

In Nova Scotia, drag racing is a family affair

BARRY RUEGER

LIVERPOOL, N.S.

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 17, 2023

UPDATED NOVEMBER 18, 2023



Driver Lorne Buchanan, centre, and his partner Brenda Rafuse, right, beside their methyl-hydrate burning dragster, with writer Barry Rueger, left.

SUSAN EVANS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

In the 1970s, back home in Kelowna, B.C., I had fantasies of becoming a race car driver. My cherry red '69 Dodge Charger was too fast for my own good, and speeding tickets were a regular expense. I drove fast, and I loved cars that went fast.

On the Greenfield Dragway near Liverpool, N.S., I've rediscovered that love of fast cars, of roaring big V8 engines, and have found one of the last places where global warming and fuel economy just aren't on the table for discussion. It's not that people aren't aware of these things, or don't care, it's just that when you're driving a car at 320 kilometres an hour, they really don't enter your mind.

I've also found one of the few remaining places where virtually everything on wheels has a North American nameplate. In an age when the car business is global, and when electric cars are becoming more and more common, drag racing is still the domain of big-block Chrysler and Chevrolet engines, with a smattering of Fords. Even the token Volkswagen Beetle and the two Honda Civics manage to squeeze in loud and powerful Detroit engines.

At the Greenfield Dragway, which leases the little-used South Shore Regional Airport runway for several weekends each year, Noel Peach is repacking the drag chute that slowed his car at the end of his first run.



Driver Noel Peach packs his parachute. A chute is required for any car that goes faster than 150 miles an hour. Drag racing still uses imperial measurements.

SUSAN EVANS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

It's a tricky business, and one that benefits from a second set of hands. On this sunny October weekend, he was helped by his wife Lindsay.

Peach's dad was a racer, too. After Noel and Lindsay met, it was natural that Lindsay became part of the race team – or more accurately, exactly one-half of the team.

Nova Scotia drag racing is still dominated – although not exclusively – by male drivers, but partners are integral members of most teams. Whether providing bookkeeping and planning skills, or hands-on maintenance and support, a lot of drivers rely heavily on their partners. (It's a good thing Noel and Lindsay are a team in other ways, too: The couple's home in Upper Tantallon, near Halifax, burned in the wildfires just a few months before, when they were here for another race.)

Drag racing still uses imperial measurements – a quarter-mile track is about 402 metres. Cars are measured in inches and feet, and an explanation on the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) website explains that a Top Fuel dragster “can burn up to 15 gallons of nitromethane fuel during a single run,” reaching more than 330 miles an hour. That's more than 50 litres during a 3.7-second run at more than 530 km/h.

Peach drives a 1988 Trans Am, a car that hit 164 miles an hour on this day. He explains that even though drag racers are fierce rivals on the strip, they're a strong community back in the pits. If you need a hand, or a part, someone will step up to sort you out.

Working together is what Peach and Lorne Buchanan of Bedford, N.S., did when it came time to upgrade their cars. Peach wanted to buy his current car from another racer, but didn't want the engine that came with it. Buchanan's dragster was fine but needed a new engine. Buchanan and Peach bought the white Trans Am together, and each took what they needed.

Today the two cars are parked side by side in the pits. Buchanan's partner, Brenda Rafuse, guides the dragster into the pit, and helps him to pull off the hood covering the electronics. If you look for it, you'll see Rafuse's name is also painted on the side of the car.

If you only have cursory knowledge of drag racing – fat tires and loud engines – you may be overwhelmed by the many classes of cars and races. The NHRA points out that there are 10 classes that feature a straightforward, heads-up race between similarly classed cars. Two cars line up beside each other at the “Christmas tree,” watching as a sequence of three yellow lights flashes, one after the other. When the bottom light turns green, they both take off.

At the Greenfield Dragway, things get more complicated. Cars range from full-length dragsters, to various levels of pro and super-pro cars, to what seem to be factory stock sedans. Each is assigned a handicap based on the number of seconds the weight and configuration says it should run a quarter-mile. And each car can choose to run in more than one class.

In practical terms, you usually see two cars lined up side by side, with the slower one getting the green light first.

Greenfield is still a small-town race, and spectators aren’t kept in the grandstands. You can walk up and down the pits, talk to the drivers and their teams, and take the time to marvel at the cars and the obvious pride of the people who maintain these vehicles.

Beyond the (usually) shiny paint jobs and sponsor logos, serious cars need to meet a plethora of NHRA safety rules intended to protect the drivers, crew members and spectators. In all but the slowest cars, a roll cage is required, made to specific dimensions. Safety belts are replaced every two years, and helmets and neck collars are mandatory. Faster vehicles need to add a drive shaft loop and axle retention



Author Barry Rueger sitting in Lorne Buchanan's dragster.

SUSAN EVANS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

devices, and cars that can hit 150 miles an hour must have a parachute at the back of the car.

All of this costs a lot of money, and as Fred Thibeault from Middleton, N.S., describes it, it has been many years since the winnings at a Nova Scotia race paid enough to cover what it cost to build the car. At this point, everyone is doing it for the love of fast cars and the thrill of racing.



Fred Thibeault is a local legend, and is still racing into his 70s. His Chevrolet Camaro is a thing of beauty. The car beside it is driven by his son.

SUSAN EVANS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Thibeault's 1969 Chevrolet Camaro SS is a shiny red thing of beauty. He has been racing this car for 34 years, and it's obviously his pride and joy. The car is, in some ways, still stock – the same car that came off the dealer's lot when it was purchased – but over the years it has been slowly upgraded in nearly every way allowed by the NHRA rules.

Under the hood, the car is cleaner than most kitchens. The stock 375-cubic-inch engine has been bored out, and has seen the pistons, rings and camshaft replaced or upgraded to boost performance. A dry-sump oil tank makes sure that everything stays lubricated under extreme conditions. And the transmission – well, the outside is stock Chevy, but what’s inside is another thing altogether.

Another of Thibeault’s cars is the 1989 Camaro parked right next door at the track. It’s driven this weekend by Thibeault’s son Scott. He has three sons who drive, and two are here on this cool October weekend.

The race track family goes beyond the children and spouses who are part of the teams. The 160 drivers and hundreds of family members and spectators all seem to know each other, and spend as much time socializing as they do prepping their cars for the next run.

Drag racing today is high-tech. The Christmas tree tower at the start and the photosensors at the finish line time each run and generate the printed slips that each driver picks up on the way back to the pits. Inside the cars, many of today’s dragsters rely on an electronic box to time each shift to perfection. All you need to do is steer the car for a few seconds – the computer will make sure that each shift happens at the perfect moment.

Not everyone wants such a high-tech racing experience. The head of the Greenfield Dragway Association is David Joudrey. He explains that when he’s racing his 1979 Chevrolet Nova, he’ll do so in the “non-box” class, racing against people who still shift their own gears instead of letting the “box” do it.



Racers 'burn out' before racing to warm and clean their tires.

SUSAN EVANS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

At the start line, some things haven't changed. Once you've done your prerun "burn-out" to warm up your tires, and have positioned your car's nose at the starting point, you'll have both the brake and the throttle pushed in as the Christmas tree counts down. You want your engine revs to be as high as possible before you start moving. Your aim is to release the brake when the lights hit "1/3 yellow" – if you wait until the green light comes on, you've already lost.

After a day revelling in the smoke and sound of these cars, I'm sadly reminded that I hardly drive over the speed limit any longer, and that it's been years since I even did my own oil change. My Mazda CX-5 SUV is a convenience now, not the passion that my Charger used to be.

Still, as David Joudrey reminds me, if I can borrow a helmet, and can pass the safety inspection, my Mazda and I can join them at the Greenfield Dragway next season and recapture those days of speed – though I doubt my insurance policy will allow it.



Two racers are neck and neck as they pass boards displaying their times.

SUSAN EVANS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Sign up for the Breaking News Newsletter

Sent by Globe editors for the most important breaking news and exclusives.

SIGN UP

Follow us on Twitter: [@globedrive](https://twitter.com/globedrive)

[Report an error](#)

[Editorial code of conduct](#)