

The World of Speed Story
By Jamie Hayslip and Gretchen Kriesen
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There is a 34-mile stretch of highway just west The Great Salt Lake without exits or rest stops, a road so straight and the landscape so monotonous, that at 75 mph, you wonder if you are moving at all. There are signs noting the number of fatalities so far this year and the importance of staying alert. "Long. Straight. And the possibility of death, if you aren't careful. Seems a fitting introduction to The World of Speed," Gretchen says flatly. Until now, we've not spoken about the event since leaving New York. Half to calm my nerves about making the 150 Club, half to calm her nerves about me flipping over, spinning out, skidding uncontrollably, or actually failing to pass my licensing run. For all of the danger, failure seems the more immediate and terrifying enemy.

Like everyone else who makes the journey to Bonneville, I've spent more time covered in grease and fishing for tools and parts than I care to admit. For six months, I've been happily (?) sequestered in my garage with the car that oscillates between being mildly uncooperative and flat-out disobedient. I can't remember the last weekend I wasn't in there all day. *I can't imagine what I will do when I don't need to be there all day.* But when you drive onto the flats, the struggles are irrelevant.

It's white. It's flat. It's endless. And it's intimidating. Gretchen turns back and looks at the Corvette we've been towing for four days. I call it a 1990 Corvette with a stroked small block good for about 450 horsepower. She's calls it The Diva, insisting that it just sits around, demanding time and attention, and has been slothing about from New York to Utah. "You better bring it, Missy," she says to the sleeping car. No response.

The atmosphere at Bonneville is awesome. This is an event about driver/builders, about personal achievement instead of competition, about brining a car you've devoted countless hours to and seeing what it'll do – because most of us really don't know. And everyone is curious, helpful, encouraging. There are no egos here. There's just a love of speed and an appreciation for a wide variety of machinery.

We've barely unhitched the trailer in our pit, when Clay comes marching over to help. He's been here before and is hoping to set a record in his snowmobile-engine-powered Geo Metro. (Yes, you read that right). Within minutes, he's hammering spikes into the salt to tack down the ground cover tarp while telling us all about the event. And then he freaks me out about Tech Inspection by telling me I might have a problem because I don't have protective film on my windows. Apparently, the folks at Bonneville don't look kindly upon shattered glass littering their track at 150mph. "Hey, even if they do point it out, you can just put strips of packing tape over your windshield; they'll approve that." I've prepared for everything, everything but packing tape on my windshield. We drive over to Tech and there's a pit in my stomach. We've driven almost 2,000 miles to get here – what if I missed something...

I've never been through tech like this. The inspector so friendly and just as eager to chat with us about Corvettes, and where we are from, as he is about running down the inspection list. I pass; no packing tape necessary. Now all I have to do is drive. Fast.

To get into the 150 Club, you must drive a street-legal car over 150mph (but no faster than 160mph) twice during the week, after a 125mph licensing run. As they say at Bonneville, "It only sounds easy." That's because your car has to combat altitude (4,500 ft), salt conditions, and wind – all of which slow you down. But everyone is facing it together and that equity is clearly seen in how the week is structured. It's pretty simple: Get in the staging lane. Wait. Drive. Repeat as desired. Priority goes to cars defending a record, but otherwise, it's pretty unstructured.

The lane is an eclectic mix of motorcycles, street cars, streamliners, roadsters – you name it. And a Geo Metro. The wait is long, about three hours, so you have time to look at the automotive eye candy all around and talk to the drivers/builders/mechanics/supporters. There is a beautiful vintage belly tanker in front of us. I wander over and strike up a conversation with Ron Richardson, the owner/driver. Unbelievably, we discover that we live within 10 miles of each other back in Rochester. He tells me he's been waiting over 50 years to be here – a sentiment I hear frequently as I talk with fellow drivers. It's a long-held dream, on their "bucket list," and, for some, almost a way of life.

In three hours, you also have time to wonder. What will the salt feel like? What will the car do? How will it feel? You inch closer. You watch others take off. You wait. And wait.

We've been pulling the Corvette on a tow rope behind our Tahoe, but when we are four cars from the start it's time to get ready. My dad, who flew out to help crew, unhooks her as I warm up the engine and start to put on my gear. After waiting for three hours, suddenly, I'm rushed. I put my helmet on without my balaclava, can't get the Hans Device latched properly, and they're telling me to move up and close the gap in line.

And then: I am sitting here, ready for my licensing drive, nothing but seven miles of salt stretching out in front of me. Monte, who sees off each driver, kneels down, tightens my belts (too tight; *definitely too tight*) and gives me a few last instructions. He hears the course clear signal on his radio and sends me off with an enthusiastic swoosh. I hear later that he talked to Gretchen afterward, telling her she should get in the car and drive. Undeterred by her insistence that she drives like a grandma (and she does), she finally tells him I've mounted the seat so that it doesn't move and my "endlessly long reindeer legs" mean the seat is too from the pedals for her. Each time I go out after this run, he tells her to get on me about moving the seat up so she can drive. These guys are all addicted to speed.

There are no surprises, no problems with traction or stability. After pulling off the course and stopping at the timing trailer, I receive a small paper printout. It reads 127mph. Perfect. Licensing accomplished. But I have to get right back in line if I want to fit in my first attempt at 150mph before the sun goes down and they close the course.

I'm up on the starting line again, now wondering if the really will do 150. Monte checks in, and signs off on my licensing pass, and cautions me that I'll need to pick up quite a bit of speed now. He sends me off again. This time, I'm accelerating more aggressively, and I'm well above 4000rpm, in 5th, by the first mile. As the revs climb easily toward the magic 5000 rpm mark I notice the left front corner of my Targa top starting to lift away from the windshield. *Well, I didn't expect that to happen.* The car is stable, but I need to concentrate on keeping it straight. I ignore the sliver of daylight above the windshield and focus on the tach as it nails 5000rpm just before the two-mile marker. I hold it steady at $\frac{3}{4}$ throttle until I cross the big "Q" sign which marks the end of the measured quarter. *That should do it,* I say to myself hopefully. And it does: 152 mph. Now I just have to back it up.

We hit the flats on Thursday morning and quickly get into line. Same drill as before; it's like we're old pros by now, but you never lose that butterfly feeling when you are two cars from the starting line. The line slows down when someone drops something on the track; they are very good about getting everything off, but you do *not* want to be the guy who dropped parts and delays everyone else. Gretchen hears the tireless folks on the radio joke about holding one part for ransom. She wishes me luck and then tells the Corvette, "Now don't poop any parts, young lady. Nobody will like you if you do." Monte sends me off.

She does not "poop parts." She does her job. I hit 157 and I'm not even at full throttle. When I talk to Gretchen about it later, we speculate if they'll let me run flat out. She tells me to ask and if they say no, not to do it (as in, "Whoops; didn't realize I was going that fast..."). "Don't be *that* guy," she says. "These people deserve too much respect." She's right.

And let me tell you why. The folks running the event are tireless. Monte's attitude is mirrored by everyone: the people manning the radios, picking up stuff from the track, at the concessions, registration, tech, timing, and the others running the lines. Everyone is in this together. Everyone is in a good mood, friendly and always encouraging. It's incredible. This attitude is what makes us more interested in thanking and saying goodbye to event marshals Monte and Jim than in talking to Top Gear's Jeremy Clarkson, Richard Hammond, and James May who are there filming on Friday afternoon. Those three are just TV stars. Monte gives us that big smile, and adds, "She wants to race the car! Move the seat up for her!" as he walks away. She looks at me.

"Um, well, maybe I should start with actually driving the car once," she says. We climb back into the Tahoe, and lug The Diva, crusted in salt, away from her stage as the sun sets on the flats.