

A DAY AT THE RACES

by
Teria Blagg

Exploratory Major
Zion-Benton Township High School, Zion, IL

A love for drag racing may be an acquired taste, but I was born with the love. Since the year I was born, every summer weekend and every Labor Day weekend has been spent at Great Lakes Dragway in Union Grove, Wisconsin. The race track is located a mere twenty-five minutes from my city, so it becomes my summer home. The dragway draws in different types of people, depending on the show, but there is always the regular crowd, which for the past eighteen years included me, my father, and my brother. Many people can merely see the races, but there is a unique atmosphere at the track which continues to entice me.

The track offers many different shows on Wednesday and Friday nights and all day Saturday and Sundays which attract diverse cars. For a person who has never experienced the thrills of the track before, Wednesday night would not be a good night for their first experience. On Wednesday nights the track is scarcely populated by a few racers making adjustments on their cars or preparing them for the upcoming weekend. My dad, my brother, and I are typically at the track on Wednesday nights trying to repair the damage which my dad had caused the weekend before, such as ruining a brand new transmission. Sundays are also a day to repair the damages that had occurred the day before or to compete in the final rounds of an event. Friday night the track is open for street cars as well as the usual drag cars. Motorcycles doing close to one hundred and eighty miles an hour, new Camaros, and new Mustangs can be seen racing down the track. If someone is highly interested in motorcycles, then Friday night is the night to go. Saturday is the best day to experience drag racing, if someone has never been to a track. On Saturday the track comes alive. On certain Fridays and Saturdays, the track offers big shows which have jet funny cars, alcohol dragsters, jet dragsters, wheelie standers, and nitrous funny cars. These shows may even feature the car-eating monster, which is a large metal sculpture shaped like a dinosaur. It picks cars up in its hands, breathes fire on them and devours them. "Benny the Bomb" is also an added feature to the show. "Benny the Bomb" is a man who locks himself inside a car with dynamite and blows the car up but comes out unharmed. The big shows typically draw a national crowd, which squeezes out the local racing talent.

Driving up to the drag way, nothing can be seen except for the corn fields which surround it until you enter the gravel road. Pulling into the parking lot is not a very smooth ride since the parking lot is simply a mowed down corn field with patches of gravel showing the remnants of a road. After parking, you walk about half a mile until you reach the ticket booth. Tickets range from ten dollars to twenty. An adult admission to the races is only ten dollars, but for an additional ten dollars you can go behind the scenes into the pits, which is where all the drag cars are

located. The experience cannot be appreciated unless a person pays the extra ten dollars to go into the pits. To me, the pits seems like a little community I have been part of since the day I was born. I rarely enter the front gates, since the racers drive their cars around back, so sometimes I think I am unable to experience the track the same way as people who are "front gaters," as opposed to the "regulars."

When you enter the pit, you see multitudes of cars ranging from dragsters to big-block Chevies, and also the only mini-funny car, which would be my father's. After visiting the pits so frequently, I could recognize which areas were claimed by which cars and which drivers weren't racing on certain days. Other drivers are also able to recognize whether or not we are racing, because racers acquire the same spot week after week. They become aware of who will occupy the spaces around them, which creates a neighborhood and friendships. Normally my father resides in the space next to a friend, Jim Regenaar, whom he met at the track. The friendships extend beyond the track. My dad generously offers our garage to Jim, so that he can fix his car, and my parents frequently go out for dinner with the Regenaur's. We have also met a man from Iowa whom we frequently visit, or he comes to visit us. My sister and I have babysat the children of a man named Harry Alden, whom my dad also met at the track. Everyone in the pits shares tools, food, and offers a hand whenever anyone needs one. Usually we park the car to the right of the enclosed trailer, and we position our lawn chairs in front of its door. Next to our lawn chairs we have pop coolers, which are open to any one of our "neighbors," including Broadway Bob driving by on his four-wheeler and taking a pop from the cooler. The leisure atmosphere of the pits adds to the overall relaxed atmosphere of the track.

After leaving the pits you enter the center of excitement, the track. Before getting to the track you have to wind your way through the maze of food and drink stands. No one can pass through the maze with the smell of hot dogs and hamburgers in the air without stopping to buy some food. To buy a hot dog, you cannot simply go to the stand which you choose and pay for it--you have to buy tickets at the food ticket booth. On a typical day a person can spend twenty dollars on food since each ticket costs fifty cents, and usually my brother and dad eat double cheeseburgers, which cost eight tickets a piece. Besides hot dogs and hamburgers, you can buy ice cream, cotton candy, and many other different types of food which can only be found at a carnival. The distinct smells of the different types of food, and the gasoline, add to the unique atmosphere of the track. Close to the food booth there is an airbrush booth, which promises a picture of any car in under twenty minutes. If someone desires a souvenir, there are many booths which offer posters, sunglasses, hats, t-shirts, and many other gifts someone might want. There is also an arcade which my brother and I used to play in when we were younger with many of the other drivers' children. After battling through the maze of food, and miscellaneous stands, you can finally experience the excitement of the track.

The sound of the engines' roar engulfs the crowd as the cars go screaming down the track. Four sets of bleachers surround the track, although the best treat is being able to stand near the starting line, and to have a dad who races give me that opportunity. As soon as my father is

ready to begin his race, my brother gets in front of the car to direct my dad so that he lines up right. One time while my father was racing he had a problem and lost first gear so he had to throw the car into second gear. As my father neared the end of the track, smoke started coming out of the car even though he was okay. Over the walkie-talkie of the lady standing near my brother came the words, "I think that the Tin Man has hit the guard rail and is going to need to be towed up the return road." My brother wasn't sure what was going on, and since he had my dad's keys he went back to the truck, unhitched it from the trailer, and drove down the return road to pick him up. My father was so surprised when he saw his truck coming to get him, even though he was fine, and even more surprised that my brother was driving it, since Billy was only fourteen. I am privileged to be involved in the action of racing while the people in the stands are merely spectators. My brother and I are considered my father's pit crew, which does everything and anything that needs to be done such as getting the gas can out of the truck, grabbing tools, helping my father get in the car, and lining the car up on the line. Frequently my dad puts me in his car so that we can go fuel up, since it requires lifting up the car's body so that he can get in. It's just easier for me to slide through the top.

Racing has been considered a family event since I was born, though my mother and sister have not retained their love for the sport. Throughout my life my dad has had a variety of racing cars which he usually builds and races himself. Once his newest car was featured in the magazine *Hot VW's*, and also in a parts catalog for *Mofoco*. When I was born we had a white and blue mini-funny car which was named "The Tin Man" since my dad had a career in sheet metal. Next my father created a dragster, which he raced for quite a few years, but then he realized that he wanted to rebuild his mini-funny car. He finally rebuilt it, and desired an enclosed trailer to protect it instead of a snowmobile trailer. A friend my dad met at the track agreed to sell his trailer to my dad, but only if my dad would buy the race car too. So, needless to say, we acquired an alcohol dragster. Growing up with race cars all my life supplied me with a love which is typically acquired. Each year my dad says that he isn't going to drive any more and he wants to retire, but I think that inside he really understands that it isn't the car itself, but the atmosphere of the track which keeps drawing him back, and it is also guaranteed time to spend as a family.