

SPEED ON SALT

Bonneville: 1958



Sorrell-sponsored, Chet Herbert's 272 mph car covers its 3 injected Chevy V-8s with a Rod Schapel-shaped shell.



Mickey Thompson dressed up his slingshot dragster (twin tandem Chryslers tuned by Voigt) with straight-forward George Hill-designed body, set new record with 286 mph two way average.

THIS YEAR'S week of speed on the Salt marked the tenth anniversary of the Nationals. Entries were by no means as numerous as they have been many times in the past, but qualitatively they were outstanding. A bumper crop of new records was harvested. The wonderful, off-beat spirit of automotive alchemy prevailed, as always — expressed neatly this year by automotive philosopher Jim Price, who said, "Who needs differential calculus when you can guess?" To this his colleague George Butler added, "Don't let a lump of iron do your thinking for you. YOU be the master."

These are guys who could put a locomotive in orbit if they had to snap it into space with rubber bands. Watching their disciplined anarchy work is a priceless experience.

There were 130 entries at Bonneville, including 21 sports cars, 8 streamliners and two streamlined motorcycles. Superchargers were more numerous than ever; 26 percent of the entries were blown, mostly by GMC Roots-type 6-71's, but with a sprinkling of 4-71's, McCullochs and Lathams. Among the 117 four-wheeled entries 35 percent were powered by Chrysler-product engines: 26 Chryslers, 8 Dodges, 6 De Sotos and one Plymouth. Chev V8's powered 18 percent of the entries and an identical percentage was held by Ford-Merc V8's. New two-way records were set in 17 classes, most of them by very broad margins. And about ten percent of the assemblage wore beards. (Author included—Editor.)

The Class O (under 91 cu. in.) record was wide open, a fact which came to the attention of Sherman Golub and Gilbert Dunne. They had motored out from Wappingers Falls, N. Y. in a Porsche Carrera coupe just to spectate. They happily paid a late entry fee, and after some juggling of plugs and carb settings, went home with a big trophy and the class record of 114.157.

Wayne Stanford of Los Angeles had set the Class A (92 to 170 cu. in.) record last year in his Porsche 1600 at 107.932. This year he bumped his two-way average to 110.552. He had no competition in his class.

Equally alone in Class B (171-305 cu. in.) was Cincinnati investment broker Albert Schmidt, back again with the 300SL coupe with which he had set the class record of 150.647 in '57. This year he arrived with an imported mechanic, high hopes and the wrong gears. He worked hard, inching his times up through the 130's and ultimately could do no better than a very decent 146.10.

There was plenty of competition in Class C (U.S. production cars under 371 cu. in.). Eight entries consisted entirely of Corvettes, except for the lone T-bird entry of Ronnie Huss of El Monte, Calif. He was second-quickest in class with a most impressive 147.12 mph. His engine was not stock, but the rules somehow allowed him in this class. The 292 cu. in. block had been bored one-eighth over to give a total displacement of 311.5; the heads carried oversize valves and had been milled to give a 12:1 compression ratio; it ran a Clay Smith cam and dual four-throat carbs.

But the Corvettes were stock to the best of my knowledge, although I did not get to check Paul Sylva's, which turned 148.27. What these strictly-stock cars are capable of is awfully impressive. The entry of Jerry Eisert of Automotive Specialty, Montebello, Calif., was a stock, injected 283 that, like all the others, ran flawlessly. Pulling 3.27 gears the car, run after run, turned a consistent 141 mph. This was disappointing to Eisert because his tow car, a box of a sedan with an identical engine, had clocked 135.95 the first time through the traps. Eisert finally robbed the sedan's 3.55 gears and squeezed 143.54 from his sports car.

Perennial contestants from the state of Washington are Joe Duffy and Clarence Fish. Last year they competed in T-birds, this year in Corvettes. Duffy's car also was a stock injected 283 which he had bought at the factory and driven home, and then to the Salt. Running 3.27 gears and with careful tuning of plugs, injection and tires he reached 145.16. Fish, driving an identical car which he had bought used, clocked 143.76. All agreed that 3.55 gears should be better for the course. George Hill, running them in his stock injected Corvette, turned 144.69. The slowest Corvette at the meet went through Otto Crocker's clocks and 141.50. These over-the-counter stockers are a plenty rapid breed.

The Class O Modified record was set last year by Bob Hirsch at the wheel of Bill Scace's Porsche RS at 135.772. The only entry in that class this year was another RS owned and driven by Dick Hughes of Los Angeles. His best time was 126.23 mph.

Scace of Chicago this year arrived on the Salt with a magnificent 300SL roadster. Stripped of its stock windshield and muffler, it ran in A Modified Class. Early in the week, with typical generosity, Bill offered me a ride, which I accepted. I tripped the timing lights at 139.75 mph after red-lining it down the course in the indirects in complete luxury and security. In spite of a slight chop caused by tire inflation pressure of about 50 psi, the full-independent ride was completely comfortable and the car handled superbly. Although I had my foot in it all the way, Scace coaxed much more speed from the roadster in the days that followed. He experimented with tuning, tires and modifications to the radiator air inlet opening. He was not running a belly pan and felt that its absence was holding back his top speed by a good three percent. His final two-way record was 143.191.

The B Modified record had been set in '57 by Bob Drake in Frank Arciero's 4.9 Ferrari at 176.913. The only challenger in that class arrived in mid-week: aerodynamically a very slippery Devin-bodied, Cadillac-powered Special entered by the Juggers Racing Team of Burlingame, Calif. They had teething troubles, but worked up to 166.05 mph and learned a great deal. The car is capable of much higher speeds and should go much faster next year.

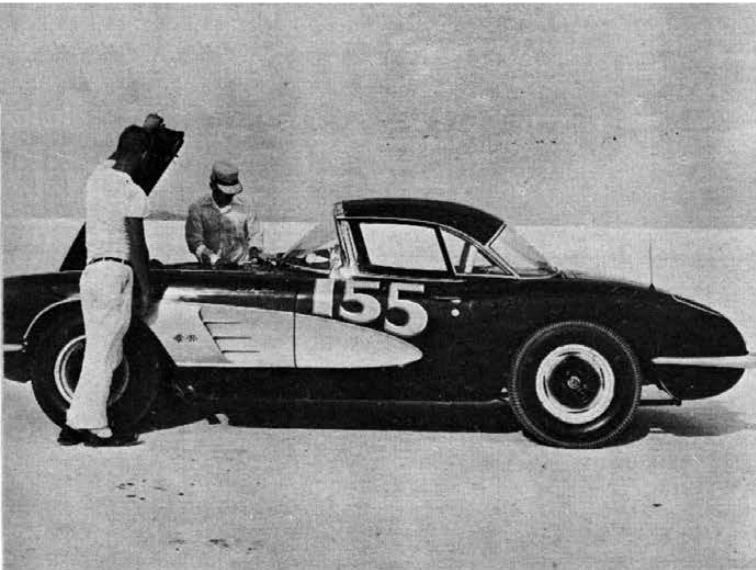
The Class C Modified record of 138.317 was set last year by the E & D Special, a Chrysler-powered Corvette. Two cars challenged it this year, both last-minute arrivals. Brian Chuchua of La Habra, Calif., appeared with a McCulloch-blown '58 Corvette that eventually turned 148.27 mph. But the '55 T-bird with 342 cu. in. McCulloch-blown engine belonging to Southard and Heboian of Torrance, Calif., beat the existing record by all of 24.285 mph. It clocked a two-way average of 162.602. Their highest one-way speed was 167.59 mph.

The big-bore D Modified record of 178.068 was established by the Chrysler-engined Sorrel-bodied coupe of Barnes, Larsen and Dauphin in '57. The car did not appear in its own defense this year; nor was it necessary. Two formidable threats were made. One was by the special built by Dr. John Teverbaugh and Bob Kirkland, both of the San Francisco Bay Area. The car has a very smooth Fiberglass body, chromoly tube frame, torsion bars on a live rear axle, tubular front axle with cross-spring and disc brakes all around. Its engine is a 368 cu. in. ohv Merc fed by a GMC 6-71 blower and Hilborn injection.

This machine ran extremely well for the first three days and had turned 163.93 at about 5000 rpm. Late on Wednesday it sped north and entered the quarter-mile at 5500 rpm



Fastest sports car this year: Boxy, brutish, 173 mph Kurtis-Chrysler. Tuned, owned and driven by Tony Sampo, Denny Weinberg and Troy Ruttman.



Well-rounded Washingtonian Joe Duffy turned 145 in his stock FI Corvette. Rest of year he manages 3.6-mile road course and 1/4-mile strip near Tacoma.

— about 175 mph — and burned a hole in a cylinder head. That ended its foray for '58. With the right power package it should be capable of breaking 200 mph easily.

The other DM Class challenger was a Kurtis-Chrysler entered by Denny Weinberg of Norwalk, Calif., prepared by Tony Sampo and driven both by Weinberg and Troy Ruttman, who just returned from racing in Europe. Aerodynamically boxy and ragged, this car still had the horsepower to shove it through the wind at a top speed of 173.41. The car was still about five mph short of the class record, but nevertheless it was the fastest sports car of the meet by far.

Performance by Detroit sedans was phenomenal. The Sanchez-Kamboor-Ansen Stude, powered by a massive Chrysler with experimental aluminum heads, clocked 210.40 before it scattered under a full nitro charge.

The gas classes were equally amazing. Karol Miller of Houston was back again with his stock-bodied Ford sedan and turned an entirely improbable 151.997. He was running a 259 cu. in. Merc engine aided by a Latham supercharger giving eight psi boost.



With Moon discs, partially blanked radiator but lacking a belly pan, Chicago exec Bill Scace hit 143 while riding in utmost luxury of his 300SL.

Miller ran in C Gas Class. Even more spectacular was the performance of the D Gas record winner Lewis Ashby of Odessa, Texas. His car was a '57 Buick four-door and it was very close to stock. A dual plate Mallory distributor gave him an extra 100 rpm. Six Stromberg 97 carbs gave him six additional mph over the stock single four-barrel setup. This utterly demure-looking street machine made the Salt vibrate at the starting line with its thundering exhaust note. To the amazement of everybody it clocked a high of 151.00 and set the two-way record at 147.905. Like nitro, the Texans have a strange something that shows up on the dyno. They go.

The most intense drama of the meet, of course, centered around the fastest cars, the streamliners. When Roy Leslie drove Bill Kenz' three Ford-flathead engined car to a two-way average of 266.204 last year Kenz stated on the spot that there was no more where that had come from. There was nothing to do but retire the car. He showed on the Salt with a slow but fun-to-drive highboy roadster.

Cam grinder Chet Herbert has had his sights on Kenz' records for years, but his awesome entries always have been

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Bonneville '58

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hampered by inadequate preparation or plain bad luck. This year was different for Herbert. He had pulled the two Chrysler engines from the beautiful Schapel-designed Fiberglas streamliner and slipped three injected Chevies in their place. His preparation was excellent, largely thanks to 20-year-old Dave Ryder of Pasadena who slaved on the job for months, 14 hours a day and seven days a week.

Ryder had never driven over 150 mph and this he had done at drag strips. He had never even run on Southern California's dry lakes. But when the time to go to Bonneville rolled around he asked Herbert to give him a shot at driving the streamliner. Because of the magnitude of his contribution to the project Herbert could only say yes. Ryder proved to be a natural.

The engines seemed to run beautifully from their first firing up. The first run was just a feeler and Chet told Dave to take it through at about 200 mph. Although the car had no tachometer Dave went through the traps at 207. Then Herbert told him to try one at about 250. Ryder turned 252. Herbert was not interested in getting the ultimate out of his machine all at once. For the present he just wanted to go a little faster than Kenz. On the next to last day Ryder qualified for the following day's record runs with a 272.93. Sunday morning he made his northbound run at 272 and headed back with the new absolute record all but signed, sealed and delivered. Then, flat out, an engine caught fire. Dave instantly killed the ignition. Things were happening very fast but he reasoned that there would be a fire extinguisher at Crocker's timing stand. He steered gently off the course and brought the car to a perfect stop alongside the stand. The extinguisher was unnecessary, however. He had handled the emergency so well that the fire was out before he leaped out of the car. Cool, courteous, quiet and intelligent, Ryder was the most respected man on the Salt.

The big news and fastest time would have belonged to Herbert and his crew if Mickey Thompson of Bell, Calif., hadn't decided to slip a shell on his two-Chrysler-engined slingshot dragster. He arrived the first day with his partner Fritz Voigt, builder of the engines and one of the sharpest hot engine specialists in the country. It was a brutal looking machine: just efficiency and damn the looks. Its sound was almost terrifying as Voigt tuned the engines in the warmup area. Then Thompson took off on his first run and, burning straight gasoline, turned 241. Then he clocked 251, which seemed to be the limit for gas. On Thursday, with the front engine running on gas and the rear on methanol, Thompson set a new two-way record of 266.866—just 0.662 mph faster than the old Kenz-Leslie record. He was content with that until

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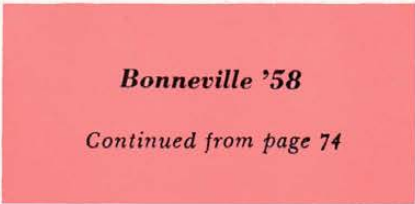
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Herbert qualified for the record runs with his 272. This meant that if Thompson wanted to be sure of not being blown off the record book by Herbert he would have to re-qualify. He put the methanol to both engines and thundered through the clocks at 286.85 mph. On Sunday, the last day, it was go or blow and he tipped the nitro can 30 percent worth to both engines. He went down at 294, came back, everything hanging out, and blew an engine to bits.

The official 286.85 is the fastest time ever for an American-made car. Great credit goes to all concerned, including George Hill, who designed the car's streamlined shell. It was not good looking but it was obviously correct: the car had less horsepower than Herbert's and went faster. And, Thompson reported, it handled flawlessly. We saw this when, spectating at the three-mile mark, we twice saw the car's canopy blow open. Both times Mick reached up and grabbed it and continued on his rapid way steering with one hand!

The Chrysler-engined Shaddoff Special was the fastest single-engined American car ever last year with a speed of 248.281. This year it turned a 254.59 before blowing a whole side out of the engine.

One of the most beautifully designed and executed specimens of automotive engineering in the entire world is the streamliner of John Herda, engineer for the Hiller Helicopter company. But, in its several years on the Salt, it has failed to go. Herda finally bowed to his fate, admitted there are better engine men around and called Doug Hartelt who, with Spade Carillo, is co-owner and builder of the blown Chrysler that powered Cal Rice's World Kilometer Record car (SCI, May '58). Thus an ideal team was born and when Herda finally clocked 259.36 he won for his machine the title of fastest single-engined car. After years of frustration and disappointment Herda went home a very happy guy.

Duane Carter of USAC spent several days on the Salt. He got a ride in the Summers Brothers competition roadster, cut a two-way 212 and became a member of the 200 MPH Club. On behalf of USAC, Carter presented a trophy to the car judged the best engineered. It went to the Vesco-Dinkins streamliner which we described with great enthusiasm last year. This superb little machine with its mere five feet of frontal area turned 166 last year on a sick engine — a four-port Riley Ford four-banger. Engine troubles plagued this entry again in '58 and its best time was 180.36. What this car is capable of with a strong power plant that will stay together for a reasonable period is awesome to contemplate. 250? 300? Why not?

Playing with Ford four-bangers has its nostalgic appeal but John Vesco and Jim Dinkins of San Diego are ready to work with better iron. There may be a reader of SCI who has a compact engine putting out 350 bhp or so that he'd like to see run in this exceptional machine. An Offy 270, for example, would do nicely. It can be arranged; please contact our editorial offices.

The absolute world record for motorcycles was set two years ago by Johnny Allen of Ft. Worth, Texas in a two-wheeled streamliner powered by a 40 cu. in. Triumph engine (SCI, Jan. '57). This year the Texas Cigar was back again but was ridden by Jess Thomas. Allen remained at home due to a family emergency. Allen's record was 214.40 mph and was run under the sanction and scrutiny of the FIM, two-wheeled equivalent of the FIA. This year Thomas' runs were observed by Bus Schaller, referee for the American Motorcycle Assn. Although he reached a one-way speed of 224.02 mph, his two-way average with the 40 in. engine was 214.47. It would have been higher if the bike's frame hadn't broken while in full career on the return run. Proof that the 40 in. combination can go much faster is the new 30.50 record set by Thomas in the same streamliner: 212.28 mph, a 14 mph improvement over the existing record held by a blown German NSU.

Our old friend Bud Hood, although he now lives in Mazatlan, Mexico, where he is building The Sands Hotel, was back on the Salt with sickel-wizard C. B. Clausen of Los Angeles and the ferocious streamlined honker known as The Brute. C. B. had single-handedly built the frame, the shell and the 96 cu. in. transformation of what had started out in life as a Harley 74. Jim Hunter of Los Angeles, who before had gone 162.74 mph on his own non-streamlined bike, tooled the thundering Brute. By Saturday morning he had worked his speed up to 224.71 — the fastest speed at which a two-wheeler ever has gone, anywhere — and he took off on a run for the record. He went about 50 ft., was doing about 35 mph, and got into an uncontrollable low-speed wobble. The big bike flopped on its side, then went end over end and came to rest with no damage to the rider and apparently none to the machine. But C. B. would permit no further runs until a minute examination of the entire machine could be made. Both he and Hunter hope to break the 240 mark next year.

Many of us who are devoted to road racing feel that "that stuff is only for straightaway" and therefore without interest. But there are others who recognize and savor the challenges that this form of competition presents. Add to this appreciation the technical interest and the color, safety, sound and spirit of the Bonneville Nationals and you have one of the greatest and most unique shows on earth. Why don't you try to be there next year, either as spectator or participant? Information may be obtained from Bonneville Nationals, 20304 Gresham St., Canoga Park, Calif.

—Griff Borgeson