

## LAND SPEED

racing is reinventing itself on runways and race tracks all over the nation. This time-tested, straight-line approach is resonating like a motorized pied piper as it attracts thousands of amateur racers into competition.

The touchstone of this growing race pace is the venerated “flying mile,” where the speed machine tries to ramrod organized horsepower to the contact patches for 5280 steady feet.

At the Bonneville Salt Flats, where more flying mile records have been set than anywhere on earth, competitors get a two-mile run up to the timing lights before thundering wide-open throttle through one to three exhilarating timed miles.

For places with less real estate and tighter safety margins, half-mile competitions are trending, offering yet another perfect opportunity to attempt driving as fast as possible.

With all the roaring horsepower bursting off assembly lines the past few years, even the humble grocery getter is showing up at various test-n-tune and midnight-madness events.

In fact, these people want to get a “speeding ticket” to brag about. And more mile and half-mile events are being hosted all

the time. Not full-blown race cars—just understand that they all tend to make some level of speed-enhancing adjustments, or safety modifications, that require parts and/or service purchases.

### Runway Triumphs

Bonneville—as long as the salt holds out—will forever remain the “chosen land” to transmute horsepower into whatever speed the right foot has the courage to seek. But smaller, local events are giving weekend racers and serious enthusiasts opportunities to use their vehicles like never before.

Tonya Turk of The East Coast Timing Association (ECTA) has observed interesting, evolving demographics to build the next level of racing consumer. “We are seeing multi-generation drivers at every meet,” she said. “In order for speed-run racing to continue, we need to keep bringing in the next generation. Parents that enjoy what we do see it as a safe way to introduce racing to their children.”

She noted how the sport is populated by amateurs, so it is very important that promoters ensure participants can safely test personal limits in addition to the speed machine. “I love interacting with the wife, or significant other, of a male racer

# THE STATUS OF SPEED



asking why she isn't taking her turn," she said. "Many are afraid to try, but after talking to them a bit, I convince them that the car doesn't know that it is a female foot pushing the gas pedal any more than a male foot. They have total control of how fast they go—they get to pick when to lift.

"It is a blast when they come back to see that they experienced that total sense of accomplishment that comes with overcoming the unknown. It isn't always about going over 200 mph. Some of the greatest accomplishments happen around 100 mph," Turk concluded.

Blake Hutchison of wannaGOFAST in Destin, Florida, believes that half-mile racing competitions are becoming a larger driving force of aftermarket parts sales every year. "In addition to custom fabrication, and one-off builds for extremely high-horsepower applications, our events provide a proving ground for vehicle innovation, testing of new parts and vehicle tuning technology," he explained.

"If a performance shop or manufacturer is looking to up their business, half-mile racing is a great place to meet new customers, or bring current ones out to inspire them to take a new approach

with their current build in most cases," he continued. "Making it to the top of the podium at one of our events provides incredible advertising opportunities; half-mile speeds are becoming an extremely important measure of a vehicle's performance."

Hutchison added that wannaGOFAST events "provide an excellent networking aspect between parts manufacturers and dealers," noting that "20-plus performance shop sponsors and motivated manufacturers [are often on hand] to support existing dealers, as well as meet potential new [ones]."

Vengeance Racing, in Cumming, Georgia, which modifies cars for quarter-mile and half-mile competition, owns a Chevrolet Corvette C7 ZO6 that holds the current record for fastest C7 ZO6 in the quarter mile (at 151.2 mph) and half-mile competition (170.7 mph). Ron Mowen told us the main reasons half-mile and mile events are gaining traction all over the country are the lower cost of entry and that they're typically "more forgiving to first timers."

Mowen believes the main contributor to the market's rapid growth and popularity is the sheer "fun factor," coupled with less track prep and no pressure to launch like a drag racer. "These events allow for the average enthusiast to legally achieve speeds

# STRAIGHT-LINE EVENTS



**From air strips to dry lake beds, everyday drivers are becoming serious racers—and serving as a viable source of upgrades, safety equipment and more to satisfy their passion for acceleration.**

# STRAIGHT LINE SPEED EVENTS



**Vengeance Racing, which modifies and preps cars for quarter-mile and half-mile competition, typically has “30–50 Vengeance Racing modified vehicles at any given half-mile event. This literally creates an event within the event,” said company owner Ron Mowen.**

only dreamed of previously,” he observed. “I spend a lot of time talking to participants at these events, and they always tell me they never imagined they would be driving in excess of 150 miles per hour.”

Rusty Durham of the International Mile Racing Association (IMRA) in Fort Pierce,

Florida, points to the increasing number of 200-mph cars that come straight from the factory as a new market driver. “Aftermarket modifications continue to push speeds higher because speed enthusiasts are always interested in seeing just how fast the machine is capable of

going. The bar continues to be raised,” he noted.

Dennis Sullivan of the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association (USFRA) in Salt Lake City, Utah, also sees the expanding popularity of mile- and half-mile events directly linked to economical accessibility. “People can enter their street cars, hot rods, and bikes for a fairly low cost to set a record, or just to see how fast it will go. The events are very low key, and as more are set up around the country, more people get a chance to ‘live a dream.’

“Events held on a runway greatly reduces set-up costs [versus] what it takes to host a Bonneville Salt Flats or El Mirage Dry Lake event,” he continued. “And, some people simply don’t want to run their cars and bikes on the salt or the dirt.”

Hutchison’s events are living proof of that thinking. From six events in five states for 2016, wannaGOFAST added three more events, and expanded into another



state, for 2017. “More and more sponsors and racers want more events,” he stated, citing numerous emails, phone calls, and one-on-one conversations. “Requests are coming from all sides, from specific regions of the country, and we are bringing the races to them. We give sponsors and participants a diverse schedule to provide excitement while allowing sponsors to expand their advertising reach.

“Additionally, sponsors and racers love our casual and open format of racing. We run multiple classes at once—no run groups, which means we can run races every 40–45 seconds,” he added.

At each event, wannaGOFAST offers five to eight runs per participant, though some manage more. In fact, a competitor once pulled off 34 runs at a single event.

“Our racers can take their car right off the showroom floor and come see what it will really do,” Hutchison said. “Bone stock Dodge Vipers run side by side

against Hellcats. Afterwards, they can start modifying the vehicle, measuring the progress at each event and strive to achieve a higher speed than the last.”

The practical, mechanical benefits are recognized by the only group that offers 1.5-mile speed records, and is nearly as far to get to as Bonneville for many. “There is inherent safety in lower driveline loads by not launching aggressively,” said Tim Kelly of the Loring Timing Association (LTA) in Maine. “Our single runner format makes the safety requirements much easier for the average competitor. More competitors arrive every meet. New competitors who find it easy to enter are joining dedicated drag racers that have tired of the rules, competitiveness, and costs of the strip.”

For these competitors going flat out on a half-mile or mile-long runway course, numerous opportunities are available for racing operations to help customers

seek their need for speed from a variety of engine and chassis parts, as well as safety equipment and pit products to keep them racing into future events.

### **A Challenging Environment**

IMRA’s Durham recognizes that historically popular Bonneville events are becoming harder to book. “Over the last 100 years many areas have become so depleted of salt that some of the tracks of the past are unusable,” he reported.

“IMRA has been contacted about doing two-mile Bonneville-style sessions on concrete,” Durham added. “The Kennedy Space Center Shuttle Landing runway is three miles long. Two-mile speed runs would have a full mile of stopping space. Insurance costs are another challenge.”

USFRA’s Sullivan appreciates Durham’s insight, because the No. 1 issue facing land speed racing on the salt is the diminishing race track. “What was once 13 miles is today down to seven miles.

# STRAIGHT LINE SPEED EVENTS



Our salt racing surface, once at more than a foot thick, is now less than a couple inches,” he said.

“The really fast cars and motorcycles are starting to look for other places to run around the world. The jet cars have not been able to run here for more than 20 years.

“And yet,” he continued, “the interest in land speed racing is still growing strong. Website postings reveal that people are still building cars and bikes. The demand for entry at some events is so strong that the event organizers must limit the number of entries. Entry limits at some events are filled in less than a week.”

The ECTA’s pressing hurdle is finding and keeping an acceptable place to race. “We are not hosting a 2017 race season due to losing our home of five years in Wilmington, Ohio,” lamented Turk, who summarized the task and ECTA’s viability: “There are so few air strips with inactive

runways that will accommodate one-mile racing. Our self-imposed, 150-registration limit per meet allows participants to get in ample racing. Last year, we added an additional day of racing to two ECTA events. Every event was sold out, so the interest or participation is not falling off at all. Our racers are anxiously waiting for us to find a new venue.”

## **Fastest People On Earth**

Interestingly, all land speed events, traditionally the realm of amateurs, today have more professionals showing up with all manner of speed machines. “Our competitors come from all walks of life, and from all parts of the world and across the USA,” revealed Sullivan.

“Cars and bikes built everywhere from a carport to professional shops are raced by young and old, male and female, from all financial backgrounds,” he said. “We have professional drivers, with professionally built vehicles and professionally built

engines, but our rules keep the playing field level. Amateur racers can—and often do—reset a professional’s record.”

“There is no prize money, only a trophy, a time slip, and the recognition of peers,” SCTA’s McDowell added. “Don’t get me wrong, we are made up of many high-performance industry leaders. But most come as individuals who share our passion, and lately many ‘old’ drag racers also end up on the salt.”

ECTA also has a varied pool of racers. “We have groups from different colleges and technical schools that bring project vehicles out to run tests, and collect data for their classes,” said Turk.

IMRA’s Durham revealed that some 60 percent of its competitors have had some previous racing experience, while 20 percent are totally new to the scene, and another 20 percent are hardcore professional racers. “We get a wide range of individuals looking to experience the



unforgettable thrill of pushing a vehicle to its absolute limit,” he concluded.

“USFRA is starting to develop a relationship with the people that run the bicoastal The Race Of Gentlemen (TROG) to hold an event on the salt flats during the World of Speed, and are working with a local airport to develop a one-mile event,” explained Sullivan.

### Turning Fun Into Earnings

Expanding beyond the traditional West Coast venues, wannaGOFAST is identifying regions where the most interest is coming from potential participants, particularly metro areas where the draw would be greatest. “As the racers meet up and develop relationships, it spurs them to travel to other events looking for new competition in other areas, which will only boost car counts,” Hutchison said. “The fastest Corvettes and one of the fastest Vipers in the country are from Atlanta; the fastest one is from an eastern

state. And who would believe the fastest Lamborghini Huracán (247 mph) could be from Charlotte, North Carolina.”

Regardless of where these events are held, traditional race industry manufacturers are highly involved. LTA’s Kelly noted that Edelbrock decals dominate the sheet metal and fiberglass panels, followed by a healthy showing of MSD Ignition, Worldwide Bearings, Brock’s Performance, Amsoil, VP Racing Fuels and S&S that back these competitors from simple product discounts to cash support.

The business model from Vengeance Racing’s Mowen is to participate in, as well as support, speed events—a strategy that’s paying dividends. “Physically being at the event supporting our customers, and interacting with other racers has proven to be very rewarding for us,” he said. “We typically have 30–50 Vengeance Racing modified vehicles at any given half-mile event. This literally creates an

event within the event. When other racers see our team in action, and our customer vehicles running well, it motivates them to be a part of what we do.” 

## SOURCES

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