

COVER STORY



On the barren, white landscape of Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats, a line of hot rods and motorcycles stretches nearly half a mile long. The smell of burning fuel fills the air as the ground rumbles from the roar of the souped-up vehicles.

At the front of the line, Greg Samson, 44, sits behind the wheel of a 1934 Ford coupe, starting out at miles of brilliant white salt. Samson is one of some 300 drivers who've come from across the United States to the 50th annual Bonneville Speed Week with one goal in mind: to go fast, very fast.

The old Ford's sister sits beside Samson, his heart pounding, hands gripping the wheel, looks to the roll cage on his right. That's where he's taped a picture of his dad, the late Sam Samson, who raced at Bonneville years earlier. He's riding shotgun with me, says Samson, who traveled more than 2,000 miles from Poland Spring, Maine.

With the go-ahead from a Speed Week official, Samson steps on the gas, sending his car to 50 mph, then 75, 100, 150, 190. Fighting to keep the hot rod within the designated, smoothed-out lane of salt. It may look like you're on a set of railroad tracks, but behind the wheel you're bouncing off that 100-foot-wide lane all the way down, Samson says, grinning. You have to feather off the gas because if you don't it'll go sideways on you. It's pretty wild.

Moments after a 197-mph run, he's greeted by friends and crew of the Maine Barron Racing Team, who once shared the excitement of a fast run with Greg's dad, who died in 2003. It's not a land speed record, but the team doesn't mind. There are so many people who've donated time, material, parts, paint jobs, whatever, to keep the car going in my dad's memory, Samson says. "It's a labor of love."



Greg Samson sped to 197 mph in his 1934 Ford coupe.

Birth of Bonneville
The lifeless landscape on which drivers race was formed some 15,000 years ago when ancient Lake Bonneville receded, leaving behind a crusty layer of salt that spans more than 50,000 acres. Each winter, a shallow layer of standing water floods the salt flats. Then, during spring and summer, the water slowly evaporates while winds smooth the surface into a flat plain.

Located 80 miles west of Salt Lake City, the Bonneville Salt Flats first came to international prominence in 1935 when British driver Malcolm Campbell broke the 300-mph barrier in a modified automobile. Then in 1949, a group of hot rod enthusiasts from the nonprofit Southern California Timing Association (SCTA) decided to host an annual event—Speed Week—to safely set a standard for land speed records. That year some 40 cars and drivers arrived to speed across an 11-mile course. Today, the landscape looks the same, and drivers return each August to test their vehicles on two courses—one five miles, one seven miles.

The event, which still is organized by the SCTA along with Bonneville Nationals Inc., is supervised by some 200 volunteers, who inspect every vehicle for safety, set up courses, answer driver questions, certify speed records (174 last year) and help the event run smoothly.

Volunteer Les Leggett, 67, has been coming to Bonneville since the early 1960s. During last year's event,

Leggett, who has twice served as SCTA president, offered his expertise as a safety inspector. "I inspect cars because I've done this so long that I wanted to put something back into it," says Leggett, of Hepteria, Calif. (pop. 62,262). "People have time for me all these years, so I'm glad to help out."

Safety is a big issue, considering that some vehicles travel at speeds of more than 400 mph during Speed Week. That's why new drivers must earn a license at a lower speed before advancing to higher speeds. The different classes in which vehicles can obtain land speed records are based on engine size, vehicle type and other modifications. To set a record, a driver must complete two runs, with the top speed from each run averaged together.

Driver Phil Griotti, of Chino Hills, Calif. (pop. 66,787), is heading home after taking a 1970 Plymouth Barracuda—dubbed the Sully Cuda—to 207 mph. "We previously ran 202, so we averaged 204 mph for a record," says Griotti, 37, who first came to the Salt Flats with his dad when he was 9. "The previous record in our class was 197.8 mph."

No cash prizes are awarded for setting a land speed record, but drivers get a certificate and often a handshake or a pat on the back from fellow drivers. "It's a lot of an addition," explains participant Donny McNeil, 71, of Orange, Calif. "If you're into cars, you'll dream up this. It's just a competitive spirit that everybody enjoys."




McNeil passed that competitive spirit on to his son, Dennis, who carried his speed license by safely driving a modified roadster 210 mph. "I'm proud of him," McNeil says. "It's something most people don't get to do."

Dennis grins, explaining, "The whole deal is fun, from the time you get here, to driving the car, working on them. I'm here with a group of guys, so you're hanging out with your friends."


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SPEED

I hit the ground at 145 mph and got up and walked away.
—Motorcyclist Steve Barus

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Bonneville Speed Week is scheduled Aug. 18-24.

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