



DRAGWAY RETROSPECT

by "Onondaga Dewey" Ketner

Onondaga Dragway Planned to Reopen

This is one of a series of columns to appear in the newspaper periodically. The author, Dewey Ketner, is a recognized expert on the subject of drag racing.

After being shut down for 35 years, the hot dragstrip of the 1960s-70s in Michigan – Onondaga Dragway – has a healthy breath of fresh air and will reopen in the summer of 2013.

The old-timers will remember it, as Don Garlits told me years ago, "The cleanest and friendliest dragstrip I ever raced at." For the younger crowd, "Daga" is located halfway between Jackson and Lansing, off US-127, on Bellevue Road (Leslie exit), four miles east. Clean country air! Where the young great ones were competing in "best of three" matches every Saturday and Sunday.

It was fast, furious, exciting and competitive, but safe-safe-safe. Among those young greats people remember:

- from Lansing, Canfield & Johnson, in the World's Quickest Blown Roadster;

- from Warren, the Ramchargers Funny and F/X Chrysler Cars;

- from Ypsilanti, Connie Kalitta, Top Fuel Dragster "Bounty Hunter," worldwide, the only Fueler to win all three sanctioned championships in one year, 1963. The car is still in the top 16 in the U.S. NHRA;

- from Detroit, Odie & Verdie, Blown Gas Chevy, "Pizza Wagon";
- from Chicago, Chris Karamesines, The Golden Greek, Top Fuel Dragster, "The Chizler";
- from Addison, Bobo Phelps, 1962 world champion 1962 Corvette;

- from Hudson, Ben Gutierrez, The Eldorado Deuce, and his 1932 Ford 5-Window Coupe;

- from Ohio, Art Afrons and his V12 Allison Aircraft Green Monster "Cyclops." Also his jet engine dragster, the only jet ever ridden by a daredevil tied on top – Bob Moon of Ann Arbor;

- from Detroit, Al Eckstrand, in "The Lawman" F/X Dodge Station Wagon;

- from Munith, Benson & Freymuth, HEMI-powered '33 Ply Coupes;

- from Jackson, Janice & Ted Mannor, a family of competitive drag car racers, and

- from Ann Arbor, Elwood Peterson, in his "Blue Goose" Blown Chevy Crosley Altered.

And who could forget E. J. Potter, the Michigan Madman, aboard his "Bloody Mary," a Harley frame with a Small Block Chevy engine mounted sideways.

Talk about excitement, I was at the finish line in my Track Ford Pickup when E. J. went through the traps at 127 mph.

I could see he was in trouble trying to shut the bike down. Suddenly, he "fell off" as he called it when he was in trouble. The bike went straight another 1,500 feet through a swamp and buried the front wheel in a hill.

E.J. cartwheeled through a hayfield.

I was first to him, he was laying flat on his back, asking, "Is Bloody Mary hurt?" I sent him to

Leslie to our doctor on call. He was okay, but the bike had a well-bent-up front wheel.

If you get a chance to see his book, "The Michigan Madman," on page 38 you will see his bike in the box of my pickup, with E. J. sitting on the side looking like he almost lost his best friend. In the upper left in photo is my left arm pointing to the pits and telling him to get the bike to the pits and install a new wheel.

Forty-five minutes later, the entire spectator crowd of thousands gave him a standing round of "Welcome back" as he rolled the bike to the starting line for another of his daredevil rides – 131 mph, not a scared bone in his 130-pound body. I met him when he was 16 years old. More on E. J. in later issues.

There are many more highly competitive drag racers who, in some cases, put their training wheels on at Onondaga, and a great many who sharpened their starting line procedures under the flag.

Yes, Flagman "Hook" Brondyke, the guy who could change his timing to keep the drivers on their alert and keep them honest. Many a too-quick driver saw his red flag!

All this great drag racing excitement coming over the speakers, greatly enhanced by "The Man" Jon Lundberg, the Voice of Drag Racing.

Jon could make two VWs sound like 100 mph racers. If you were there, you remember, if not, you missed out on a truly great show when Jon called the Art Afrons Jet Dragster to the starting line to be ridden by a guy tied on top of the dragster.

To say the spectators went wild would be a gross understatement. They went BANANAS crazy wild!

The new promoter of the dragway is Dan Pranshka. He has drag racing experience and is in the construction business. He has great plans for Onondaga, and, as I type, he is on site sunup till sundown. Lots of projects to start and finish.

Dan is fortunate to have a well-experienced drag racer for advice. Gary Long worked with me when I built the Onondaga in 1959-60.

Gary was only 13 years old, but large and how he liked to work! Poetry in motion.

He stayed on to be part of the operating crew for many years, worked every position there. He also later worked at US-131 Martin Dragway.

Gary was a valuable employee and always could be depended on to keep the show moving. He is a wealth of knowledge and has "been there and done that," as have I.

And I'm ready to do it again. So exciting I have trouble sleeping.

Probable plans are for a 1/8th-mile dragstrip. The asphalt is

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Onondaga Dragway, as it lies waiting for spring. – photo by Bill Springer

about 4,000 feet long, with 660 feet of new concrete, including the starting line and approach. Drag racing cars of today in the top fuel classes are going almost twice as fast as 50 years ago, like 330 mph in under 4 seconds. So shutdown length is important.

Highway safety rails are going in the length of the strip. The earliest possible opening is probably going to be mid-June.

Onondaga Dragway, 70 acres, has been cleared of weeds, brush and debris. Everywhere you look the dragway looks "alive." I can (almost) hear Big Jon Lundberg announcing, "ARE YOU READY TO RUMBLE? LET'S MAKE SOME SMOKE AND NOISE!" It's magic to old Onondaga Dewey, who had more than a few fast licks on this 1320.

What a reunion we will have when Onondaga reopens. Some of the old-timers have passed on to the Great Dragstrip in the Sky, while those of us remaining are getting a little long in the tooth and gray on top, but we can get excited when 8,000 horsepower engines roar to life, sending a beautiful song of speed over the airways, and the oh-so-sweet smell of nitro fuel to our smellers.

If you ain't smokin' the rubber and smellin' the aroma, you ain't livin'.

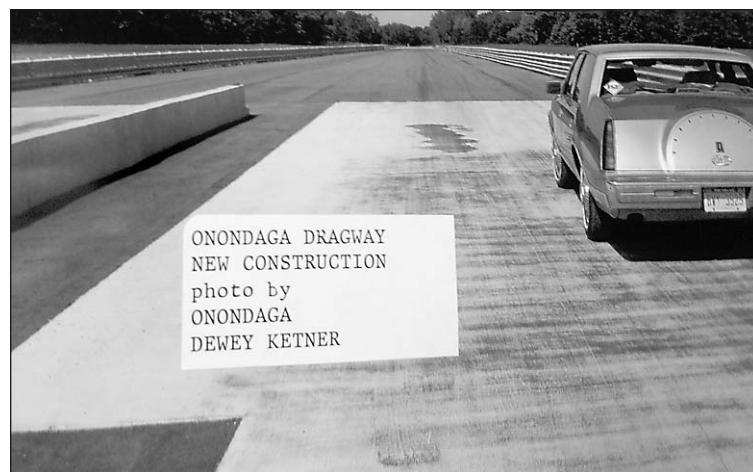
It's the only real way to a grand finale of the week. And the thundering experience will carry you through the week until next weekend.

See you at the starting line, smoking those 18-inch hides and inhaling deeply.

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E.J. Potter off to smokin' hot star in his Chevy-powered Harley.



Column writer Ketner took this photo – and labeled it – of this scene from the starting line north of the new construction at Onondaga.

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