



Hot Rod Heroes

John Drummond

Need For Speed

LANDSPEED RACER CHARLIE NEARBURG



Editor's Note – Landspeed racer Charlie Nearburg will be honored as a “Hot Rod Hero” at the Goodguys 2nd Spring Lone Star Nationals March 18-20 at Texas Motor Speedway. Nearburg will be on hand throughout the weekend exhibiting his 400mph “Spirit of Rett” streamliner. He will sign autographs for fans during the weekend.

Texas native Charlie Nearburg is an old fashioned Renaissance man. A titan of industry, he's the owner, founder and president of five large companies in the Dallas area. He's a Master of Engineering from the prestigious Thayer School at Dartmouth College. On weekends, he's a world-class fly fisherman capable of a “perfect drift”, dirt bike rider, and all around sportsman.

When it comes to motorsports, a lifelong passion, he's an animal - a throttle masher par excellence who happens to pilot the fastest gasoline powered vehicle in the known world. Whether it's flying through the mile marker at 414mph in his “Spirit of Rett” streamliner (named after his late son) or taking the checkered flag at a historic race behind the wheel of a vintage Williams F1 car, Charlie Nearburg knows only one way - full speed.

In a racing career that stretches back to 1973, he's competed in the 24 Hours of LeMans, Cart Fed-X IndyCar Series, Toyota Atlantic Series and others with podium finishes in all. It was his first trip to Bonneville 2006 however, that would set the stage for height's he'd never dreamed of. Earning his license and quickly becoming a member of the 200mph club, he set his sights on 300mph and beyond. Racing a streamliner carrying the name of his son Rett, who died at age 21 from Ewing's Sarcoma - a rare form of cancer, Nearburg blasted right through the 300mph zone at the 2007 Bonneville “Speed Weeks” then returned that fall to set two world records (@ 350.728 and 348.524mph) as well as the fastest speed of the meet. Two years later ‘Rett became the first normally aspirated single engine car in history to exceed 400mph clicking off a blistering 402.955mph run.

Nearburg has rightly earned a spot in Texas auto racing lore, standing tall next to legends like A.J. Foyt, Johnny Rutherford, Jim Hall, Eddie Hill, Kenny Bernstein, Vance Hunt and Raymond Beadle.

We recently had the chance to get to know Charlie Nearburg a little better. He runs as fast in his professional life as he does on the salt, going wide open but we corralled him long enough to ask some questions. Enjoy:

GG: Charlie - What got you hooked on fast cars?

CN: My parents and grandparents used to tell me that almost from the time I could talk, I was constantly asking about every car I saw. As I got older, when we traveled my favorite game was to see who could name the oncoming car the soonest. For as long as I can remember, the thing I wanted most to do in life was to race cars – and the faster, the better.

I was born in 1950 in Midland Texas, but at age two we moved to Roswell, New Mexico. I was not surrounded by cool car dealerships or the type of automotive scene that was present on the east or west coast. However, there was a very large Strategic Air Command Base, Walker Air Force Base, in Roswell and with it a considerable number of servicemen and pilots who were interested in sports cars. We probably had a disproportionate number of sports cars in town relative to the 50,000-person population. I remember the first autocross I saw like it was yesterday. The cars were mostly British: MGs, Jaguars, and Triumphs.

My Dad was also always interested in cars, as my grandfather owned a small Chrysler dealership in Andrews Texas for a period of time. At various times in my childhood my Dad had an Alfa Giulietta Sprint and a Porsche 356. He also had a Plymouth Fury with a Fire Power Hemi in it. They were very different cars but I loved them all. My Dad enjoyed driving fast and taught me to drive on the dirt roads in southeast New Mexico at an early age.

GG: What kind of race events did you attend as a youngster in Texas? What memories stand out from those days?

CN: The first race I remember attending was actually in Fort Sumner, NM at an abandoned World War II training airport. I believe the race was in 1960, and I distinctly remember the exotic cars that were brought to the race by the likes of Carroll Shelby, Jim Hall, Hap Sharp, and Bob Schroeder. There was a Porsche RSK Spyder, a Bird Cage Maserati, a hot rodded Corvette or two, and I believe a Ferrari Monza. In addition there were numerous other MGs, Alfa Romeos, Triumphs, etc. I was totally enthralled and after that weekend I longed to go to any races I could. There was also a drag strip in Roswell where they had drags several times a year. I used to love going to the drag races and seeing the hot rods, jalopies, and the occasional rail job that would show up to race there.

I also remember one very special trip – when my Dad took me to California on a business trip and we spent one day of the business trip going around to exotic car dealerships and go-cart shops, which was my idea as I lusted after a kart to race. I do not remember exactly where we went, but I remember being on cloud nine the entire trip, but I was not able to convince my Dad that we should bring home a go-cart.

We moved to Dallas in 1963 and, whenever I could, I would get my Mom or Dad to drive me to Bill Browning's Precision Motors, where he sold a variety of European sports cars. I was equally excited to go to Custom Automotive, which was in the same neighborhood on Pearl Street, to look at all the hot rod and drag racing cars, equipment, and parts. Occasionally I could get them to take me over to The Hot Rod Exchange on Beckley.

I also started begging my Dad to take me to Green Valley Raceway for the drags or sports car races. Moving from Roswell to Dallas was incredible in terms of the additional car activities that were available. I still remember the first time I saw "Big Daddy" Don Garlits race at Green Valley. When I was in college I had a summer job erecting steel with Curt and Bones Carroll who always had competitive AA Fuelers driven by the likes of Richard Tharp. I also had summer jobs working for John Miller on exotic European racecars, who shared a shop with Foster Yancey and Buddy Anderson, both big drag racers.

One of the real highlights of my life in those days was getting to attend the 1965 Sebring 12-Hour Race with my Dad, as guests of Jim Hall and Hap Sharp. My Dad was friends with them through all of his years living in that area and being in the oil business. That was the year they won the 12-Hour race with the first automatic transmission rear engine Chaparral that was the harbinger of all the future success they would have. It was incredibly exciting as a 15-year old to be there and watch it all. Roger Penske was their team manager for that race. Being amidst all that exotic machinery just blew me away. It was also the year that it rained almost six inches very late in the afternoon, and they actually had to halt the race for an hour or so to let the water recede.

Jim Hall has always been one of my heroes because he combined incredible engineering know-how with creativity and outstanding driving. To me, he had the whole package.

Even back then I was also really aware of land speed racing. It always fascinated me. I remember in September 1960 when Micky Thompson went one-way 406, and then, of course, in November 1965 when Bob Summers and Goldenrod set their 409 MPH World Record. At some point, even back then, I thought I would love to race at Bonneville and pursue just all out top speed.

GG: How did you get your start in motorsports?

CN: As much as I wanted to go racing from a very early age, and even though my Dad was interested in racing, he never was interested in helping me go racing. Racing was very different in those days. To get a sports car racing license back then, you could not attend an SCCA Racing Driving School until you were 21. Naturally, I got a fake drivers license and managed to do that when I was 19, but it was nothing like it is today where some kids' careers are over by the time they are 21!

I actually got my start in racing by saving up money from my summer jobs and buying my first go-cart, which was a Kates Kart. It was not very good, made out of square tubing, but it had a Mac 9. I joined the North Texas Kart Club and raced at the Whizzer go-cart track between Dallas and Denton. In the summer I loved racing under the fluorescent lights they had suspended over the track. I was 16 at the time and I raced that go-cart until I was able to buy a much better Bug go-cart.

I raced as much as my budget, time, and school would allow and until I went off to college. I had to quit go-cart racing when I went east to school, but I continued to save the money from my summer jobs and ultimately I bought a rundown Lotus Super 7. I would ferry parts back and forth with me to college. I spent a lot of time at the engineering school in the machine shop making high performance parts for my Lotus Super 7 to get it ready to take to driver's school when I was finally able to do so. I built the Lotus Super 7 into my first racecar, and went to all my drivers' school and regional races to earn my national license. I did my first national competition racing in the Lotus Super 7.

GG: It seems competition has always been a driving force in your life. Why is that?

CN: My Dad instilled in me the idea that if you really wanted to achieve something in life, regardless of the area, you had to be willing to compete and measure yourself against the people who were the best at what they did. I was interested in competing in sports and, of course, I always wanted to race cars. The sports that I really pursued were also racing related. I was a swimmer in high school and on the Varsity Crew for four years at Dartmouth College. Something about racing in whatever form always attracted me the most. The other thing I like about competition is that it motivates me to do the best that I can do.

GG: You've competed in road racing, Indycar racing, vintage/historic races and of course land speed racing among other forms of motorsport. Which has been the most rewarding?

CN: This is really a hard question because other than trying to be able to provide for my family, my real motivation behind building a successful business was to be able to afford to pursue my dreams and achieve my goals in racing. There have been elements in every type of racing I have done that have been extremely rewarding.

My first professional oval track podium in the Bosch Volkswagen Super Vee Series at Nazareth, Pennsylvania was an incredibly special moment. My first road-racing podium in the Toyota Formula Atlantic Championship at Laguna Seca was also really special. Although I was 47 at the time, and the oldest driver in the field, achieving my dream of racing an Indy car in the CART PPG Indy Car Championship was the achievement of a lifelong dream, as was finishing 4th overall at Sebring in Jim Downing's Mazda prototype car, and being asked to drive a prototype Ferrari 333SP at LeMans.

Having said all that, the success that I have had with my own team driving the "Spirit of Rett" in Land Speed Racing has been the most rewarding. I believe our suc-

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cess at Bonneville has been built on the lessons learned in all the previous racing I have done.

GG: Tell us what kind of hot rods and muscle cars you've had over the years?

CN: The first muscle car I had was not really mine, but I absconded with it whenever I could. It was my Dad's custom order 1963 Buick Skylark Grand Sport convertible with a bench seat and a 4-speed Hurst shifter.

They normally wouldn't give you a 4-speed with a bench seat, but it was great car to be able to sneak off with as a senior in high school because of the combination - I don't think I need to elaborate any further!

I have always loved hot rods and have spent a lot more time the last few years, since we started racing at Bonneville, pursuing the kinds of hot rods that I've always dreamed of having. I feel really fortunate to have a fantastic tube-framed torsion bar '32 Roadster with a very unique Westlake Chevy V8 that was built by Steve Moal. It is a fantastic car to drive and look at.

I am also in the process of working on a car that I've always dreamed of having, an original '32 Ford Vicky with modern running gear. Roy Brizio is building it for me, using a Steve Moal torsion bar chassis, ZO6 engine, and lots of really nice special touches. This car will be finished in time for the Grand National Roadster Show. I feel lucky to have an original '50s-era full-fendered '32 Roadster that has all the correct speed equipment from the period, Merc flathead, Navarro heads, Thixton manifold, Stromberg carburetors, 49 Merc steering wheel, etc.

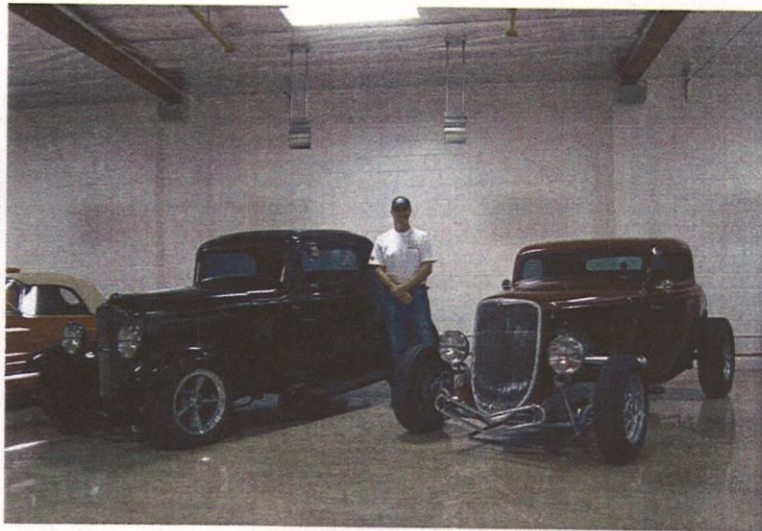
Another car I love to drive is an original all steel Willys made by the late James Earl Ellinger of Evergreen, Colorado. This car is built on an Outlaw chassis with a modern Hemi motor, beautifully fuel injected, incredibly engineered, runs well and fast, handles beautifully, and is a real treat to drive. Also in the '32 line-up is a really fine 3-window, built as a Ford show car by Dan Webb, and converted to street use for me by Roy Brizio. It is subtle, but superb.

GG: You've been an engineer most of your adult life. How have those skills helped you in motorsports?

CN: I actually pursued an engineering degree because I wanted to be the best race-car driver I could be. As I have always enjoyed working on cars and motorcycles and always wanted to design and build things, I was inclined towards engineering anyway. As I previously mentioned, the inspiration I got from Jim Hall's career was important in this decision. In my early days of racing, I applied my engineering skills directly to designing and building parts for the cars I raced, and in analyzing what went wrong in parts that would fail.

As I moved into my professional driving career, on-board data logging was just becoming available and my technical skills were then primarily used in reading and interpreting the data graphs, relating that to my on-track experience from one session to the other, and working with my race engineer to improve our set up and get faster. This really helped me run up front, particularly when coming to new circuits that we'd never raced at before.

Five years ago, as I was organizing our land speed racing team, my engineering input took a little bit different turn in that I was trying to formulate a multiyear development plan for the "Spirit of Rett" to take on the Goldenrod record. With Lee Ryan, my Crew Chief, implementing all the changes and providing immaculate race prep, we treat each run as a valuable laboratory experiment, because even in a "good salt" year we probably make less than 10 runs. Each run is very expensive and high risk at the speeds we are running. It is important that we learn every single thing we can from every single run. Along the way I have made many engineering decisions related to which type of equipment to use, what type of aerodynamic changes to make, etc. that, with Lee's ability to execute, enabled us to achieve our 414.3 MPH record in September 2010 which



broke the 45-year old Goldenrod record.

GG: It can be argued that Land Speed Racing is the purest form of motorsport. Tell us why you chose to run for speed records?

CN: I have been interested in Land Speed Racing since the 1960s. I have always been fascinated by the pure pursuit of speed. I had always wanted to go to Bonneville, but the almost year-round effort required by the professional series that I was involved in for so many years and the demands of raising a family and building a business, never left time to do Bonneville. It was always in the back of my mind to someday pursue the biggest records at Bonneville.

When my son Rett died in January 2005 at age 21 after a very difficult, 11-year battle with Ewing's Sarcoma, I spent a lot of time thinking about what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. One of the things that kept surfacing was something that Rett and I had talked about a number of times in the last years of his life, which was going racing at Bonneville. I am sad that he and I never got to do that together, but out of that thinking and those discussions I decided to seriously pursue this goal.

I am motivated by the desire to make more people aware of Ewing's Sarcoma, Rett's fight against the disease, and how truly courageous he was in his fight against cancer. Rett is my inspiration. I want to reflect that in our efforts at Bonneville and I want to honor his memory. In doing so, I want and wanted to go for the fastest of the Bonneville records, focusing initially on the fastest normally aspirated records.

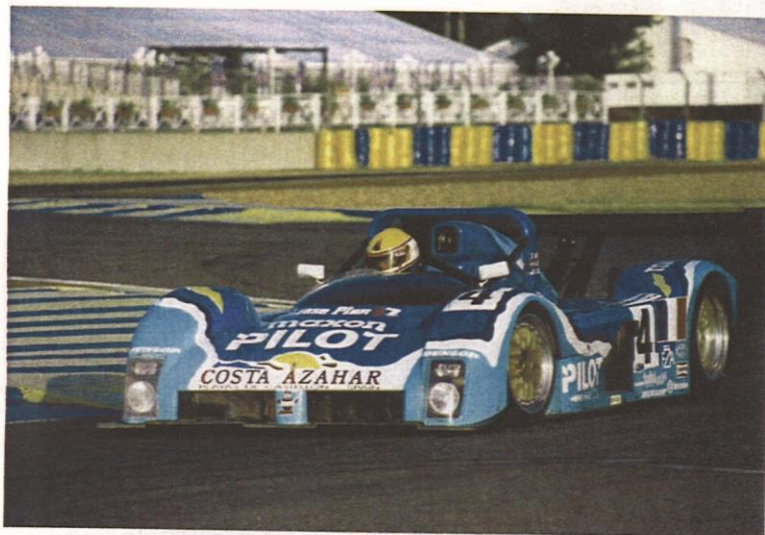
The Spirit of Rett is now the fastest normally aspirated car in history and it holds the fastest single engine car records in history. It is the only car in Bonneville history to set two over-300 MPH records in one day, and it was the first single engine normally aspirated car to go over 400 MPH.

We hold the two fastest FIA records available to a normally aspirated car, as well as the four fastest normally aspirated SCTA/Bonneville records. And, of course, we are looking for more. I'm honored to be one of the four living members of the 400 MPH Club, driving a "real" car. I love driving at the absolute limits of speed for a piston driven car.

There are two things I'd like to add about what the "Spirit of Rett." If you would like to know more about the "Spirit of Rett", please visit www.rett.org for much more information. On every Bonneville run, I feel Rett with me. Rett is the last person I talk to before the start of a run, and he is the first person I celebrate with when it is finished.

GG: What challenges does a land speed team face when attempting to set a world record?

CN: There are two types of World Records available, those sanctioned by Southern California Timing Association/Bonneville Nationals ("SCTA"), and those sanctioned by the Federation Internationale d'Automobile ("FIA"). World records sanc-



tioned by the SCTA/Bonneville Nationals are available to be set at the August and October meets put on by SCTA, and the September meet which is put on by the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association ("USFRA"). World records sanctioned by the FIA, which is the worldwide sanctioning body for Formula One and other international racing series, must be set at a private meet such as "Mike Cook's Landspeed Shoot Out." The reason for this is that the procedures for these two records are different, and they do require a different level of preparation. We have set both kinds of records.

One of the biggest challenges in pursuing any land speed record is building a car that will reliably make two absolutely full-powered passes, each in excess of five miles in length with the engine developing as much horsepower as can be wrung from it, the entire drive train is strained to the limit. Driving a car to set a record requires obtaining the maximum speed while still keeping the car together. These world records are very definitely an endurance event as much as they are a speed event. There have been many fast one-way speeds achieved without a record being set because the backup run failed due to mechanical failure.

To set a record at Bonneville you have to have a car that is very aerodynamic, develops the maximum amount of horsepower possible from the engine configuration you have chosen to run, and develops as much traction as possible, as traction is a limited commodity on the Salt with the size tires we have that are rated for the speeds we want to go. The car must be reliable and fast enough to make a qualifying run, and with limited impound time make a return run at a speed that will allow the average of the two to set a record. Into all of this factors the environmental conditions of temperature, humidity, moisture of the Salt, wind conditions, etc. so that in any given year, the number of runs you may make may be extremely limited or non-existent.

In the AA and A Class we are racing in, there are no soft records. Every record we have achieved has been the result of a combination of having the car absolutely ready to run when the conditions offer the best chance for success. It also requires great teamwork, car preparation, and communication among the team.

In particular, for the FIA International records, only one hour is allowed between the time you exit the traps on the first run and the time you must break the speed traps on the return run. This places an even higher premium on preparation than do SCTA/Bonneville national records, as four hours is allowed for maintenance between runs on those records. For a car with the complexity of the "Spirit of Rett", there is a great deal to be done in that hour to ensure safety and speed on the return run. We double the size of our race team for the FIA records.

I could go into a great many details about the planning, engineering, and driving that goes into setting a big record, but it would take a book to do it justice. In short, each run requires a large number of critical decisions on gearing, jetting, fuel mixture, timing of the run, course alignment, and many other things in order to achieve success. When we broke the Goldenrod record and set a new normally aspirated world record of 414.3 MPH, everything we did for the two runs that set that record had to be absolutely perfect. Careful engineering, planning, preparation, driving, and four years of

continuous improvement on the car, came together on that day.

Because of the FIA requirement that a new record exceed the old record by 1%, we had to exceed the 409.25 MPH Goldenrod record by 4 MPH just to take care of that one percent. At those speeds, every mile an hour is incredibly hard to attain. Aerodynamic drag increases by the square of the speed, but the power to overcome that drag goes up by the cube of the speed! While we exceeded that record by five miles per hour, the last mile per hour between 413 and 414 is what really set that record. You can see that one-mile an hour out of 414 allows for a very small percentage of error, and it is one of the reasons that record remained unbroken for 45 years!!!

GG: What do you consider your proudest achievement in Land Speed Racing?

CN: Without a doubt my proudest achievement in racing is the record we set September 21, 2010 of 414.316 MPH breaking the 45-year old Goldenrod record set by the Summers Brothers.

GG: You drive the Williams FW07 in historic races. That was a Formula 1 car developed in the late 1970s by Britain's Frank Williams. Tell us about that car?

CN: The Williams FW07 that I drive was one of Alan Jones' world championship cars from 1980. It was designed by Patrick Head, building on the revolutionary ground effects Lotus of Colin Chapman. In 1980 this Williams was clearly the class of the field, and to this day continues to be an excellent and highly competitive historic Formula One car. It is a very elegant and, as is the case with most racecars, has a beautifully executed design. Powered by a Cosworth DFV of approximately 500 HP, it is still a very fast machine and a great deal of fun to drive. For me it is also quite painful, because to fit in the car I have to wear size 8 shoes instead of my normal 10-1/2 size. Further, I have to wear Kevlar shin guards to keep my legs from being bloodied by the steering rack. I get out of the car bruised over a number of body parts because of the tight fit in the cockpit. It is worth it because of the competitiveness of the car and the joy I get from driving it. I have been very successful with this car over all the years that I have raced it.

GG: Fascinating stuff Charlie. Hot rodders world wide and certainly the Goodguys Rod & Custom Association appreciate you taking the time to tell us about your fascinating life in motor sports and your mission with 'Rett'. Thank you for spending some time with us. We look forward to seeing you at the 2nd Spring Lone Star Nationals at Texas Motor Speedway!

CN: Thank you. We look forward to visiting with the Goodguys. 