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# FRICITION ZONE

MOTORCYCLE TRAVEL AND INFORMATION

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## BONNEVILLE SALT FLATS

*One Rider's Experience*



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## Bonneville Salt Flats

by Brian Schreurs

AS I SAT THERE, the voice in my head kept getting louder and louder: "C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, when is he going to wave that green flag?"

For a budding east-coast gearhead reading about it in the pages of *Hot Rod* magazine, the Bonneville Salt Flats might as well be the moon or maybe Oz. It was not a place you could actually go to—no, the best you could do was read about it and wonder what it might be like. Bonneville was a black-and-white, two-dimensional land illuminated by a flashlight underneath a quilt that doubled as the heavens.

At some point, however, one must either seize upon a dream and make it happen or admit it is lost and let it go. This dream I could not let go, so I enlisted a couple of friends, Josh and Todd, to join me for a late summer's road trip to the salt for the International Motorcycle Speed Trials by BUB.

There are several land speed events that take place each year at Bonneville: the Southern California Timing Association's Speed Week in August, the World Finals in October, the Utah Salt Flat Racing Association's World of Speed in mid-September, and the BUB event in early September. Only in its third year, the Speed Trials event is by far the youngest of all the events on the Bonneville calendar and it has the added distinction of being the only motorcycle-only event. Denis "Big Ugly Bastard" Manning, a lifetime salt racer who has built a comfortable living as owner of exhaust-system manufacturer BUB Enterprises, writes the checks necessary to hold the competition and views it as his way of giving back to the motorcycling community.

Lacking the resources to run purpose-built bikes, we reviewed our options for street-stock motorcycles. There proved to be two: RWB (Run Watcha Brung)—an open class requiring little preparation but only allowing two passes and no record eligibility; and AMA P/P (Production/Production—meaning stock body and stock engine) racing, a highly restricted class that allows very limited modifications.



Racing P/P cost more up front and required more safety modifications than RWB, but it allowed unlimited runs and was eligible for records. My friends chose RWB while I signed up for AMA P/P.

Josh and Todd needed to do little to prepare their Triumph Sprint ST and BMW R1150R for RWB at Bonneville. Fresh tires, a tune up, and a roll of tape was the extent of it. I needed these as well, and added to the list for my Kawasaki ZZR-1200 a steering damper and a lanyard kill switch as required items, and a lowering strap and several different sprockets for things to try on the salt. With nearly all modifications banned in P/P, I was spared the temptation of spending beaucoup dollars on performance upgrades.

We chose to ride our machines the 2,100 miles from West Virginia to Bonneville rather than trailering them. The journey westward was like most long interstate-based slogs, filled with non-

descript cookie-cutter gas stations and motels. What we were doing and where we were going did not seem real until we saw the green road sign stating simply "Exit 4, Bonneville Speedway." We had arrived unto holy ground.

Soon we discovered that the heavenly radiance blinding us was, actually, what happens to sunlight when it gets reflected off a white, table-flat surface that stretches to the horizon. It is bright. Cameras struggle to compensate. Humans attempt to double-up on sunglasses. Other creatures—well, there are no other creatures. The salt flat is a giant dead zone where nothing stands a chance of living for long unless it has evolved a means of carrying lots of bottled water.

In this environment we set up our pit area next to Tom "Santa Claus" Anderson, a jovial fellow from Wisconsin with a heavily modified Buell motorcycle. Santa picked us up as ignorant newbies right away and soon was helping us figure

out what we had packed wrong while regaling us with stories of Bonneville races past.

In the morning we returned for registration, the first rider's meeting, bike setup, and tech inspection. The RWB guys removed their luggage, zip-tied their center stand, taped up their lights and mirrors then went to get teched. Running AMA P/P required a good deal more

### Checklist for First-Time Bonneville Participants Riding Stock Motorcycles

#### Rider

- leather boots covering ankles
- leather gloves
- leather suit, one- or two-piece, with full-circumference zipper
- full-face helmet
- shatterproof corrective eyewear (if needed)

#### Run Whatcha Brung Motorcycle (two runs, not eligible for records)

- 0.5" ball end on control levers
- handlebars must place hands outside of forks
- rider footpegs
- defect-free frame
- frame stand/kickstand must be zip-tied/safety-wired
- pump gasoline only (provided by official supplier at Bonneville)
- headlight covers taped
- ignition kill switch operable from the riding position
- mirrors removed (integrated mirrors must be taped)
- OEM-equivalent tires required (must meet speed rating)
- metal valve caps
- no wheel discs or spinners

preparatory work to convert the ZZR from tourer to land speed racer (see sidebar). We sailed through tech and got in line at pre-staging.

Pre-staging proved to be where we spent the rest of the day. There are some realities that the privateer salt racer must accept: it takes about five minutes for a motorcycle to complete its run; the environment plays hell with radio communications; and the streamliners, with their large budgets and special needs, get priority over everyone else. The end result is a good deal of waiting. One or two passes per day was typical.

As the sun trekked over the salt, more motorcycles and riders showed up. The final tally was 161 competitors plus crews, spectators, media, and support staff, all clustered around a seemingly arbitrary point in the vast flats—actually the halfway point for the course. The pits extended a quarter mile, three rows deep, loosely partitioned with caution tape, boxes, and motorcycle parts. The rope marking the edge of the course area was lined with campers, canopies, and camp chairs filled with spectators armed with binoculars and zoom cameras.

As evening approached, we slowly inched up the line of bikes waiting to run from Mile 3. The BUB event uses an 11-mile course that runs straight as an arrow across the salt. Streamliners and motorcycles capable of more than 175 mph are allowed to start at Mile 0 and use



*Three amigos who decided to take their streetbikes on the unforgiving Bonneville Salt Flats: Brian on his Kawasaki ZZR-1200, Josh on his Triumph Sprint ST, and Todd on his BMW R1150R.*

the full 11 miles if they need it. Motorcycles not capable of reaching 175 mph start at Mile 3—the short course. The timing is done across a flying mile and flying kilometer—the mile starts at Mile 5 and ends at Mile 6, with the kilometer situated exactly in the middle. Short-course racers are expected to be clear of the track no later than Mile 8, and long-course racers run out of groomed salt at Mile 11.

Gradually each racer at Mile 3 took his or her turn down the course. The sun crept closer to the mountains on the horizon. Chatter on the radio talked of closing up for the day.

*There's no way I'm going back to that hotel still not a salt racer, I resolved. At last my turn did come—as the final racer of the day. But it did not matter. I was on the line, waiting for that damned green flag.*

It waved! I eased out, aware that my ZZR-1200 would be quick to lose traction if I started under too much power. I short-shifted first and second, then pinned it in third to redline, then fourth. Things were happening pretty fast, fourth peaked at 130 mph. Fifth gear ran out of breath early, about 1,000 rpm short of redline but still indicating over 150 mph. Sixth also stopped pulling short of redline but was indicating over 170 mph!

The Mile 4 flags, black on gold, whipped past in a blur. I focused

on Floating Mountain dead ahead and kept the motorcycle pointed for it. It rode stable and steady, screaming to be heard at full song over the Category Five maelstrom enveloping the windscreen and my helmet.

The black Mile 5 flags vanished behind me. I continued to adjust my tuck, fitting as far behind my windscreen as I could. The howl of the engine, the roar of the wind, the movement of the tachometer, the salt surface, became the entirety of the world. The timing tower and emergency services appeared and disappeared so quickly that I paid no notice to them. In 23 seconds I covered the timed mile.

Fellow racer "V-Rod" Valerie Thompson had advised against using the front brake when slowing, so I gently eased off the throttle and applied a small amount of rear brake. The speed scrubbed quickly. Between an indicated 150 and 130, the tail of the bike wiggled a little, just enough to get my attention. After I shot past the Mile 7 flags I was back to road speeds. I eased my way off the course, turned around, and headed for the pits. My actual speed was 157 mph.

That day (and every day) ended with a salt storm. Each afternoon the entire Speed Trials operation was broken down and packed up, leaving nothing behind but the skeletons of canopy tents and crates. Then the storm hit, severe winds whipping the powdery salt into an abrasive mist that coated every exposed surface and filled every crack. Each morning, the staff and racers all arrived with the dawn, dusting



*You never know what will show up at the Bonneville Speed Flats.  
Photo by Brian Schreurs.*

everything off and rebuilding the tent city.

Over the week I took as many runs as I could, improving technique, attempting to improve aerodynamics, adjusting the ride height, and changing sprockets. By the end my best was 161.793 mph, an increase from my first pass strictly due to practice. All the modifications I had done to the motorcycle were for naught. Josh's Triumph clicked off an impressive 157.970 mph, and Todd's BMW, with a torquey opposed-twin, ran 120.714 mph sans windshield.

But these were just a few of the hundred dramas unfolding before us, with the main event being the four-way streamliner world record shootout. Dave Campos set the record in 1990 (322.150 mph) with the Easyriders streamliner—and that vehicle sat

on display near tech to taunt the next generation.

Mike Akatiff's Ack Attack streamliner fired the first salvo, with rider Rocky Robinson clicking off a new world record of 342.797 mph. But this record quickly fell to Denis Manning's BUB Enterprises streamliner (piloted by seven-time Grand National Dirt Track champion Chris Carr) on Tuesday, at 350.884 mph. Impressive, yet the murmur in the pits was, "wait until Wheeler shows up."

When Sam Wheeler arrived with his EZ-Hook streamliner, he instantly muscled it up to 355.303 mph—despite blowing the front tire! Unfortunately for Wheeler, the tire was an insurmountable obstacle for the all-important return run. While fastest, he still went home without the record.

The fourth streamliner, Max Lambky's Black Lightning, pow-

ered by Vincent—yes, that Vincent—suffered engine gremlins that evaded all attempts to purge and never made a run at anything approaching full power.

Meanwhile, Santa Claus was running his 1995 Buell S2 Thunderbolt in APS-PG-1350 (Special Construction Partial Streamlining, Pushrod: Gasoline, 1,350cc or under). Santa has been a fixture at Bonneville for the last 11 years, racing as the Buell Brothers with bright yellow T-shirts and coolers full of water, Gatorade, and beer for anyone passing by. He has long held the SCTA record for production motorcycles in his engine class, so he races in modified now. One look at that Buell and it is clear that there is not a lot of stock Buell parts left on it.

This was Santa's first year as a rider. For all his experience at the salt, he was giddy with excitement to actually race the Buell himself. But Santa had a trying week. On his first pass the fuel system shut off, leaving him to coast down the salt. And on the third day, during a return run to back up a record, the Buell ate a piston. Fortunately, he had already bagged a record at 151.121 mph the previous day.

Santa's friend Pete Davis used to ride the Buell, but this year campaigned the first motorcycle completely built from the Drag Specialties catalog. The machine looks like a Harley and sounds like a Harley, but there are no Milwaukee parts on it; every piece comes straight from the "big book." It uses a TP 2,000cc twin with an Edelbrock street nitrous kit but no other engine modifications. Pete set a new record in M-PF-2000 (Modified, Pushrod: Fuel, 2,000cc or under) at 154.835 mph.

However, Pete, like almost every other competitor who showed for the 2006 Speed Trails, will certainly be back next year to try and go even faster. The salt leaves its impression on all who compete there (literally, it gets into every nook and cranny of everything it touches), but it is the camaraderie among racers that brings competitors back year after year. And the chance to say that they are "the world's fastest." **FZ**