

Wall to wall Budweiser!

Words & photos Mike Collins
 from Harlan Thompson Part III
 The Budweiser years
 Re-mixed for Eurodragster
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Eric Sawyer photo

Nancy Bracey, a powerhouse executive who'd taken over marketing of Budweiser across Europe in 1989, knew nothing of drag racing, but when she met Harlan at the Budweiser backed Irish Derby she was more than just impressed with the modest, soft spoken American. Sometime later she visited with the team at the track and was totally in awe at the sound and fury of NitroThunder, naturally! She couldn't believe the noise and acceleration, loved the fact the team were touring US bases, and decided to increase Budweiser's presence at Santa Pod. As we know, drag racing explosions make highlight reels. The UK is no exception, and Harlan's horrific fireballs were featured heavily on primetime TV. However, thanks to Nancy, British drag racing's best ever exposure came about before the season began in 1992, when she managed to get a BBC a crew to visit Harlan's Budweiser team at a pre-race media gig at Santa Pod.

Mind you, she had nothing to do with the finished product, but the powers that be at the Beeb (as the world's biggest and best non commercial TV channel is affectionately known), loved their short film so much they showed it three times each day through the bank-holiday weekend! The clip's well made and its climax is funny, but more than just a good plug for drag racing, I'm sure you'll all agree it was massive for Budweiser! Nancy rang Tuesday morning to thank him, saying "That was great Harlan; you've already made your sponsorship worthwhile." She also sent out a press release stating "Harlan gave us more prime time media exposure than our budget in Europe could ever buy," and also expressing her thanks to Harlan "for giving Anheuser-Busch the opportunity to sponsor the race-car." Wow!



Andy Willsheer photo

Bud signage dominating the Pod and Harlan's unique factory backed two-car fuel coupe team was looking good! Yep, he'd worked some real magic with Anheuser-Busch and Chrysler to get himself a matching pair of fuel coupes! He'd also gained a new Budweiser Drag Series for Santa Pod on top of the long standing Budweiser Cannonball. And the new Budweiser VIP stand was filled with employees and lucky fans thrilled to be so close to the awesome ground pounding NitroPowered action. Despite this step up, Harlan still collected his own nitro from the G-Max store.



Wet weather saw the fuel coupes make one pass each, the quickest two reaching the finals...

After that awesome burnout above Harlan got the hole shot, lifting as his car made a violent move leaving John Spuffard to win his first Budweiser Cannonball in Bob Jarrett's Showtime at 5.96, 224mph. Things were much the same back in 1988 as rain stopped play at Santa Pod's World Finals, but not before the final - Harlan had a half-car hole shot, overpowered the track and got badly out of shape. This time it was Gary Page winning in Bob Jarrett's Showtime with low ET of 5.89 at 229 mph.



For 26 years Harlan's "office" was a blown an' injected fuel coupe, Budweiser happily sponsoring his racing and USO tours from 1983 to 2012, but the Bud decal first appeared in Sweden 1982 with Harlan seen racing Lee Anders' Flygvapnet Datsun.



Photographer unknown courtesy Harlan Thompson



Carlson Drag Photos



Courtesy Harlan Thompson

Happily my plans to return to the UK with Harlan went out the window; I just drove him to the airport and made a quick tour of autumnal New England before returning to life as beach-bum in Bradenton. My babe was over-the-moon (serving me roast dinner while naked!), the weather was glorious, the Jet Ski was oh-so fast and so was my racing at DeSoto! I shot John Force, Gene Snow's 4.99 (the 4th and first outside Texas), Big Daddy driving his Swamp Rat 1 and more! Later, having found out it rained at the Pod it was easy to call my decision spot-on! And so was Harlan's crew on his first Fuel Coupe back in 1970 at Bremerton Raceway who suggested trying for a "Best Appearing Crew" award and won with this really outrageous kit - can you imagine it in colour? His 1970 ex-Jerry "The King" Ruth Camaro was cool, and so was his 1986 Bud car - good lookin' but it gave them a bunch of problems though! However, to the fan's delight, it always made ground pounding burnouts like this before it quit! Talking of which, enjoy Hot Gossip 'cos I'm outta here 'til next time. MC



Eric Sawyer photo