

Glory days

From Buffalo Bill Cody through the western movies of my youth to the lightnin' quick NitroFired gun slingers' of today, my heroes have always been cowboys...

Sunrise is a great time to start a journey, especially on Route 66 in an arrest-me-red coupe that has a time travel button - so hang on as we stripe the legendary road with screaming rubber and go visit some golden moments in space & time...

Cars came into my life during warm summer months spent high in the south London hills, fresh dreams fired in the cool of shade trees by American cars unlike any I'd seen on the streets, their rear seats large enough to party in, or at my tender age, play any game an already fertile imagination produced. A Cadillac was my favourite; sat in its front seat, the huge steering wheel took a full arms stretch as I emulated chase scenes from Saturday morning movies. Later, time was often spent après school in a souped-up Ford Pop, tweaked by a pal whose dad had money to spare, in the passenger seat having fun, looking and learning about the shuffling co-ordination required between feet, hands and mind for changing gears, while pondering the driver's wisdom in his choice of location to stomp on the gas pedal! Joining the Royal Navy saw me spend the best part of 10 years driving round the high seas, being introduced to Hot Rod magazine by some US Navy guys in Hong Kong and learning to drive in an army truck on a race track in Singapore. My time learning in that hot rod Ford paid off when four days into the course I had my first drag race on the Bukit Timah Road - and I won! My good fortune continued when I returned to the orient on a rock an' roll tour that really got going in Malta, making the big time in Japan and Australia, all the while sponsored by my Sovereign Lady Elizabeth of England, still in the Royal Navy, but making mucho dinero having more fun than most sailors ever did! Then came a few years spent ploughing the ocean waves, but before you get sea sick



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Fuel Coupe NitroGear, it's also
used for time travel! Being old
gold, it's not 100% accurate, it
leaks and nitro gets in for one thing (no problem!), an' the
shifter's kinda loose which is why we landed in October

SANTA POD RACEWAY



1966 at the last race of the season! An event remembered by those who raced there for sideways action off the start line an' top end freaky scenes, cars playing full-speed ahead destroyers making impressive bow waves like Cliff Jones' 1958 Corvette! However we're time-shiftn' to 1967 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of a transition from driving a 27second no-go-showboat to a top-gun international shootout, and the invasion of a posse of genuine street machines driven more than 500 miles to race, and we're talking ol' school, sideways action, so let's jst nudge our ride into a NitroFree zone...



DragRod photo courtesy Asphalt Archives

Those Royal Navy years left me brimming with confidence, and that was handy after going up to Santa Pod in "Half a Min," a Minivan custom built into a bobtailed pick-up with a wood deck by John Bravery, paired to race Mick Wheeler's giant killing Scorpion that had me eating its dust. After a first-time out 27second ET I gave her a head job, fit double valve springs, new Goodyear tyres and ram-air'd the carb during the off season Inside I put a pair of huge Wolseley leather chairs that weighed a ton, but I never thought to remove 'em when racing! At the second event of '67 we won G/SA, on a bye run and a 26.578ET at 49mph!



Bill Correir photo
courtesy John Woolfe Racing

Ooops - everything worked fine, but the traction of the G8's helped rip the motor mount off the firewall! Once fixed, we improved to best marks of 20.0 at 66.8mph, in total luxury, but still way off the class record! However, good fortune came along when I became professionally involved with Santa Pod and the BHRA, things moving quickly for me in more ways than one. Soon after my first ride, in Ian Demaine's Mustang powered Zodiac, Clive Skilton let me drive his fuel injected 365hp, 327 Stingray. A decal on the dashboard with the legend, "Hit this shifter as hard as you like, but please don't break your wrist!" made me smile, but I thought it was a joke! Clive told me the rpm to shift and to come off the line at as I drove us out to the start line. What a launch, my grin was ear-to-ear as we left the line, but I almost screwed up the shift - until Clive yelled, "Hit it Mike," whacking my hand hard, knocking the stick into gear with a hard clunk! Oh yeah, I punched third gear like I was born to it as Clive chuckled, "Didn't you read the decal?" The M22 Rock Crusher was built for tough guys! The lesson was well learnt, and my next when Mark Stratton let me race his Chevy-powered Hustler, a wild ride! Years later Dave Riswick laughed, saying it was "a pussy to drive," yeah right! The other car gone at the last amber, but Hustler launched like a pocket rocket and I was hanging on with everything - then came the shift, and oh boy!



Photographer unknown bbf courtesy Asphalt Archives

The power hit, tyres bit and the tiny BSA rocketed off again, blasting by the other car as if I'd unleashed a wild beast, accelerating hard, riding the bumps like a bucking bronco was too muckin' fuch! Being way ahead I clicked it off, convinced I'd won - until my pal passed me at the line to win by inches, yet my ET was quicker! But that's drag racing - and when I decided to stick with full bodied cars!

Mark Stratton's seen driving the diminutive BSA Scout at right, while there's a whole lot of pullin' and pushin' goin' on below in a Super Eliminator final later in the year. More than a classic drag race between a pair of 12second, 100mph legends, a 427 Shelby Cobra, the ultimate street machine and a mouse-motored Chevy hot rod, this turned out to a great race of historic significance. As you can see, things were different back in the day - and boy did we have fun....



Photographer unknown bblf courtesy Asphalt Archives

Tex Blake drove the Hustler to 109.89mph (no ET), win over the Cobra's best ever 12.72 at 112.11mph leaving John Woolfe unable to understand how a lil' ol' Chevy had beaten his giant Ford!



Later Mr Woolfe suggested Hustler'd be dynamite with his engine. A generous offer met by a classic reply from Mark Stratton, "No way, it's a Ford, give me a Chevy and we'll talk." Shortly later John Woolfe Racing was born, and an L88 427 saw JWR's Hustler hit 131.08mph and 11.01 in '68

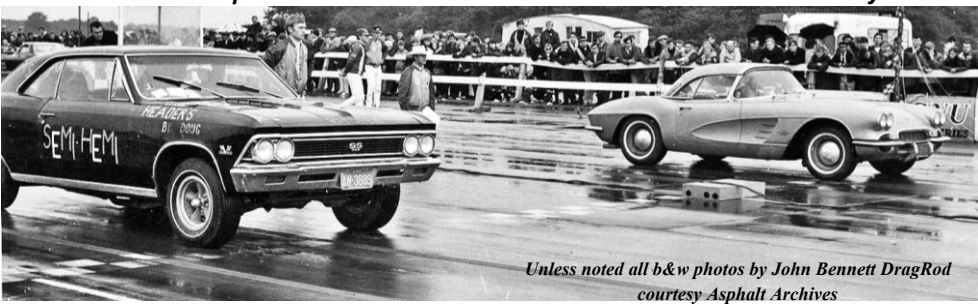


Unless noted colour photos by Brian Sutton Courtesy TimeTravelDVDs

Back in 1967, I also got lucky racing a hi-po 289 Mustang (launched at 5,700, shifted at 6,700, clearing the traps in 2nd gear!), against a hi-po 340hp, 327 Stingray, swapping rides and winning each time. The US Commando Team returned with this set of two pairs, sadly just stockers with mag wheels and paint jobs - and there were no mixed races - it was strictly Ford vs Ford and Mopar vs Mopar! Although fans weren't very happy, the cars looked good and drivers raced balls out chasing bragging rights. Later in the year we had a call at Drag Rod's office to say a US Air Force team from Ramstein wanted to come race, no problem they were told and a few weeks later I was at Dover meeting the early morning ferry and about a dozen cars, including a tough looking 12 second Olds 4-4-2 and a red pick-up truck carrying sets of slicks and things. But we had no time for social niceties, apart from being asked to drive about 55mph to suit the racing gears of the heavy hitters, it was just hit 'em up and move 'em out. A couple of slow moving trucks gave some fun - pulling out I saw the road was straight ahead so I nailed it, slowing once there was an empty quarter mile behind me. Moments later the black maw of the Olds moved out from behind the truck, its nose lifting high in the air as the driver unleashed its power, tyres smoking, the car fishtailing before gaining traction and accelerating hard into my rear view mirror! A red Nova joined the Olds in my mirror, playing drag racer and catching up at speed, soon they'd all pulled out and thundered after me until we were running nose-to-tail again. Today such a convoy would cause a stir, but in 1967 oh boy, the amazing sight and sounds of the big American muscle cars had heads turning heads through small towns and villages en route to London. Everything was cool until we reached the huge round-a-bout at the bottom of Park Lane, even then a crazy race track I'd always loved so I just drove on, merging with speeding traffic, checking my mirror to find no one following me - they just stopped! Powering around the huge circle, I found my convoy of muscle cars blocking the road, drivers looking kind've bewildered at the uncontrolled traffic flow! No problem, I leapt out and played traffic cop, halting the flow, yelling at the guys to head straight on through and wait - it worked and shortly later I joined them in Park Lane saying it'd be easy now! The first traffic light on the Edgware Road began to change and they all accelerated, fishtailing like crazy, all smoking to catch me up - luckily it's a duel carriageway, there was no traffic and not a policeman in sight! Green lights eased my mind, the M1 putting smiles on everyone's face, with a few making high-speed power bursts before cruising again. The many tight bends on the original skinny cross-country route through the lanes was also fun, but we were soon happy and safe at a very wet Santa Pod. It never occurred to me that my bumper to bumper street-legal race cars were on the wrong side of the road - until we got to the start area and one of the guys asked me to drive him down track to check where the bumps were. No problems right! Wrong - he wanted me to drive his Camaro, a 396, 375hp beast and its starter motor had more power than my Mini! Worse, the track was wet, wet, wet! Mind you, having honed my racing skills since driving Hustler, I never gave it a thought, just climbed in, cinched up, ready to enjoy. Launching hard, the torque powered us sideways off the line, and again at each spot-on power shift but I kept my foot hard down. A max'd out two-three shift in one of the Pod's infamous puddles was kinda exciting 'til we regained traction, straightened up and thundered through the traps with the motor sounding just right. The powerful Hugger was a huge hit with race fans, and to this day that Saturday afternoon drive rates as an all time favourite with the owner just sat easy, then he spoke, "You've got a mulefoot Mike, I liked th't," shaking his head, chuckling as he added, "You sure kept your boot in on that one, you did good," and then he screamed! During the wild ride, I'd done everything right - until then! Still excited, I'd backed off and switched to auto-pilot as the engine slowed us, relaxing, easing on the brakes, swinging round for the return road, rapt in the ride, going with the flow, my mind on auto, j'st right for "Half a Min" but the scream was an instant return to the reality of rubble-filled drums dead ahead - in the middle of the Camaro! Whoops, but happily saved by quick reactions, a rapid down shift, flicking the wheel and powering on by - maybe I'd earned my spurs, but I'd still a lot to learn! The lessons continued on race day, but our English weather really put a damper on festivities. The Pod was wet, wet, wet - more than just singing in the rain with umbrellas they're racing in eliminations with wipers on! The rare semi-hemi Chevelle was another heavy hitter but it had more than just traction problems, the lengthy road trip, evil weather, bad luck an' too much power destroyed a UJ early in the day. We never really got a dry track, but it didn't rain all the time - and that's the good news! As is the fact there's no time travel needed this time, just turn to page 84 where there are more cars and action aplenty - and a few surprises in store as folks continue searching for glory on the quarter mile...



Street or strip, our GT500 looked tough!



Unless noted all b&w photos by John Bennett DragRod courtesy Asphalt Archives

When "Red" Harris drove over from Ramstein for the Big Go in his 283 '55 Chevy, he hooked up his cheater slicks and ran a best of 15.58 at 90mph racing in Street Eliminator, seen here racing Dave Riswick's '57 Chevy. The bad news for the USAF team who'd also made the long drive was they could only race each other! A Sprite and a Semi Hemi, come on! Talk about a bummer, and I did quite vehemently, to no avail! But the Ramstein racers gave it their all, and the fans loved 'em for it - see their action on [Time Travel DVD1](#).

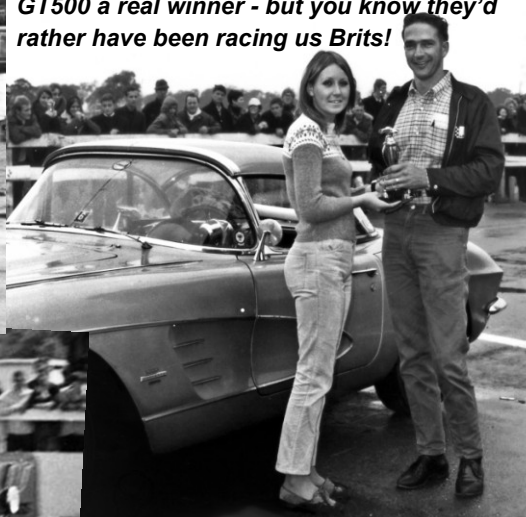
TTDVDS courtesy Dave Riswick

Drag Rod's Brian Sparrow wrote in his race report that "The machinery was actually more technically interesting than the Commando Team's Barracudas and Mustangs," adding "Come again boys when the weather is better, for the show was most competent."

Ramstein colour pix by Brian Sutton
courtesy TimeTravelDVDs

How right he was, these mean muscle cars looked and sounded even better with cheater slicks and open pipes,

but sadly they had too much power for track conditions yet gave fans some really "hairy" racing. Dale Price's 4-4-2 Bounty Hunter ran regular 12-second ETs at Ramstein, but not at the Pod - he ran faster chasing me out of Dover! In the end Al Boucher won in his 315hp fuel-injected Corvette (wearing hub caps through most of the race!), with a string of hole shots, this one in the Final over Tip Franklyn's GT500 a real winner - but you know they'd rather have been racing us Brits!



Juggernaut, my all-time favourite "old" race car gets out on Clive Skilton. We'd become good pals during the year, and when Tip Franklyn suggested I raced his Mustang against the Stingray, Clive jumped at the chance. I was over the moon, excited like you'd never believe. The younger 427, 400 hp GT500 Shelby was a slight favourite over Clive's 1964 Stingray - it was a bitchin' machine, but

the GT500 was something else. More than just lookin' tough, with Tip briefing a as I climbed in beneath a stock roll cage and strapped into its stock 3-point harness, it felt ultra cool. And when I fired the motor it was so much more than any I'd known before, oh boy! Now I was really cranked about racing and maybe beating Clive, but when the lights ran and I slid my foot off the brake nothing happened! So I gave it more gas, then more, and more in milli-seconds, the rpm climbing high on the rev counter, the engine starting to roar - truth dawning as the rear end started to step out, and at last I lifted my finger off the Hurst Line-Loc! What a ride, the Mustang

fishtailing wildly at each shift as I gave pursuit - it was close at the finish line, but Clive had it won from his hole shot. Later when I met up with Tip, in my defence I told him it was the first time I'd ever seen, let alone used, a Line-Loc and my excitement at racing Clive with a real chance of winning got the better of me, he just grinned, told me it was cool, I'd made a good pass, his words made me feel fine.



But the real buzz was chasing down the Stingray, with Tip's GT500 producing my first quarter mile speed over 100mph! Clive more than blew my doors off that day, he was the first person to win both won Comp' Eliminator in his Henry T (so I guess he beat Juggernaut at the top end) and Super Eliminator in his Stingray. He also won the Sports & GT B and the G Street Altered Class Eliminations – whipping me yet again in G/SA! (Elimination data courtesy Trakbytes) A couple of weeks after I'd left the USAF team on the Dover road they invited a team of racers to the Ramstein Auto Club in Germany, insisting that I came as their guest, which did not impress our "big-wigs" but that was their problem! Our BHRA racers were Bootsie and his new Chevy-powered dragster Motovation with the Beadle brothers and John Harrison, Harold Bull with his tiny-but-tough Stripduster with Pam and Derek Metcalfe and Pete Allen's Magnum Opus and Ian Richardson's Moonraker, two of our top bikes. In his famed Drag Racing Almanac for 1968, Mike Doherty hailed our trip as "Another milestone of progress..." But he'd no idea it took us 27 long hours to make the journey, but happily we had much fun - most of the way! However, we were the BHRA then, but it'd changed to BDR&HRA when this DragRod feature came out - the next paragraph is an introduction to it...

"On Sunday October 22nd, 1967, Ramstein's last meeting of the season was visited by a BDR & HRA demonstration team - and the rain. Many competitors, mechanics, spectators, photographers, pressmen and officials were thinking about cancellation. Then along came a kindly, bearded individual nicknamed Jesus. "Hey Jesus," chuckled one of the boys, "Get up the mountain and see what y'can do about the weather!" Mike disappeared for a while, then returned with a grin, "Daddy says it ain't gonna rain no more!" It seems that when the Ramstein racers first saw me at Dover in a shaggy Mongolian sheep skin jacket, my head was haloed by the early morning sun – hence the nickname! And it worked too, with thanks given as our prayers for dry weather were met. In fact it was great day at the races; the dragster-starved GIs thrilled by smoky runs from our rails and bikes. Stripduster set a new track record of 11.4, with Bootsie getting an 11.5 out of his traction-troubled Motovation A/FD, actually setting the slicks afire while trying to use BX10 for traction - much to fans delight.

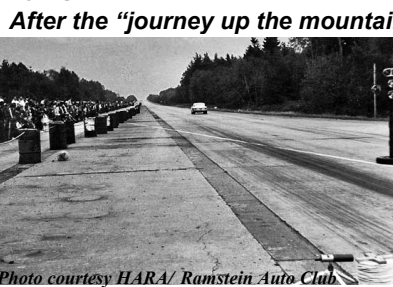


Photo courtesy HARA/ Ramstein Auto Club.

After the "journey up the mountain" I was offered a stock Mustang, fenders emblazoned with the logo "Jesus washes whiter," perhaps taking advantage of the RAC's advertising ban being lifted, albeit slightly tongue in cheek! But first I was sent out to join cars drying the track. All of my previous Mustang rides had featured hi-po shifters, totally unlike the slush-box stick in an unmarked floor-mounted console which I now had. Driving to the back of the pits I tried it out, but no matter where I put the skinny stick the car launched hard when I nailed it, so I cruised up to the start line and asked, "Which way does this shifter go?" The starter was a big guy who just grinned, shaking his head as he said, "Ah don't know, but you go th't a-way," waving me off down the track. So I nailed it, smoking off the line sideways before I realised we were supposed to be taking it easy and, luckily, backed off the throttle. After the pass, I turned back towards pits and was flagged down by the Beadle brothers who both asked together, "Why'd you shift into low going through the traps?" Happily I'd not been running balls out and its trans was tough, but even so - oops! However, divine sponsorship proved little help in the second round of eliminations, when my Mustang was blown away by a lady driving a Rambler! Mind you, it was a good race. I cut a light and put the "Racing for Jesus" car ahead off the line, but the set-up Rambler just blew my doors off. Did I say set up? The Rambler Rebel was factory sponsored! Understandably, this race wasn't mentioned in the Drag Racing Almanac, unlike "local hero Tip Franklin" who won Top Eliminator in his GT500 with a best ET of 13.8 over Dale Price's awesome Bounty Hunter. It also didn't mention that he won the Top Stocker title - twice! Tip raced against a big block Chevrolet with two tenths given to his Ford as per NHRA rules, a handicap which the Chevy owner protested when he lost. Going by the rules, it could've been expensive, but Tip was happy with his winning season, suggesting racing heads up for gold, glory – and the protest fees! The challenge was readily accepted and heartily agreed to by racers and fans, then Tip spun round and said "You're driving Mike, it's another chance to whip a Chevy," throwing me the keys with a chuckle, "And don't screw up this time."

Talk about a dream come true, racing for dollar bills and an NHRA title, and now I knew the car, unlike when I'd raced it at Santa Pod! This time there was no mistake, I got a good half-car hole shot, the Shelby left hard, powering to victory with a high 13 second ET, slower than Tip's, but my first such number, again over 100mph! Yeehaw, an International, NHRA drag race and I won it on a hole shot! Later at the club house our team all got trophies, then after Tip received his awards he called me to the stage, chuckling as he said "I won the Championship but you won the race," adding with a big grin, "And this belongs to you," handing me the tall NHRA badged trophy while I just grinned like a Cheshire cat around, "Wow, thanks Tip!" Wow indeed, what a thrill, the memory still gives me a buzz, 1967 was indeed truly a glory year that I've never forgotten. The only bummer was the lack of mention in DragRod, but that was their problem, and not being able to party hearty as Harold and Derek had been up most of the night working on the race car and needed me to do some driving. No problem, the journey home almost trouble free, a gallon jar of bourbon survived our trip through customs, and I recall getting home, taking a hefty swig, sleeping very late the next day dreaming of my time driving a Pony Express. To this day I give thanks for the good fortune that saw me drive so many young, fresh muscle cars with Captain Robert "Tip" Franklyn's GT500 Shelby topping the power polls in my mind. My time in the orient in the early '60s and those halcyon years of drag racing at the Pod at the end of the '60s were true glory days, and amongst the happiest ever thanks to my rock an' roll pals round the world and my many fine racing friends.

RAMSTEIN

AND JESUS WENT UP THE MOUNTAIN (with apologies to MIKE COLLINS)



Photo courtesy HARA/ Ramstein Auto Club



That's all folks, until next time; take it easy on the bends y'hear!

Mike Collins