get put under a microscope instead of a pat on the back. If racers always have to hold back, then it's not racing and we are not moving forward." —*Louise Ann Noeth*

SPORTSMAN DRAG RACING

licensing procedure on an eighth-mile drag strip in their own vehicles that meet program requirements. Street-legal, full-bodied cars, trucks, vans, or SUVs with mufflers, and street tires must be registered, insured, and running nine seconds and slower.”

Regarding IHRA’s Junior Dragster class, Peaco said, “We’re seeing a lot of racers that have been with us for a long time starting to bring their kids to the track. It has become more of a family atmosphere at our local bracket racing programs.”



Nearly every new class or race that sanctioning bodies or tracks add to the event calendar are the result of demand and support by racers, and sometimes even fans. A source from NHRA described the sanctioning organization’s decision process: “Because member tracks are running weekly events, their customers help drive what it is they need to offer, and ultimately, what we need to offer as a sanctioning body.”

Miller stated that another way to help eliminate street racing is by offering more radial tire classes at NMCA and NMRA. In addition, he stated, “Social media is a promotional tool we use to attract fans and racers by inviting TV personalities to our events that appeal to younger audiences.”

Blount added that NHRA follows a detailed plan for targeting youth. “We recently produced a video in our new studio telling all the sportsman racers how social media can help them gain new sponsorship,” he said. “Our Street Legal program allows almost anyone to take almost any street vehicle out to a local track for a thrilling taste of drag racing. Many tracks have a Midnight Madness program on Friday nights to encourage teens to bring their cars to the track.” **PR1**



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