

Fuel For Thought

with "Landspeed Louise" Ann Noeth

Dirt Start: El Mirage Dry Lake Season Opener

Photos by Wendy Jefferies and Ed Safarik

Land speed racing is the greatest equalizer in all of motorsports. It provides numerous opportunities for ordinary people to achieve extraordinary goals without arrogant side effects or suffer integrity lapses for the sake of sponsor money. Consider also, where else on earth could seniors whup virile youths, rookies spank hardened veterans, or a paraplegic walk away with Top Speed of an event?

Johnnie Lee, of Blythe, California, closed out the 2004 season opener at El Mirage Dry Lake May 16th with a 248-MPH record deftly driving in B/Blown Gas Lakester class. Lee, who leaves his wheelchair at the starting line, was still coming to grips with his "Top Dog" status when we spoke, confessed, "It's the first time. . . I don't know how to react, but it sure feels good. I was really happy with the first run of the season, babied the engine until the last 100 yards and then stood on it."

Lee depends on a Mike Cook prepared 430 CID Chevrolet. "Without Mike there would be no racing for me," stated flatly, "I can't say enough about him; he built my roadster, fitted me in it so I had all the hand controls in the right place, and then when my son got too busy with his bridge building job, Mike stepped in and picked up the engine building chores so I wouldn't fall behind in my racing program."

It was 1995 when pal Warren Robbins introduced him to land speed racer and engine wizard John Bjorkman who encouraged Lee to become

active in the sport. SCTA officials told Lee that if he could get in and out of the car he would be allowed to drive.

"That was all I needed to hear," chuckled Lee, "By Father's Day 1997 I was racing, upside down as it turned out." On the first run a combination transmission fluke and tire failures sent the car careening wildly down the track. The rear tires went flat, the car began to sway violently, but he was able to save it from spinning three times. Then the tires came off the bead, and the car launched 15-feet into the air before smashing down on the frame, spinning, flipping and cartwheeling a few times before coming to rest on its side.

"I remember Cook telling me, 'You are not going to die because this car came apart,' acknowledged Lee, "But the way that car flipped, I should have been dead." No doubt Lee's considerable experience driving top fuel dragsters, blown fuel altered, off-road and other high speed machines, starting in 1960 as a dirt track racer factored on that fateful day. "We fixed the car to make the last meet in November that year."

Lee's 2004 plan is to lay down a run in the 260-MPH range. "The speed secrets we learned from the roadster are now being applied in the lakester," noted Lee. Son and Crew Chief Jack Lee, 39, who also tunes the engine gets plenty of help from the determined crew of Robert Shankland, Carl and Teresa McNeil, daughter-in-law Kim Lee.

So just how does a paraplegic drive to Top Speed of the meet? Hand controls. Lee uses a push bar throttle with a push-button toggle switch mounted on top to



activate an electronic parachute release.

"That way I can stay in the run at speed, shut off and still count on the parachute to pull the car straight," he revealed. An air shift button on the steering wheel allows him to effortlessly go through all three speeds. Since he only has his hands to work with, the custom built, direct drive Mogi transmission permits gear changes without a clutch or torque converter.

Braking is done through another handle mounted just forward of the throttle bar with a vice grip-style bar that shuts off the fuel by just squeezing it onto the brake handle. "I only use it at the starting line and after the parachute is deployed."

Ever mindful that his seemingly weak condition in an able-bodied society has vast, hidden powers of persuasion, Lee makes it a point to engage children in conversation when he catches them eyeing his wheelchair.

"I tell the kids: 'I didn't look both ways before I ran out into the street one day' and they get real quiet. The parents usually pick up on my comment and turn the moment into a life lesson." Grownups would also do well to learn something from this high-achieving role model.

He is a very capable driver," said SCTA Secretary Warren Bullis of Lee's achievement, "He is very motivated and everyone wants to see him do well."

Top Speed for motorcycles - 194 MPH -- went to Bob Broge of Huntington Beach riding his "Green Goblin"

entry, a Kawasaki ZX12R in 1350 class on fuel. Broge had no idea he had captured the crown until I called him for a few words on his triumph. "I guess all the time I spent tuning the nitrous system and adjusting paid off," remarked a surprised biker.

Elsewhere, the blustery barren lakebed held up long enough for all the 118 entries to lay down at least one full speed run before officials called it a day. Thanks for such longevity goes to the volunteer track prep crew headed by long time racer Lonnie Martin.

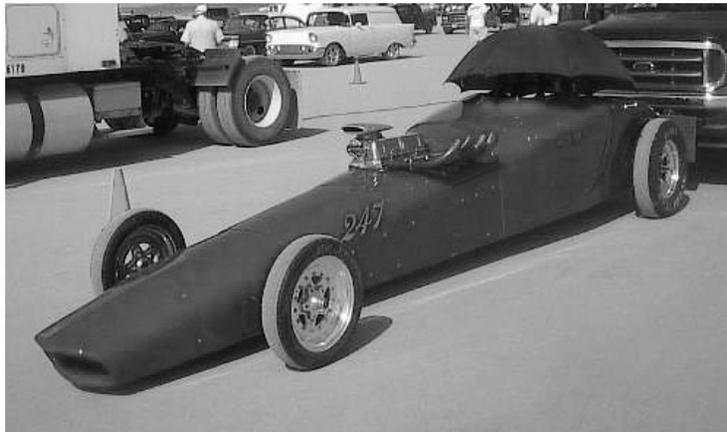
"Records were still being set at 1:30 in the afternoon," explained SCTA's kindly record keeper Dan Warner, "Last year, because the course got too chewed up, most everything was over by 10:30 a.m." A total of 18 new confirmed records were set: 12 car and 6 motorcycle.

Warner also noted a 100% improvement in "El Mirage 200MPH Club" membership as two people earned entrée at the event in comparison to only one for the entire 2003 season. The first was Steve Phillips who drove the Phillips & Son Racing A/Gas Roadster to a new 229 record.

The second was quite possibly responsible for the high wind conditions. Reports that a gigantic sigh of relief emanated from the family race pit after Alan Barbee ended the long-time jinx of The Barbee Boys roadster by piloting it to a 202 MPH record in B/Street Roadster class. Last year, these fellows ran 199 and change all season -- setting records but unable to reach the 200 MPH.

"Gene and Alan worked all last





year for 200 but fell just a tad short," said Bullis, "Now they'll sell the street roadster and move onto a gas roadster."

The driving medal of the day goes to Mike Cook Jr. who spun out the Hodges-Lee-Cook D/Blown Gas Roadster as he was hurtling through the timing lights at 212 MPH, but still managed to set a record, despite the last 100 yards of the track surface being crumbly dirt mush. Lee commented, "It doesn't matter what attitude, altitude or axis you are on as long as you break the timing light beams."

Records set by other racers included Rick Yacoucci trying to 'three-peat' as SCTA Points Champion driving the I/Blown Gas Streamliner of Costella-Yacoucci to a 219 MPH record.

"That kid is real sharp, he jumps enough classes with his car and understands that at the end of the season the championship doesn't always go to the fastest, but the most consistent racer," observed Warner, "That is what I like about our points system, even slow running vehicles have a equal chance to be on top."

Noting it was the best surface he had seen at the lakes in five years Mike Brauer, 29, of Brauer & Sons Racing team, drove the A/Fuel Roadster to a 223 record bumping up the family's existing 216 mark. "We'd like 250MPH at Bonneville this year," said "Old Man" Brauer, "We doubled the percentage of nitro from 30 to 60 and we're praying we don't break too many parts." With a new 496 CID injected engine and new 2-speed

Lenco transmission, they might have a chance if the oiling system behaves.

Warner was forced to deny two records. One team had entered their car in the wrong class.

It is the responsibility of the racer to enter the correct class and there are plenty of folks around to assist with

determining the proper classification. Don't be mule proud . . . Ask! Another record was denied when the engine displacement measured too small for the class entered.

It was Déjà vu day for Jack Kelly driving the Kelly & Hall Racing chrome yellow belly tank in E/Gas Lakester class nudging the record up to 205. After enduring a series of vicious engine deaths, the team for the second year in a row (fingers crossed), managed to gather it all together using new equipment on the first run of the first meet and tow home with a record time slip displayed on the sun visor. Wife Jerry drives next, but look for her to turn in much bigger numbers at Bonneville. I'm rooting for you lady.

"To get a record on the dirt you need to think: drag race," explained the jubilant Mr. Kelly, "I was lucky enough to avoid wheel spin off the starting line and power through all the gears." Kelly credits the engine work of Mike Waters and Jim Stevens for the sterling performance on the innagural runs and thanks crewmembers Wally Bethune, Joe Bemby, Lance Rose and Wayne Yates for making the day shine.

Dave Murray had the red modified roadster entered in the V4/FMR class and set the record for the Joe & Dave Murray 'T' to 171. Julio Hernandez and the Autopower-Bean Bandits G/Gas Modified Roadster set a new record for the class to 153.

Paula Burns jokingly told George Callaway only the starting line she'd fill-in if he could find his driver last year and when said throttler failed to arrive Paula became the permanent

driver of the Callaway Warnock Roadster. Daughter of the late Mike Burns, the guy to beat in the 50's for motorcycle and sidecar records and who still holds various class speed records at El Mirage, Muroc and Bonneville, Ms. Burns nailed a G/Gas Roadster record at 137 MPH record.

Dan Warner is utterly convinced there has to be something wrong with a Honda S2000 engine in a '29 Ford roadster, but Burns is looking forward to driving at Bonneville this year (she'll be a virgin salt driver) where she can drive more aggressively and not miss a shift!

"My land speed hero will always be my dad," she stated, "He was so determined, successful and I ask for his help as I leave the starting line." God Speed girl, go get 'em!

Tommy Hodges set a new record in B/CBFAlt class at 223. Jim Lattin took time off from recreating great hot rods from the past to let son Bill take the 60's era Kuzma XXO/VOT Indy Car to a record of 174 using a 255 Offy mill.

Bob Moreland, who operates Bob's Garage in San Marcos, California, put a side hack on his 1350-SC-G Hayabusa (200MPH street bike) and set a record at 165 on gas. "We just wanted to see how fast we can run with a sidecar," he said noting that Kent Riches and Randy Nelson also share the blame for this wild hair notion. The three-wheel trio has squeaked out a 178 MPH record on the salt using nitrous. Plans are to obliterate Wink Eller's 177 MPH record at El Mirage.

"Getting a record is always somewhat of a surprise," said Cathy Butler of her 50cc Aprilia at 89 MPH, "No matter how well you try to prepare I always feel very grateful for setting a new record." Watch out, she's adding nitrous now . . .

"I really admire land speed racers that do all of their own building and innovating of their race vehicle by themselves, she added, "They get out there and try something new, maybe blow something up and come back the next event and try just as hard."

Another 50cc record was set by Brian Rochlitzer, a Dirty two-club member, riding a Honda in the 50-SC-F class at 62 mph -- quite a change from dad's 300MPH Razzberry Rocket lakester!

Derek McLeish drove/rode the Team McLeish Brothers Silver Arrow splashed some red paint and checkered flag graphics to a 72 MPH record 50-SSC-G class. Ralph LeClercq rode his 650-P-P Honda to a class record of 164+. Terry Lewis brought out one of his vintage BSA bikes, entered in 750-APS-PG class and set a record of 130.

Several cars showed up sporting

new paint schemes, Paul Stanley and Rich Manchen brought the S&M lakester out in bright yellow with purple, green and orange graphics applied by Ed Hertz and his crew at Abstract Fiberglass.

SCTA-BNI webmaster Ed Safarik 'speed dipped' his young cousins from San Diego: Andrew "the shadow" Fuqua, 11, followed Safarik wherever he went and Cory, 13, got to drive/steer the roadster back after Ed's personal best 159 MPH run.

"They got to sleep in the bed of the pickup, under the stars," offered Safarik. I wonder if he realizes the seeds of speed he may have planted?

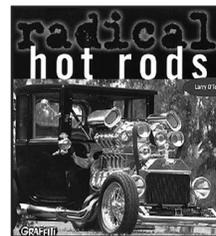


Louise

SPEED READING

(Writers note: This is the first in continuing series of short book reviews that will follow each month's report. I figure if Oprah can do it, why me with wheels, eh?)

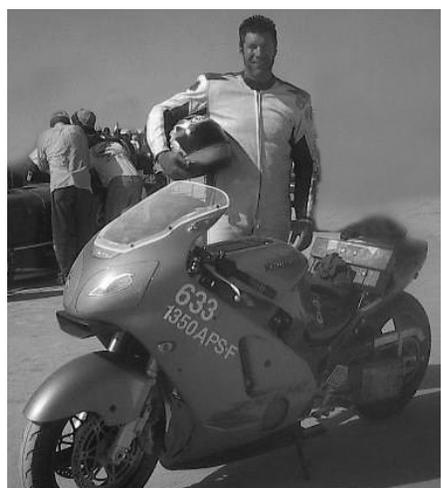
Radical Hot Rods
By Larry O'Toole
112 pages / 200
color photographs
\$24.95
MBI Publishing
Company
ISBN: 0949398748



If, like me, you are one of those folks who aren't very good at following the "rules" – whatever those might be when trying to define a "hot rod" – then you'll enjoy paging through this soft cover collection from down under. More than 50 far-reaching designs are featured from the USA and Australia with a lone ranger each from Sweden and France.

Besides the requisite Model T's and gaggles of roadsters, the wide variety of styling expressions include a delightful low rider school bus, 1937 Cord and Studebaker, a Jeep, Lincoln Zephyr that looks like a steel pompadour, and even an MGB. O'Toole doesn't discriminate; he includes not only the admirable work of enthusiasts who start with rusty hulks and a vision, but also those of checkbook fiberglass fantasy rides. It's an interesting look at rodding that even George Barris might enjoy – American readers will especially enjoy checking out rides not sold in the states.

Extreme is the common denominator for the blown engines, wild wheels and tires, exotic styling and fanciful applications of advanced engineering. Each vehicle is described in a few short paragraphs and shown from several angles with additional shots of interiors, engine treatments, or other notable details.



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