



A† **L***udicrous* **S**peed

drag racing can be a fearsome business, unless you like working with your butt strapped to a bomb

THE FLESH REMEMBERS. Long after the mind has put the fear away, some small, visceral trigger—like cinching a seat belt across your lap—can bring it all back: the murderous roaring, the smell of burning rubber, the nasty taste of the fireproof hood where it's bunched up into your mouth under your helmet, the sweat in your eyes and, most vivid of all, the awful worry just under your harness buckle that in a few seconds, when all galloping hell cuts loose, you are going to forget some crucial little piece of business and be dead.

The mind puts these things away for a reason.

The seat belt I was doing up when I suffered that rush of remembering was on an airplane headed for The Drag Racing School in Gainesville, Florida. The airline belt felt like shoestring compared with the ones I'd worn *(continued on page 145)*

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ILLUSTRATION BY ROY SCHNACKENBERG

"It felt like I'd been bound and gagged and sealed in a plastic pod to die," I said."

two years before, when I'd tried to drive one of the loud, slobbering monsters these people call Funny Cars. There's enough irony in that name to shred your ear drums from 100 yards away, and it's for sure that whoever coined it had never popped the clutch and stood on the gas in one of those things, because that's the kind of experience that can blow the word funny out of your vocabulary for a year.

Pig, I thought, as the jet took off down the runway and pressed me gently back in my seat.

Not that I needed to be getting cocky about it. I hadn't done all that well in my first attempts to drive a Funny Car. In fact, I worked on it for five days and didn't even get a full quarter-mile run for my efforts. It didn't help that I went into mortal dread of the machine every time the pit crew started it. Top-end dragsters like the ones we were using can run a quarter of a mile in approximately six seconds. In order to do that, they have to go from a dead standstill to 100 miles per hour in just over one second, which is less time than it takes to say 100 miles an hour. That's a felony violation of the law of inertia and it doesn't take advanced physics to figure out that the weapon you're going to be driving to accomplish this little crime against nature isn't really an automobile. It's an explosion dressed up to look like an automobile. So, unless you're used to working with your butt strapped to a bomb, there's some fear to it.

I got the big fright on me early the first morning in the garage while I dressed. The car hadn't even been started. It was sitting there, as quiet as a museum piece, with its white fiberglass body cracked into the open position, showing off the monstrously beautiful geometry of its huge engine.

"Around 2000 horsepower, 500 cubic inches," one of the crew said, as he helped me on with my fire suit.

"That's big," I said, which is about as deep into motor-talk conversations as I can go. But if the numbers didn't mean much to me, at that moment, I didn't need them to be convinced that I was warming up to do something serious. I was pulling on fireproof long johns with a hood that covered everything but my eyes and nose, heavy quilted pants and jacket, high silvered boots, long silvered gloves and a Darth Vader-style helmet that immediately cut my air supply in half and scented it with the sharp stink of whatever it is that makes this gear impervious to blowtorch heat.

People don't dress like this unless they're

going off to flirt with something truly awful, I thought as I waddled to the car. If there are beekeepers in hell, they dress like this. I crawled up under the body and lowered myself into the tight aluminum bucket seat. My heart went into a hyper trot as two of the crew adjusted the accelerator, the brake and the little butterfly steering wheel to my reach. They fastened the wide shoulder and lap belts and pulled until I was as small as they could make me, until it hurt. Then they dropped the body and locked it down, and suddenly all the air was gone. For a few seconds, I thought I might pass out. When I didn't, I forced my-

self to breathe slowly, evenly, and I looked around. The massive drive shaft sat between my legs. The huge rear tires sat six inches from my ears. The big chrome supercharger blocked my view out the windshield. When the crew opened the body, I hit the harness release with my fist, climbed out faster than I should have and then confessed that I'd almost panicked.

"It felt like I'd been bound and gagged and sealed in a plastic pod to die," I said.

"Wait till we turn it on," said one of the crew.

"The only thing we guarantee is that it's going to be harder than you think to drive these cars properly," Frank Hawley, founder of The Drag Racing School, told us in the opening classroom session before our first exercises in the car. I had absolutely no illusions that the experience was going to be easy for me, so I figured he was talking to my classmates. Both of them—an



"I now pronounce you man and wife. Before you kiss the bride, Donald, I think I should remind you that the laws of this state specifically forbid the use of the tongue."

airline pilot from Chicago and a businessman from New Jersey—were dedicated amateur drag racers. They loved the sport and, although neither of them had ever driven anything near the size or power of the Funny Car, you could see in their eyes and hear in their voices that they were gung-ho for the chance to test themselves in the six-second machines. And because Hawley knows that the two greatest illusions among American males are, first, that they are good in bed and, second, that they can drive anything, he spends the first hour or so with his students trying to talk the hot blood up out of their extremities and into their brains, where it belongs.

"Driving a dragster is more a mental exercise than a physical one," he said. "It's not your reflexes that are most important here, it's decision time. How fast can you think? How aware are you? What kind of judgment do you have? Your previous experience isn't going to mean much. These cars are not like anything you've ever driven, and if you don't believe me, that's all right, because humility is self-taught around here. If you are like most people, when the engine starts, you will go brain dead. The first time you try to drive this car, it could go off at a 30-degree angle—and you wouldn't know it."

On that note, he cued a 20-minute video montage that is to drag racing what military sex-education films are to sex. We watched as the *1812 Overture* played over clip after clip of dragsters veering out of their lanes into each other, going airborne, slamming the walls, then turning into fiery smears, the middle of which—you knew as you watched—was occupied by a human being who was all of a sudden just another chunk of smoking shrapnel arching up out of the blast.

Somehow, the cameras get to these guys almost as soon as the safety crews. Incredibly, nobody in this grisly video was killed or seriously injured, which meant that about the time these poor stunned bastards staggered free of the smolderings and got their helmets off, somebody was putting a microphone in their faces, asking them what had gone wrong.

"I don't know . . . got a little crooked, but I thought I could get it back. Throttle mighta stuck, I'm not sure . . . got some tire hop, I think. Yeah, I'm all right. Hurt my feelings more than anything else."

Hawley wasn't buying their explanations. The truth about every disaster in this film, he said, was that the driver could have saved himself and his car by simply taking his foot off the accelerator at the first sign of trouble. He used the slow-motion and stop-action buttons to show us what he meant.

"Right here," he said, as the car on the screen pulled just a hair left in the first microsecond off the line. "You see that little puff of tire smoke on the left side? He felt that, and he should have known he was in trouble *right there*. He thought he could get back in shape, but watch what happens

when he corrects. *Now* look at the angle he's on, and he still hasn't let up. Now he's sideways." We watched as the slow-motion camera stretched two seconds to ten, as a time-lapse fireball obliterated all sight of man and machine. "And these cars don't drive sideways too well," said Hawley, and the way he said it told you that he had been in this particular movie.

In fact, Hawley claims that his own early career was a model of recklessness. "I was Rambo out there," he says, "knife in my teeth, bandanna, blood all over the place. I hadn't figured out how to execute the quarter mile yet, so I just attacked it."

Frank Hawley started driving on his fourth birthday, when his parents gave him a gocart, which he raced around the family farm in Ontario. Almost as soon as he had a license to drive on the street, he had a license to drive a top-fuel dragster. At 18, he and a friend took a car out onto the circuit, and for six years, they hoboed from track to track. They lived on beans eaten from cans they'd opened with tin snips and heated over welding torches. They fished through the trash for castoff parts that still had some life in them. And when they won a little money, they spent it on what they'd broken. Listening to Hawley talk about those brave and foolish days, you can tell these are fine memories, full of so much laughter and single-mindedness that you could probably guess where the stories were going, even if you didn't recognize the large ring with all the little diamonds that he occasionally wears. It's less garish than most of the Super Bowl and world-series rings you see, but it symbolizes the same thing. In 1982, driving a car called the Chi-Town Hustler, Hawley won the National Hot Rod Association Funny Car World Championship. And he did it again in 1983.

"Remember this," he told us just before we stepped into the 106-degree heat of the Florida morning for our first dry run. "Make sure your right foot is attached to your brain at all times."

It's hard to say what your brain is attached to as you sit behind the wheel, waiting for the pit crew to start the engine for the first time. There's a check list to run through and hand signals to remember, and the controls are arranged in a way that makes perfect sense if you know what you're doing and no sense at all if you don't: Hand brake on the right and you have to push on it, but whatever you do, don't pull the trigger that's spliced to it, because that sets off the fire bottles in front of the engine, which cost \$250 to refill and you'll have to pay for it . . . unless there's a fire, of course; fuel shutoff lever on the left; reverser handle between your legs; parachute lever on the roof over your head; gearshift buttons on the steering wheel, which doesn't look or feel at all like the wheel on your mother's Buick but is, at least, where it ought to be, as are the clutch and the accelerator.

Hawley stands out front and to the left of the car, which is on blocks for the first exer-

cise. One of the crew hooks the heavy starter to the front of the engine, while a second gets ready to squirt alcohol into the fuel injector from a plastic bottle. Then all three of them look at your eyes as if they were gauges, as if their lives depended upon their seeing the right mix of fear and focus in there. You nod, they pull the trigger, Hawley plugs his ears and watches as the angriest roar you've ever heard shakes your bones and bowels, as his prediction comes perfectly true under your helmet—brain death.

The exercise was simple. On signal, we were to release the clutch and give it just enough gas to roll the tires forward, use the brake to stop them, put it in reverse, roll the tires backward, then put it forward again, then gun it three times, so that we could feel the short, delicate temper of the accelerator. Simple. Except that nothing is simple while your brain is awash in adrenaline, while your body is reading every sensation as a death threat. I never did find out how many decibels there are in the roar of a 2000-horsepower engine, but decibels would be too clinical a measurement, anyway. This noise hurts, promises mayhem and draws the coward up out of you in ways that need an earthier description than will ever come out of a laboratory. If you can imagine yourself surrounded by all the Hell's Angels who ever lived, gunning their Harleys, looking at your girlfriend, you'll have some idea of the way a Funny Car sounds and what it does to your heart.

By the time Hawley drew his fingers across his throat in the signal that means "Shut it off," I was a mess. I was breathing as though I'd run a mile, I'd sweated through my underwear from hood to ankle elastic, and along with my fumbling and hesitation, I'd made a serious mistake by using my right hand on the reverser, which meant I had to take it off the brake. My classmates hadn't done much better and Hawley used the quiet, military style that lurks just below his articulate good humor to dress us down.

"I have to ask myself," he said, "if this guy can't follow a few simple procedures, why would I send him down the track at 200 miles an hour?"

The car was taken off its blocks and the body was attached for the next exercise, which was exactly like the first, except that now we were actually driving the car—a few feet forward, a few feet back—which meant we were working with the equivalent of live ammunition. I'd expected it to be a little less terrifying the second time in the seat, but I'd been dreaming. When the body was locked down, there was the claustrophobia to deal with, along with the lonely sense that if anything went haywire—stuck throttle, my hand off the brake at the wrong moment—it was all going to end badly somewhere in the piny woods that flanked the track down past the finish line. I actually rolled through the whole thing fairly smoothly. Still, my favorite moment in the whole business was when I

pushed the fuel shutoff forward, the rpms rose and then died, filling the air with sweet silence.

The last business of the afternoon was a gentle drive-around, from the starting line down the track to a turnoff at the first of the escape roads, then back to the garage. I gingered the machine up to about 60 miles per hour. It handled well and I probably would have felt even better than I did about it if I'd had the throttle open more than about one eighth.

When I arrived at the track the next morning, the first thing I saw was the crew forcing the spring-loaded twin parachutes into their packages on the rear of the car. In the classroom, the first thing Hawley said was, "Doing a proper burnout is probably the hardest thing you'll learn at this school."

Burnouts are a crucial piece of drag-racing theater in which the driver pulls through a puddle of water to the starting line, hits the throttle and spins a driven plume of white smoke off the rear tires, as the car moves 50 or 100 feet down the track in a kind of slow-motion power skid. The purpose of the maneuver is to heat the tires and the track; to lay strips of rubber on the pavement, so that when you back up exactly onto them, the car will have the perfect adhesive traction of rubber on rubber and can make a catlike start without any tire spin at all.

It was going to take finesse on the accelerator, Hawley told us, and a lot of steering—small quick corrections, no big jerky moves—to stay straight. "It's like driving on ice with full power at 100 miles an hour," he said, as he talked us through the technique. Too much throttle can blow the engine. Too little can cause the tires to catch and sling you right or left into the concrete retaining wall.

I tried to take notes as I watched my classmates try their first burnouts. I ducked away from the roar, watched the tires skinny up as they began to spin; I ate the bitter white smoke, saw them let up almost immediately as they felt the force of what was happening, then stop and back up hesitantly. But I didn't get any of that into the notebook. All I wrote was the word FEAR on a page all its own.

Hawley had told us that it takes half your brain to be afraid, and as I pulled my helmet on, I thought, Yeah, and the other half is entirely taken up with trying to find an excuse for not doing this thing: stomachache, temporary blindness, loss of motor control, chest pains. Finally, though, the only feeling worse than suffering the fear is giving in to it, and maybe it's a good thing, or else no one would ever have eaten the first potato, much less let himself be strapped into a machine like this.

The crew rolled me through the water, started the engine, and I gave them thumbs up. Hawley motioned me forward a bit, then gave me the "whenever you're ready" signal and moved back. I sat for a long moment with my hands on the wheel. Then I

hit it, and a storm of sensation blew away all thought as the car rose, filled with smoke and moved slowly out, though it didn't sound slow or feel that way. Almost instantly, some electric survival signal pulled my foot up, the tires caught, the car hooked violently left, then coasted 100 yards down the track to a gentle stop. I sat with my hand on the brake, wondering if I'd done everything I was supposed to do, trying to remember what came next. I put it in reverse and backed slowly, using the center line to guide on. A hundred feet from the starting line, Hawley appeared in front of the car and pointed his finger right and left until I rolled onto the stubby little tracks I'd left.

A while later, we stood over our crooked tracks while Hawley read them like an Indian. All three of us had let up too soon, and none of us had done any steering as the cars squirmed off the line. In fact, I'd spent my two seconds of panic with only one hand on the wheel, though I had no memory of that. As soon as I'd punched it, my right hand had evidently decided it had business on the brake and went over there by itself.

On my second and third attempts, I did a little better at getting my various body parts to do what my brain was asking of them during the burnout: still short, still crooked, but less timid. On the fourth try, however, Hawley upped the ante by telling us that when we backed into our tracks this time, he wanted us to make our first start. Take it about 50 feet out, he said.

I let up too quickly on the burnout, again, but this time it wasn't reflexive. I just overfinessed it. I backed into my tracks, pulled forward exactly to the starting line and made my final cockpit checks. Then I watched the light tree: Yellow, green—"Punch it," I told myself, but the message took a long, confused second to get to my foot, and when I did step into it, mind and body were out of sync, which meant that when the almost instantaneous three-g force hit me, I pretty much took it for the end of the world. The next thing I knew, I was rolling to a stop. And I remember saying to myself, out loud, "Mother of God."

"How far do you think your run was?" Hawley asked me as I pulled my shaking body out of the machine.

"About 50 feet?"

"Five feet," he said.

Terror will do that, of course; make five feet seem like 50. But even fear wears itself out by its own heat, and sooner than you'd expect, even the most threatening experiences are returned to the cooler hemispheres of the brain, where five feet is five feet again, where the violence and the noise are just the weather in this particular part of the forest.

The next morning, when I got into the car, I was still afraid and I still made mistakes, but I knew what they were before Hawley told me, and as my fear dwindled, I began to feel the subtleties that lay just

below the fury of the machine. The natural tendency to stomp on the accelerator and wrestle with the wheel gave way to smaller, smoother moves and the car responded as if it had been holding out for me to stop yelling and ask quietly. The time contained in a second seemed to double and then double again.

Hawley lengthened my leash run by run: from 100 to 400 to 800 feet. And by my last afternoon, I was jacked, ready for a full-power, subseven-second, two-parachute ride, and I think I might have had it if one of drag racing's nasty little mechanical spooks hadn't overtaken me.

My burnout was long and smooth and straight, and as I pulled back and sat on the rubber it left, I felt like the monster in the monster. At the green light, I stepped into it and the car blew off the line so hard that it cracked my helmet into the back of the roll cage and I lost sight of track for an instant, but I didn't let up, and three seconds later, I had speed I couldn't believe . . . then, without warning, the car shook so violently that I was sure it was in the first seconds of an explosion. Everything went white, my foot came off the pedal and a moment later, I was rolling smoothly again, coasting. I crossed the finish line at about 96 mph, with a time around ten seconds, having done at least a quarter of the run without power.

"Tire shake," said Hawley when I asked him about it. "Happens sometimes. The tires actually come out of round. Sometimes you can drive through it, sometimes you can't. You did the right thing by getting off it."

It wasn't so much a sense of failure that kept me from writing the story when I got back. Real failure always makes a good tale. But what I'd made was a nice try, and no matter how I worked trying to put that into words, I couldn't keep it from violating the wisdom of the theater that says if you hang a gun over the fireplace in act one, it had better go off in act three. Even if it takes two years.

"Sure," said Hawley when I asked him if I could come back to Gainesville and take the course again. "We'll get you a fast ride this time."

The school had prospered while I was away. Nearly 300 students had left their rubber signatures on the starting line since I'd left mine. And there was new equipment: Along with the Funny Car, there were two gasoline-powered racers and an alcohol dragster, the long needle-nosed car sometimes called a rail.

"We're successful, but we're not getting rich," Hawley said with an understated sort of pride that seems to sign the book contract and the movie deal with one hand while it knocks on wood with the other. In three years, no one's ever been hurt at The Drag Racing School.

There were four other students in the

class with me this time, all experienced amateurs, and they came into the first lecture with a collective excitement that would have burned like methanol if you could have distilled it.

"If I had a wish, this was it," one of them told me.

After the fireball video, Hawley talked about the difference between fast and quick. "Speed by itself doesn't mean much," he said. "You came down here on an airplane at 400 miles an hour, eating dinner. Quick is something else, and it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with speed. Houseflies are slow—four miles an hour top speed—but if you've ever tried to catch one, you know they're quick. And it's the quickness you'll notice in these cars. Takes a Camaro IROC-Z almost 20 seconds to go from zero to 100 miles an hour. A Lamborghini Countach, around ten and a half seconds. A dragster using nitro for fuel will do it in right around one second, and the driver will take a force of six *gs* off the line. We use methanol in these cars, so you're only going to pull about three *gs* in there. But you *will* notice it."

"It'll drive the goddamn blood out of your eyeballs," I wanted to add, but I didn't. I expected to be rusty at best, and since I was going to be driving the rail this time, I figured that I might even have to go back through most of the fumbling and at least some of the fear.

From my first moment in the rail, I liked it better than the Funny Car. Its longer wheelbase gave the ride a more stable, arrowlike personality, and there was something reassuring about having the engine behind me instead of in my face. Sitting there in the open air with a clean sight down the low, pointy nose of the machine gave me a feeling that I was aimed at the finish line in a way you just don't get at the wheel of the Funny Car.

Then, too, I've always thought of the rail as the no-frills pure-breed dragster. This is the car Big Daddy Don Garlits and Shirley Muldowney drive. The car that Joe Amato highballed to a world record 282 miles an hour in 5.2 seconds at the U.S. Nationals in 1987. And Amato had done more that day than travel faster than any drag racer before him. He'd also come up with the best description I'd ever heard of what this sport has always been reaching for.

"We got this out of the movie *Spaceballs*," he told a reporter the day he broke the record. "When one of the funny-looking guys said to the other guy, 'We're gonna put it on warp drive,' he said, 'No. I don't want warp drive, I want ludicrous speed.' So every time we talked about going fast over in our pit, we said we're gonna go at ludicrous speed."

The class pretty much moved along the same emotional curve as it had two years before. Let-me-at-it exhilaration gave way to serious depression as the burnouts came up short and went crooked, as Hawley flogged us for the mistakes that we kept making. And since we reviewed all of our exercises on video tape this time, no de-

nials or excuses were possible.

By the fourth and last day, things had begun to gel for everybody, and the camaraderie that always springs up among people who do dangerous things together led into a conversation that I'd overheard my first time through the course and that has probably come up in every class Hawley has taught.

"This is better than sex, no contest," said one of my classmates.

"At least as good," said another.

I couldn't quite make the connection for myself, but it seemed like an inevitable and harmless enough comparison. As long as you don't start telling your troubles to a dragster, as long as you don't finish with your lover in six seconds.

The crows were in the pines discussing things that last morning, and the track was a bleachy yellow in the hazy sun. A little before my last try at a full run, I walked the quarter mile, from the starting lights to the finish line, and it took me almost three minutes at an easy clip, the pace at which human beings were designed to cover 440 yards. One of my classmates made his last run in the Funny Car, and it was a good one. I was about ten feet from him when he blazed through the trap and his air bubble literally blew me back a foot. Even so, the small birds on the wires above the track didn't even fly, just swayed as he went by.

The things we adjust to, I thought as I sat with one hand on the wheel, the other on the brake, staged, waiting for the lights, eager, happy, just exactly frightened enough. I got off the line beautifully. I saw everything—the wall next to me, the end of the track, the blur of trees. I hit the shift button 100 feet out, and from there on, all I did was hold it straight and ride what felt

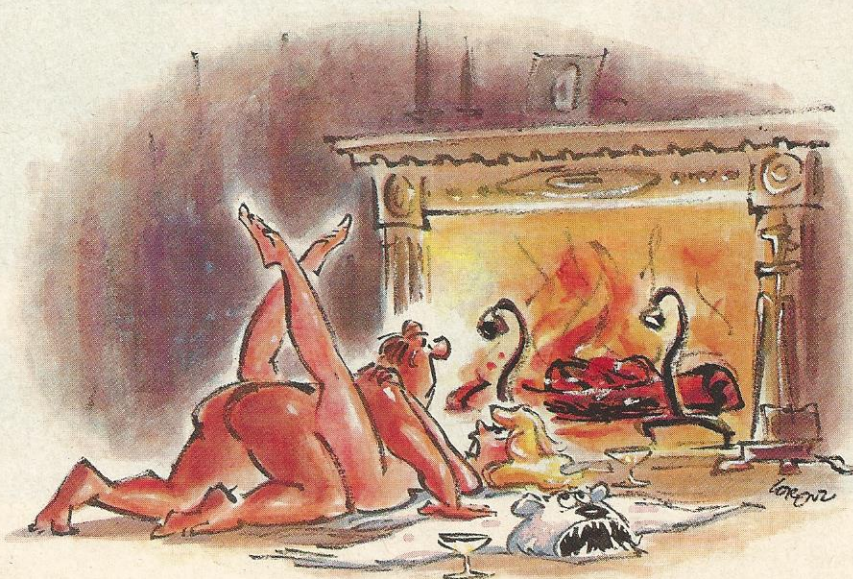
like some huge, magnetic suck tide. Three quarters of the way there, I took one hand off the wheel and got it onto the parachute lever behind my right ear. I was going so fast that only an act of faith kept my foot down, and maybe the most unbelievable thing about the whole shot was that when I crossed the finish line going something like 100 yards a second, *the car was still accelerating*, still wanting more, and in that moment, I swear it felt as if we were nearing some great rip in the universe the other side of which the laws of physics don't apply. I popped my foot up, jerked the parachute free, and when it caught the air a second later, it felt as if the hand of God had grabbed me by the collar. These cars slow down as quickly as they take off. Which was just fine with me. I got on the brake, and 200 yards later, I rolled to a stop, shut the engine down and then just sat there in the perfect stillness. Breathing. Toes buzzing. Thinking nothing.

Hawley pulled up in his truck about 30 seconds later. He had a big smile on his face, and when I was on the seat next to him, he said, "I can't wait to see how you describe *that* feeling."

"I'm not sure there are any words to bring back from that zone," I told him.

Later, when he passed out our diplomas, he said, "It's always irritating when these media types come down here and turn in the best times of the week." The little card he handed me said I'd done the quarter in 7.264 seconds, at 185.95 miles an hour.

Since then, of course, I've had time to put my run in some perspective. I mean, Joe Amato could have given me a two-second head start and blown past me on the finish as if I were the sound from the event and he were the light. Still, ludicrous is ludicrous.



"For Pete's sake! Relax and stop worrying about how much heat we're losing up the chimney."