

## Fuel For Thought

with "Landspeed Louise" Ann Noeth

## Speedy Thoughts from Wally Parks

I was attracted to the sport of land speed racing because its very nature is rooted in the freedom of unencumbered thinking, experimentation and daring. I remained intrigued because the vast majority of people who achieve repeated success and startling speeds do so from a passion powerbase tempered by common sense and made manifest by practical technical smarts. In short, it's anyone's game.

Wally Parks knew that was true decades ago. Most folks recognize the spry and spunky 92 year old as the founder and executive shepherd of the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA), but don't realize his speedy roots go waaaaaayyyy back to the wild, untamed early days when American high performance was percolating up and out of youthful dreamers. Wally invited me to brunch at the NHRA Museum in Pomona, California and we hit upon the idea of sharing some of his recollections with land speeders of today (and hopefully, tomorrow!). Fill up that coffee cup, or go get a cold

one, its pitside chat time with Wally.

Of the three southern California dirt tracks - Muroc, Harpers, El Mirage - I wondered which held the most memorable delights for Parks. His answer made me realize just what a

and size, but I knew he had gone up to Utah in hopes of rescuing land speed racing. The hot rodders were getting faster and rapidly outgrowing the "dinky" dirt acreage. SCTA knew it needed another venue to keep interest piqued.

"My first visit to the Bonneville salt flats was in 1948, where the AAA was conducting land speed runs for FIA world records recognition. Most overwhelming was the contrast between Bonneville's smooth salt surface and vast spaciousness, as compared with the California desert's dry lakebeds where we had been running our hot rod cars since the 1930s" explained Parks.

Remember, this was at a time in our national psyche when hot rodders were dismissed as little more than annoying nuisances and some American car dealers refused to sell parts to them, so it was no easy job to earn respectability for land speed racers.

"A purpose of my being there was to determine whether there was a chance that the SCTA might gain access to the salt for conducting one of its speed trials events," recounted Parks, "After contacting Bonneville's

for his indefatigable attention to growing the sport of drag racing, but I wondered what spun his crank, who were his heroes, the speedsters he admired and what ripples of their actions still exist today. He offered up folks across the years:

"My dry lake and salt flat heroes were many - starting with early '30s racers at Muroc and continuing through later salt flats years. Builders and racers of stripped T-bodied, flat-head 4-cylinder roadsters, with improvised homemade speed equipment were among the first, while later years introduced new innovations in cylinder heads, cams and carb setups. Some of the early names included Frankie Lyons, Johnny Junkin, Ernie McAfee, Bill Warth, Carl Orr, Vic Edelbrock and of course, Bob Ruff and Stu Hilborn, plus the Summers Brothers and Al Teague, magicians of more recent years.

Both the dry lakes and salt flats time trials have produced countless heroes. Much of today's equipment used and marketed in the performance fields had its roots planted in dry lakes activities. Ed Winfield, with his camshafts, carburetors and cylinder

heads, was among the first and most prominent. Edelbrock, Evans, Meyer, Weiland, Navarro, Offenhauser and others produced intake manifolds and aluminum cylinder heads, Harman-Collins, Spalding and Kong Jackson were ignition gurus, while Iskenderian was in the forefront as a grassroots cam grinder, Schiefer and Weber flywheels and clutches dominated. Speed shops like Lee Chappel's, Bell Auto Parts, Karl Orr's and So-Cal were early outlets, and hangouts, for members of the fast growing hot rod fraternity.

All these and many more can be credited for many of the major advancements that originated in dry lakes and salt flats performances, before drag racing."

Long before Parks ran the NHRA, he was "tuned up" for the job as the SCTA's first elected post-WWII president, a job that was more work than fun. "Among the toughest hurdles SCTA had to tackle was overcoming a bad image of illegal street racing by local media's condemnation of all hot rods," noted Parks, "That reflected against the association and its member clubs. To counter, we organized the first public Hot Rod Show, presented in the Los Angeles Armory - as a public-relations effort that also served as Hot Rod Magazine's launch pad. Some other problems were in placating area residents around the dry lakes, where unruly weekend antics were reflected against SCTA's organized events."

Parks had lots of help. The sport



On display at the Wally Parks NHRA Motorsports Museum are some of the most legendary record-setting land speed racecars in history. In the display case behind the cars are various memorabilia of land speed racing.

pioneer the fellow is - drag racing notwithstanding. "Without question, Muroc ranks first among my own memories of dry lake activities, as it was the first such event I had attended, in 1932," revealed Parks, "I gained my first time tag in '33 driving my 1925 Chevy-4 cabriolet at 82.19 mph. After Muroc we ran at Rosamond, Harper and El Mirage dry lakes, each one of which produced its share of fast action and legends."

Back then, for Parks to run 82 clicks and change was a big thing. Think about that the next time you see a '25 Chevy, if you even know what one looks like. Today, Rosamond and Harper are only memories. Muroc is locked up behind the secure gates of Edward's Air Force Base. Only El Mirage continues to host time trials - just as it has for more than 80 years.

What about the salt? Could he reach back, recall what overwhelmed him most the first time he wandered out onto the crystalline pancake? Everyone is awestruck by its majesty

Utah custodian of the salt, the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce, we were able to gain permission for a "one time trial" venture, which resulted in SCTA's presentation of its Bonneville Nationals in 1949 - an event that has continued to gain in popularity every year since. As driver of the Burke & Francisco belly tank lakester at the initial event, I had the first spin-out on the race course, thus confirming the salt's added safety over desert dirt."

That's right, the SCTA was told they could run only ONE event and if the participants didn't behave themselves the salt would not be made available to them again. The SLC Chamber had an iron-grip on salt access at the time, the current custodian, the BLM, did not even exist yet. On a lighter note, it is amusing that Parks was the charter member of the "spin-out" club. Now there's a Jeopardy question for you. Thousands consider Parks a hero in his own right

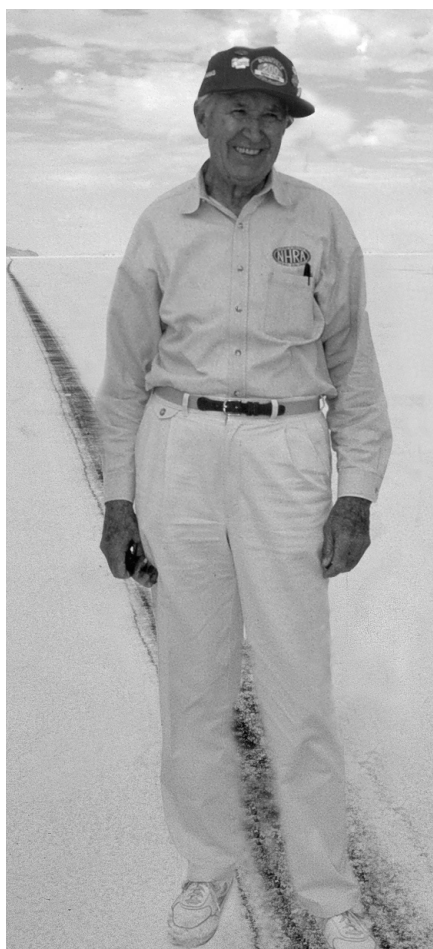




was, and still is, populated by folks determined to shepherd the hot rod-der into better and faster cars. Unlike the corporate world where big salaries attract the best and brightest, in land speed racing volunteers dominate. They bring with them passion, something that money will never buy. Did he have any idea why folks like to go fast? I asked him why he thought the sport has not simply survived, but thrived.

"Land speed racing has prospered because it has always been one of the most dedicated auto sports in existence. Its participants and officials have maintained a labor-of-love concept that overrides attempts to commercialize—and where record-settings are the prime rewards," he sagely observed, "It has always been one of the most challenging and exciting forms of motorsports competition. It allows veterans and newcomers to compete against the clock in its myriad classes of straight-line action, where nothing really becomes obsolete. The feel and thrill of chasing a single black line to its extremity, headed for a floating mountain in the distance and then turning out to await one's results in miles per hour - it's hard to match! Max speed achievement has always been a measure of skill and efficiency, almost as much as winning races. With recorded speeds as targets to be conquered, land, water and air contests aimed at official recognition, or just bragging rights, are goals for adventurers."

Parks has "been there, done that"



**Former SCTA president Wally Parks stands on Bonneville's famous long black line.**

for so long in the sport, that I thought he might have an opinion what the biggest specter facing the sport might be. A speed thinker to the core, he nailed it straight away. "In my opinion, one of the biggest problems land



**Doubtless few who attend the historic event recognized the grey-haired gent who humbly came before the custodians of the salt, the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce a half century prior seeking to stage the first Bonneville Nationals Speedweek.**

speed racing faces today is the provision of tires that are capable of today's 400+ mph potentials," he said, "It has long been a problem, due in part to a limited number of potential users - but the prospects are now looking better."

OK, but what about the folks who are supposed to observe, record and certify world records? The FIA's shabby treatment of American record-breaking hopeful who risk their very lives is well known. Still, the French group is a powerful force. Did Parks believe a BNI World Record is comparable to an FIA World Record? "World land speed records, today, are no longer 'International' - not since the years when governments, like Great Britain, helped to underwrite the high costs for official FIA attempts," he explained, "With so few venues in the world, other than Bonneville, that are suited for modern land speed contests, World records are of little value or interest to today's FIA. As the most experienced authority for conducting, timing and verifying land speed records, the SCTA and its BNI arm are well qualified and equipped to establish recognizable world performance marks."

It's saying something when you meet someone who can stay passionate, effective and vital for as many decades as Wally Parks; he's seen and done some great things, experienced some awful heartbreak shepherding speed along a dignified, albeit circuitous route. I finished up our time by asking if he had any advice for the young speedsters who are just now finding their way to halls of horsepower. He did not disappoint.

"Today's 'young speeders' are little different than we were at their age - except that their cars, fresh off the showroom floor, have much more in power and maneuverability than most of our early hot rods. The same urge is there, to 'try it out' somewhere. But today's traffic, unlike isolated roads or the dry lakes, is a formidable substitute. The challenges may be the same, but safe facilities are too few -

except for those fortunate in having drag strips that can accommodate go-fast ambitions and energies. Most drag strips today offer 'Street Legal' classes, supported by law enforcement, to help discourage illegal street

racing. It's a far cry from the desert time trials of the 1930s, but it can offer some same satisfaction in results."

Parks did more than bench race when he passed the NHRA torch, he spearheaded a preservation effort that today stands to protect the past achievements of not only the drag racing crowd, but also chronicles other forms of motorsports,

including a healthy, rotating exhibit of land speed racing vehicles and memorabilia. In 1998 the NHRA Motorsports Museum opened to the public after years of planning and months of hard work cataloging and arranging exhibits. When Parks cleared his 90th timing light, the museum honored him by adding his name to the museum title.

The 28,500-square-foot building on the edge of California's historic Los Angeles County Fairplex, celebrates the impact of motorsports on our culture by collecting, preserving, exhibiting and interpreting the vehicles, stories, and artifacts that represent the affection for, and the influence of, automotive speed and style in all its forms. This is certainly the place to view and learn about hot rods, customs, racecars and speed records. It is special to note that every person who volunteers, or serves on staff, is a true blue motor head, so we are assured of their commitment to excellence. The museum is open year-round, Wednesday through Sunday, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (except Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas), features an impressive array of vintage

and historical racing vehicles along with photographs, trophies, helmets and driving uniforms, artifacts, paintings, and other memorabilia chronicling more than 50 years of American motorsports.

In June, the museum kicked off its "Winner's Circle" endowment program. The idea is to inspire a tight group of members who have benefited tremendously from the motorsports industry to give something back and in doing so have their legacy accurately represented.

"We're comfortable with our ability to handle daily operations, but now we'd want to gather resources to take the museum to the next level," explained Sam Jackson, Executive Director of the Wally Parks NHRA Motorsports Museum, "We want the ability to reach out and develop special programs and exhibits."

Those exhibits still cost money and range from \$10,000 to \$50,000 each; a big chunk pays for transporting vehicles. When the museum sent seven cars back to Indy for the 50th anniversary, the tab was \$15,000 even after Reliable Trucking discounted the cost by half-price. In October 2005, the museum will present a new dirt track roadster exhibit in a full-blown actual dirt-based diorama on a bare-bones budget.

"Our history started on the dirt, went to the salt and then the quarter-mile," concluded Jackson, "Although it has only just begun, response to the Winner's Circle has been very strong and the goal is to have an annual endowment of at least \$125,000 to fund special exhibits."

In today's mega-buck economy, that amount seems paltry, perhaps even shortsighted. However, I find it refreshing that Wally and crew are realistic about what they want to do and I hope the campaign nets them twice their target so they can afford to offer an exhibit of historical LSR vehicles gathered from around the nation. That would be stupendous.

Land speed racers know all about doing great things on tight budgets and I venture a guess that scarcity of money keeps racers humble, focused and hungry to always do their best with what little is available. It is why I revel in their company and hope their passion never wanes. There's a genius in the speed and wonder in the deed.

Louise

