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INTO THE TRUE BLUE

With the hard salt lake as the track set against a bright and merciless blue sky, the otherworldly setting of the World Speed Week is straight out of *Mad Max*. Here's how men – and one remarkable woman – and machines measured up.



WORLD SPEED TRIALS

by James Nicholls



Once asked some dry lake racers from South Australia why they went all the way to Bonneville in the USA to try and set their land speed records. Their answer: because it was easier to get to than Lake Gairdner!

Lake Gairdner in South Australia is hard to reach. Seven hours drive from the State Capital, Adelaide, the last two hours of which is on dirt roads in the Outback and the last 25 kilometres (km) of which are pretty tortuous on corrugated, dusty and treacherous tracks. If you manage to stay on the road and avoid the wildlife (that was one very large and lucky emu that I am glad I missed), the view as you top the rise and see the dry salt lake makes you feel like a little child seeing the ocean for the first time. Indeed, Lake Gairdner's flat white surface against a backdrop of clear blue sky will make you want to sing out for joy after a journey enveloped in red dust.

Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah may have been the cathedral of speed racing; going as fast as one can in a straight line. In recent years, however, for a variety of reasons, be it weather, a changing (shrinking) landscape, it has been unable to provide consistent enough conditions to create record-breaking runs. It would appear from the latest Speed Week held on Lake Gairdner, that the mantle may now have passed from Bonneville to the South Australian salt lake, and that the Americans are now visiting Gairdner, no matter the difficulties of getting there.

Gairdner is home to the Gawler Ranges Aboriginal People – the Barngarla, Kokatha and Wiranga families are the traditional custodians of this land. On first arrival one can easily see why this vast lake, big enough to be seen from outer space, some 160 km long and 48 km across, covered in pristine salt over 1.2 metres thick, should assume religious and spiritual significance to the lore, culture and beliefs of its indigenous inhabitants. But for one week of each year with the blessings of the locals, it is the Gods of Speed that are worshipped

here – Mickey Thompson and Challenger II; Art Arfons with Green Monster; Craig Breedlove in Spirit of America; Donald Campbell and Blue Bird CN7; Roscoe McGlashan and his Aussie Invaders.

Kings of the flat track

The lake assumed its current name in 1857, after the Chief Clerk of the Australian Department in the Colonial Office, Gordon Gairdner. The salt here is as hard as concrete, as flat as the proverbial pancake, with its even, smooth surface strong enough for the Royal Flying Doctor Service planes to land on in an emergency. It stretches far enough that the World Speed Trials, held under the auspices of Fédération Internationale de Motocyclisme (FIM) took place at the end of Speed Week over the requisite 12-mile course.

The first five days of Speed Week was the annual joust of the members of the Dry Lakes Racers Australia (DLRA). Over 232 entrants and their crews occupied the Pit area out on the salt. Before entering the lake, where vehicles are normally prohibited, it is necessary to blow off the red dust from your car. Parking on the lake must be over a tarpaulin to protect the snow-white surface. The procedure is repeated in reverse upon leaving the lake to ensure no salt ends up on shore. The members of the DLRA are a unique bunch, their only common interest being their need for speed – or as one T-shirt declared, a sickness for quickness – and talking about it over a cold beer afterwards. It is serious stuff though, run under the strictest safety regulations, and with a concern for the fragile environment, which supports speeds that beggar belief.

Young and old contestants, in or on new and old cars and motorbikes pit their nerves and their machines against the clock over a nine-mile course – two miles to get up to full speed, three miles over a timed stretch, and then four to slow down (of necessity by parachute at speeds of over 200 mph).



FROM TOP: The Target 550 streamliner being serviced before the race; Ben Felten (left) is attempting to break the world land speed record for a blind person with the help of his minder rider, 1988 500c Spanish Grand Prix winner Kevin Magee; Valerie Thompson's ride is given the once-over



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ben Felten and Kevin Magee ride out; tail-end of a streamliner with parachutes; yellow stands out in the crowd; Queen of Speed, Valerie Thompson looking relaxed next to her engine; Streamliner 7 activates its chute; the complicated dashboard of a speed machine; bugging out on the salt lake

There is a plethora of classes and categories in which one can run, but the essence of the event is to see just how fast you and your machine dare go in a straight line on a near perfect track. The only thing, apart from mechanical breakdown, that might stop you from achieving your goal is a head wind, or a side wind of over five mph if you are driving a Streamliner.

Streamliners are the kings of the flat track – shaped and contoured to take advantage of the possibilities of aerodynamics. When they are ready to make their pass they take precedence and jump to the head of the line, like a first class passenger at the airport. The difference between success and failure for these pedigrees of the speed course is infinitesimal, and indeed the difference between life and death can also be measured in fractions. Everything has to be just so – the track; the wind speed; the wind direction; the machine; tyre pressure; the mental acuity and strength of the pilot. The stars must all be in alignment.

Pilot is the correct word, for the Streamliner, in whatever guise is like a jet-fighter plane without wings. Two big guns from the USA had arrived in Outback, South Australia because Bonneville could no longer meet their needs. Target 550 has achieved 387 mph at Bonneville a few years back but poor running conditions there had lead them to spend 60,000 hours, travel 12,000 miles, and spend a lot of dollars for a 50-second run in the middle of nowhere. The ultimate aim for this car, 43-feet long with twin Dodge V8 Hemi motors (“with pistons as big as rubbish bins”) driving the wheels, is 500 mph. For the moment though the target is Donald Campbell’s former wheel-driven World Land Speed Record and current Australian record of 403.10 mph set on neighbouring saltpan, Lake Eyre on 17 July 1964. Speeds for pure jet-propelled cars are even more extreme, the current record being 763.035 mph set in 1997 and with the Bloodhound SSC syndicate looking to break the 1,000 mph barrier in the not too distant future.

The other American syndicate was the motorbike Streamliner 7. This 21-foot carbon fibre monocoque red sled has a three-litre dual overhead cam engine and is ridden by Valerie Thompson from Scottsdale, Arizona. Dubbed “America’s Queen of Speed” and the only woman ever to go over 300 mph (304.263 mph on the Bonneville Salt in September 2016), her goal is to exceed Rocky Robinson’s current overall motorcycle land speed record of 376.363 mph.

The stars did not align

On the fourth day of the event, in near 40-degree celsius heat, she achieved 328.476 mph at the five mile exit. Whilst this was a personal best it cannot be counted as a record. For a land speed record to be acknowledged it must be run under the rules and regulations of FIM (or the FIA in the case of automobiles).

At the end of Speed Week, the salt was given over to official record breaking under FIM’s watchful eye. Two runs, one each in direction, within the space of two hours, with the average speed recorded. Target 550 and Team 7 Racing were about to get serious. As was Ben Felten, who with the help of his minder rider (1988 500cc Spanish Grand Prix winner, Kevin Magee) close behind providing directions by radio, was attempting to break the world land speed record for a blind person of over 221.748 mph!

Unfortunately, the necessary stars are not always in alignment. For Target 550, a blown clutch and resultant cracked bell housing meant they never got close to the target and had to pack their bags early. For Team 7 it could have been much worse. On the final day, passing the four-mile marker in ideal conditions, the tail end of the bike came up in the air at 299 mph. The chutes deployed, which helped stabilise the resulting crash from which, luckily, Valerie Thompson walked away with only minor injuries. **J**

READ our exclusive interview with Valerie Thompson on jetgala.com