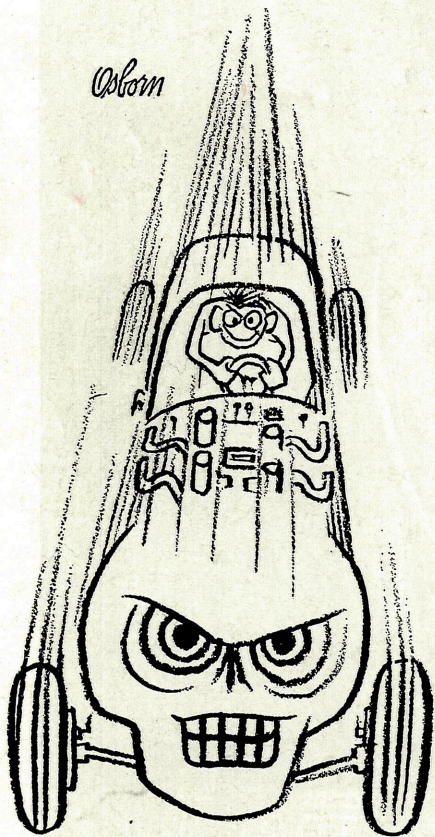


Why do we tolerate drag strips? They teach people to drive like MANIACS ON WHEELS

By O.D. SHIPLEY

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The idiot who forced you to pull off the road to avoid a head-on collision this afternoon, because he had passed where there wasn't safe room, probably didn't learn to drive like that by accident.

There's a school for that sort of driving, and it has come into being through a sad combination of youthful irresponsibility, parental indulgence and adult greed. It is the school of the hot-rod club, the drag strip and the kart track. Today it is spewing forth upon our crowded highways a class of young people trained to drive as rashly, as belligerently, as competitively as possible.

A lot of nonsense has been published about the great value of "letting young fellows get the speed bug safely out of their systems on drag strips," and about the educational advantage of permitting teen-agers to soup up ancient clunkers until they can challenge any car on the road. You hear a lot, too, about the great sport of letting anyone from five-year-olds to their grandfathers career around a paved lot in a tiny racer called a kart.

Before you fall for that plausible baloney, check with a few police and traffic-safety experts. Some years ago, when hot rods and drag races on the open highways first became a menace, a number of officials did go to the trouble of setting up off-highway drag strips in the hope that youngsters could race safely and learn, with adult supervision, something about safe driving and the rules of the road. It was a happy thought, but it didn't solve the problem.

A minority of hot-rod drivers—those belonging to the more responsible national organizations—have never been a real problem; they have for the most part raced on special tracks, observed strict safety precautions, had a healthy respect for the dangers of speed driving and regarded those who raced on public highways as "shot-rodders" and "squirrels."

Failure of the Legal Drag Strip

But for the shot-rod majority, a night or two of drag racing every week, under the eyes of police officers or community volunteers, proved pretty tame. They kept right on racing on the highways, using the "approved" drag strip to practice their lethal art. Law-enforcement officials were reluctant to admit they'd been wrong, but the majority have now soured on the plan, and most of the "approved" strips have been closed down.

But the commercial drag strip hasn't. This, to my mind, is a horrible example of making money out of one of mankind's most unpleasant instincts. The people

who throng to the drag or kart race pay \$1.50 or so admission. If you wish to enter the pit area, there's an additional charge. So far, so good. Kids thrill to the thunder of engines, the squeal of tires and the sensation of speed. Perhaps some of the contestants do get the "speed bug" out of their systems, but the same can't be said of the spectators; ask anyone who has watched the crowd roar away from such a drag strip after a day's races.

The most repellent aspect of the commercial drag strip, however, is its pandering to the morbid element in the audience. These ghouls want more than speed in a race; they want blood. Time and again I have seen a crowd surge forward after a crash to stare in ugly fascination at the mangled bodies in the wreckage. Remove the bodies, and the crowd disappears. Someone gets a cheap trophy, unanimously provided by the promoters, who then announce over the loud-speaker that "next week we'll have benzine-powered cars that will reach 180 miles per hour" and be stopped—they hope—with the aid of a large drogue parachute.

The "Safety Rules" Myth

All of this, of course, is perpetrated under what the promoters call "a strict set of safety rules that are rigidly enforced." Enforced by whom? The promoter who would lose his box office if he ruled unsafe driving and unsafe vehicles off the track?

Whatever the "safety rules," these things have happened on the drag strips within the past two years:

At Puyallup, Washington, a twenty-one-year-old miss won a drag race, but lost her life as her car went out of control at the winner's line at a speed estimated at 116 miles per hour, hit an embankment, rolled over and struck a tree. On a raceway near Riverside, California, a dragger was fatally injured when his dragster went out of control at 168 miles per hour, climbed a dirt bank, hurtled 300 feet through the air, bounced into the air again and disintegrated—a crowd pleaser. The dragger died later in a nearby hospital.

To be sure, we could callously say that these racers have a perfect right to kill and maim themselves if they insist on it—so long as they endanger no one but themselves—but the matter does not end there. I am convinced that drag strips teach the worst possible type of driving to both participants and spectators, and that the lessons learned at drag strips are daily—or nightly—put in practice on the nation's streets and highways.

Drag racing on the public highways usually starts with a bunch of the boys bragging of their "beasts"—that is, hot

rods—over a few malts or brews at the local hangout. A challenge issues, and scout cars, often equipped with police-band radios, are dispatched to survey the local drag roads.

Once a cop-free spot is found, cars are lined up with starters, timers and lookouts in position. What happens then is almost beyond credence. Two or three cars line up side by side. On signal they smoke out of the chute (accelerate from the starting line with tires spinning). The draggers roar around blind curves, over the crests of grades, side by side at speeds approaching 110 miles an hour. The driver who feels the urge to give way is unwilling to do so because such action is certain to merit a "chicken" label from his companions.

Last spring an impromptu drag race between two friends in southwestern Pennsylvania ended when one failed to make a curve on the highway at seventy mph. About a month earlier the survivor had called his friend "chicken" for refusing to race. This time he wasn't chicken, just dead. Last September, also in my state, a young serviceman was killed when the car in which he was riding got into a drag race, went out of control and crashed into a utility pole in the small hours of the morning. The drivers of the two cars—nineteen and twenty years old—explained that the race was a "matter of a couple of guys getting together and nothing to do." The same month, in Bellflower, California, another nineteen-year-old, drag-racing on a Saturday night, went through a red light at sixty mph, struck a car and killed an occupant. It could just as well have been you or me—if we had been in Bellflower that night.

The Blood-Soaked Balance Sheet

Innocent people have been killed or maimed for life simply because they happened to be using a highway pre-empted by the dragsters. The accident files of every motor-vehicle department in the United States can document the tragic consequences of competitive driving. Newspaper editorials condemn the practice. But look at a few excerpts from the letters of readers in reply to the editorials:

"If we had been provided with a drag strip, this wouldn't have happened. We don't want to race on the highways, but we have no other place to go. . . ."

"My husband was racing on the highway all the time, but since he joined the 'Road Deacons' he has been going to the drags and never races on the highway. I have been reading about these boys being fined for drag racing (on the highway). I think it is a shame they took away the one sport the boys in the area were enjoying.