



Driving across the USA was pure NitroNirvana. My lifelong dream of driving across the USA had fulfilled, heading west across the plains then over the Rockies to Los Angeles – just like the pioneers, but far easier in a Dodge wagon; no problem really, just chase the sunset and hang a left at the Pacific! All the while horsepower visions crept into my mind as for the past 21 years it'd been my desire to visit the site of the NHRA's first official sanctioned event in 1953 - Pomona! It'd long been home to their Winternationals and, since 1984, the season ending Winston Finals. The battle for the 1987 Top Fuel title was set to go to the wire so I was like a kid in a candy store especially seeing this stunning vista for real - talk about mind blowing, and when they fired the first pair I almost wept with joy...

words & photos
mike collins

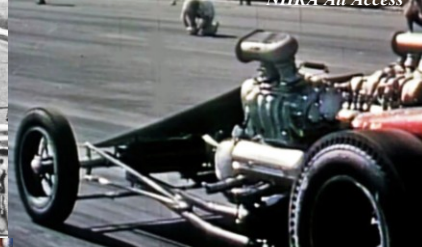


Ready to race local hero Dale Pulde in Bill Schultz's In-N-Out Burger car, Mike Dunn and Joe Pisano's gorgeous 280mph Olds (Ennis, Tx), set Top Speed with a second 280mph pass. Original hand-spliced shot morphed on with Photoshop - Fuel Coupes forever!

Pomona 1953, the NHRA's Southern California Championship Drags



mcSnip courtesy
NHRA All Access



1961 at the first NHRA's Winternats, Jack Chrisman and the Howard's Cam Special twin blown Chevy dragster won Top Eliminator with an 8.99 at 170.13, kinda different to the scenes below!



Charlie Allen in classic 1966 FX action
photo courtesy [the Magnetic Brain](#)

Eyes left from Dick LaHaie as Fred Forkner reaches for the sky



Another of Hawaiian Henry's shots from Pomona '66, Charlie Allen's injected Mopar FX car with a full set of matching 5-spoke Cragar rims - very cool as the Cragar Top Fuel classic final is seen later! But first legendary fuel coupes unleash a face full of wide open NitroPower as Ed "the Ace" McCulloch chases Don "the Snake" Prudhomme's hole-shot – it was pure ground shaking bliss!



The sport's first two and 3-time NHRA Top Fuel champion Shirley Muldowney takes out Gary Orsmy. Joe Amato won the quickest, fastest race ever, 5.110, 283.73 to Dick LaHaie's 5.124, 281.07 in Cragar's Weld Wheel Top Fuel Classic final – and \$50,000 for just three rounds of racing, no wonder he's so stoked!



But Dick LaHaie won NHRA's 1987 Winston Top Fuel title in front of a quarter mile of fans as Joe smoked 'em in the semi-finals!



mcSnip courtesy
NHRA All Access

Night time racing in California is always awesome! NHRA's 1987 Speed record was Eddie Hill's 285.89. Alongside is 1978 Winternats winner Frank Bradley



Sadly Dick LaHaie passed away December 5th. A fuel car racer since 1964, he won three UDRA championships in the '70s and a first NHRA title in 1980. With daughter Kim as crew chief in 1982 they won the Winternats and 13 more titles, five in 1987 en route to his Winston title. But not at Pomona, losing to Darrell Gwynn (who gave us a 5.09 track record!), took a 2nd straight win, [below right](#). Incredibly LaHaie also won back-to-back Winston titles as crew chief, for Scott Kalitta in 1993, '94 and Larry Dixon 2001, '02 for the Snake. But to see Team LaHaie race was always a thrill. God speed



This image & portrait courtesy Dragster Insider



More mountain magic soon, but now it's back to NitroThunder in 1968.

On Saturday 19th October we invaded Silverstone's BRDC Clubman's Championship, sponsored by John Player's Gold Leaf for whom I'd put together some lunchtime track action that press releases billed as "one of the high lights, a display and demonstration with 12 of Britain's most powerful and spectacular cars." To this day I believe we lived up to their expectaions, especially on track, but our show was kinda cool too as I hope you'll agree. Rob and Pete Skinner's Jag' powered Buckler (400 made!), Midas Touch stood first in line, its stovepipe headers and a wicked rake to its motor enough to turn any head, the team among the first with dedicated T shirts! Taking about 18months to build, it cost between £250-£300 and gave best numbers of 13.1 and 104.9mph - imagine that today! In contrast was Reuben Johnson's Colin Mullan driven Invader - it looks



Andy Craddock photo courtesy TTDVDS

tough just parked up, even in black and white. But in real life, when they lifted the lid on our first flip-top, funny car style Vauxhall Viva coupe with its wild candy tangerine paint job and an engine bay filled with a genuine 392 hemi and a fat 4bbl carb it was awesome, especially the first time! Next door is a bit of Harold Bull's Stripduster, sorry 'bout that, but the B&M team did win Best of Show from the Gold Leaf gals!



Unless noted, all Silverstone photos BBLF Photographer's unknown asphalt archives



Derek Metcalfe's wild induction system on B & M's Strip Star was kinda outrageous, but it worked!

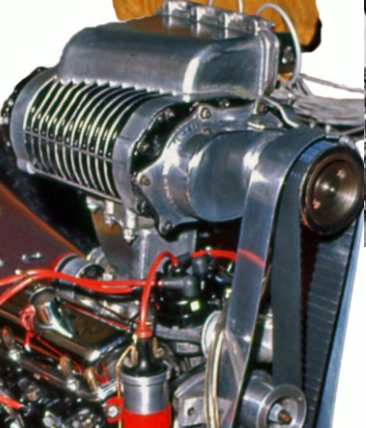


Photo courtesy Gold Leaf

Loaded with all the good stuff, Speedworld International said Don Davis' Bandit Pop "...held a 425bhp Pontiac unit under its bonnet" (balanced by Jack Brabham), and ran "over 120mph in a quarter of a mile dash," and street legal all the way to working turn indicators making me lust for a trip down Baker Street in it. But today that kinda thing just doesn't happen - well, not quite as often anyway!



jbPix DragRod



jbPix DragRod



Photo courtesy Marshall/Dickson Racing

Being in the USAF gave Don a bitchin' ride with access to the best parts at the right price!

As the statute of limitations has run out I can recall Marshall/Dickson's Olds powered Good Vibrations Pop being road tested south of London - on track it was fast, but on that leafy suburban street it was truly awesome, and hastily put away inside the lock-up j'ist in case! Back at Silverstone Freddie Whittle's Chevy powered Shutdown' sat close by - even in B&W it gleams! Sadly, my colour shots of this classic example of his superb body work in candy red were in the 750GB lost in the ozone couple years back. Same for Tony Brown's Jaguar Limelight, with my mind recalling

Here's Freddie tuning his twin fours for JB's camera.

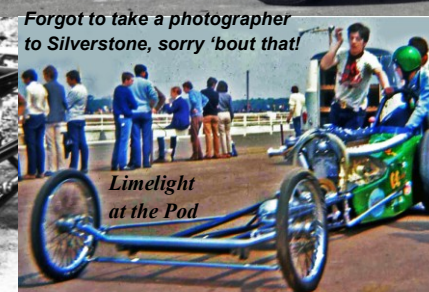


jbPix DragRod

a wild paint job matching its name, but the cavalry came to the rescue! Thanks to Nick Pettitt we've more colour (at left below), from his vast Time Travel archives, a must to visit for nostalgia freaks!



jbPix DragRod



Limelight at the Pod

Forgot to take a photographer to Silverstone, sorry 'bout that!

Nigel Dodd photo courtesy Nick Pettitt



Vic Heffer photo courtesy ttdvds

As I said in 1968, Gold Rush still seems like it's got a hangover with its "new red windows." Pat & Chris Church's Pop is tough parked up, but its built 289 Mustang (twin Carter AFB's and Engle full race cam), crammed back as far as regs agave a best of 12.8 at 110mph when in action. Talking of which, it's time to hit the track as yours truly tries to make a stylish entrance with Ric in his Mustang...

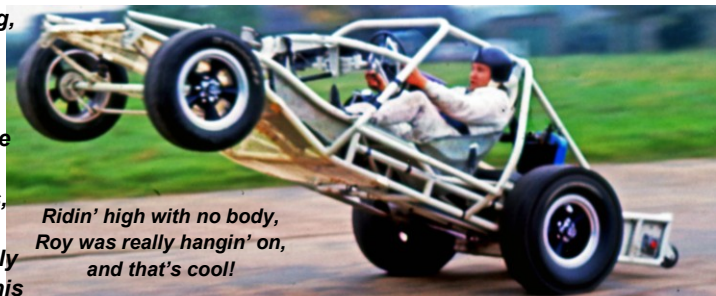


Brian Sutton photo
courtesy TTDVDS



Many folks had heard the sirens as we'd entered, and many stood watching our gold chariot as we drove into the circuit, some race cars slowing as they cruised by, one driver offering "That sounds really cool..." And it did too, a few young ladies almost running, even stroking the car's flanks as they moved alongside, "Wow," Ric chuckled, "it's just like being a movie star and some of those chicks are so damned hot, boy let's go have some fun..." Which was cool, but first I had to check the show cars out, and as you've just seen it appeared things were indeed looking good, although they were still busy working on the Commuter, but it was easy to park the Mustang, leaving Ric to chat with a couple of really hot babes as I walked deeper into the VIP area where I was met with, "What time d'you call this then?" Normally that voice would've carried some authority, but not today.

"Beg your pardon?" "You told us what time to get here and now you roll up a couple of hours later," hands on his hips and adding, "What's going on?" "Well for starters, we're paying you guys to be here, there were marshalls to tell everyone where to go, and they've done a great job," chuckling around, "Besides you needed that time to prepare your car," standing tall before adding, "Now if you'll excuse me gentlemen, I'm just going to check our time table, so let's hope you have things ready soon," turning, walking off briskly, laughing inside but feeling a tad concerned perhaps, and with good reason as Commuter, its big 427 completely torn down after the last race, was still in its transporter, crossing my fingers, waving at the crew and walking by with a smile, getting big grins and thumbs up as Peter and Tony made what I hoped were some final adjustments! Another completely rebuilt machine was the Stingray, now with a clear plastic belly pan to aid Roy's nose-high rides, and as practice makes perfect a lucky few saw him making a some check out passes with reports of many lengthy wheelstands boding well for our show. Sadly our other AAFD Tudor Rose sat silent on the other side of big Dunlop arch, Dennis and Rex really upset that their fueler would only be looked at all day. but with its wrecked front wheel from Rex's 183mph record run at the Pod and a blown head gasket, they'd opted to leave the rail as a no go showboat for the day. Moving on, the Hustler team loomed ahead, their 427 rat motor looking naked without its pair of 4bbl carbs, but they said they'd be ready in time, so I moved on up to the VIP lounge where the Gold Leaf gang were over the moon with our cars and shortly later they fired Commuter, filling the air with the sound of blown and injected thunder, albeit slightly subdued, but wide-eyed faces positively lit up the room, although someone, probably a circuit racer offered "Don't sound very loud mate!"

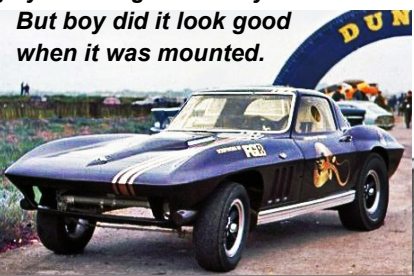


Ridin' high with no body, Roy was really hangin' on, and that's cool!

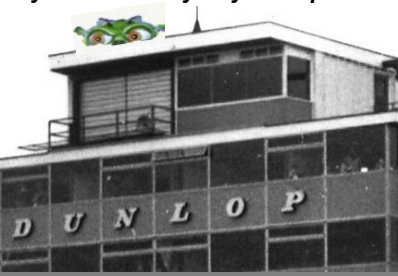
It was easy to laugh as I said, "They're just warming it up folks, no wasting fuel 'cos Nitro's expensive," smiling at at the strange looks appearing on some faces at the word Nitro! About then the Gold Leaf PR man moved in with our schedule - we'd two spots to fill, 15 minutes followed by an aerobatic display then five minutes before the main race began. "Spot on one thirty Mike," my PR pal adding, "No matter what!" Patting me on the shoulder, chuckling around, "Come and meet the team an' have a quick drink before the fun begins." Checking my Omega and noticing we had about 45minutes, I did just that, and enjoyed meeting Mr Big, but even more so the bevy of Gold Leaf gals. After a short while talk turned to our show and when the Gold Leaf folks told me how much they'd loved it when Commuter "made some noise," it was easy to agree she'd get things started, "But if you're on the start line don't get too close 'cos it's kinda fearsome the first time," chuckling before adding, "But it's totally awesome too!" They also loved our Pops so I said we'd run 'em side-by-side which brought more big grins, and then one of the suits asked about the "Skinny car with the supercharger on top," so Strip Star was slotted in next. With my suggestion that the "Stingray makes a couple of passes to close the segment," being met with affirmative mumbles and nodding heads as they returned to their beverages. So it was easy to say thanks, take a final hit on mine, leaving to take care of business, and was soon laughing out loud on hearing Rico had been "press ganged" into the Stingray crew to get the body on - at the heavy end with only Roy to help!



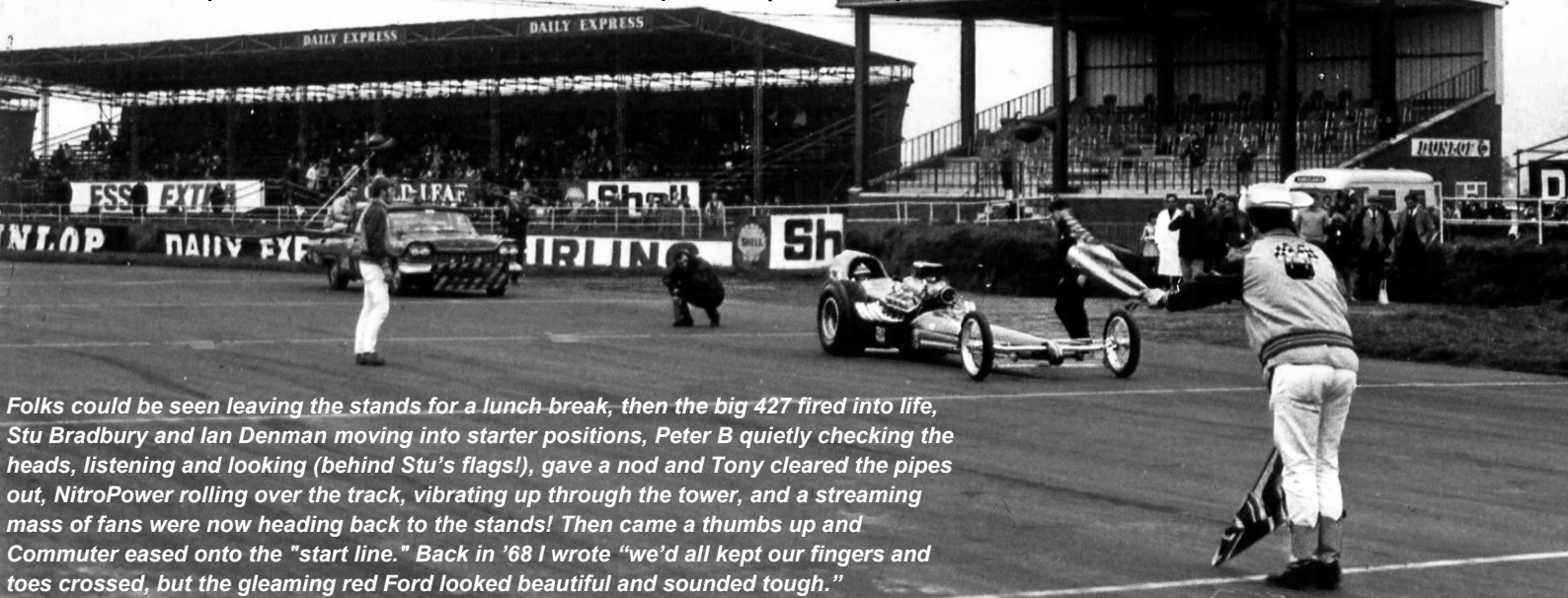
jbPix DragRod



But boy did it look good when it was mounted.



It wasn't long before Roy was suited up, time to move out, heading for my booth up high to get the show on the road. The empty stand under the tower was kinda expensive; the main stands behind Stu were packed! Spot on one pm FGR's Plymouth pushed Commuter onto the track...



Folks could be seen leaving the stands for a lunch break, then the big 427 fired into life, Stu Bradbury and Ian Denman moving into starter positions, Peter B quietly checking the heads, listening and looking (behind Stu's flags!), gave a nod and Tony cleared the pipes out, NitroPower rolling over the track, vibrating up through the tower, and a streaming mass of fans were now heading back to the stands! Then came a thumbs up and Commuter eased onto the "start line." Back in '68 I wrote "we'd all kept our fingers and toes crossed, but the gleaming red Ford looked beautiful and sounded tough."

Then Tony dropped the clutch, unleashing NitroThunder, eight trucks trumpeting, but there was no smoke! Then about five yards out the slicks lit and a rooster tail of smoke went up, Stu Bradbury stunned by the spectacle of a wall of unsuspecting circuit fans looking totally mind blown from their baptism by NitroPower! That magic moment when Tony Densham whacked the throttle often comes to mind, all the fans forgetting about burgers and flooding back into the stands to witness his powerful ground pounding display – it was totally awesome



Photo courtesy Speedworld International

Speedworld International wrote, "At this point Silverstone customers were treated to a few breathtaking moments of "Drag Power" laid on by the British Drag Racing & Hot Rod Association, conducted over the loudspeaker system by Mike Collins, who spoke of ponies with great affection and explained the explosive demonstration."

BBLF Photographer unknown asphalt archives

"One of the gems of Drag, the sleek Commuter, disappeared in a cloud of dark tyre smoke. A cowboy-dressed, double-flagged waver jumped with approval as Commuter left the base of Woodcote, passed the grandstand and the post office, baling out just before the bridge and coming to rest at Copse." Love the thought of a fuel dragster blasting past a post office - even without the capital letters! The Bandit, turn signals flashing and huge slicks sticking out at the rear made the red Pop seem quite staid – until fans saw the back seat driver in Good Vibrations! They got a flag start, didn't make much smoke, but moved out rapidly getting way out of shape and kissing close to the delight of the fans, making hasty U turns at the top of the pit straight with both of 'em twitching wildly on the way back. Fans gave Tony Densham some deserved applause as Commuter was pushed back, then Derek Metcalfe gave fans a quick blip on the loud pedal on his noisy little Strip Star, popped a wheelie and was gone. Next out was the Stingray and Roy staged up on the line, got the flag and the front end rose all the way back onto the castors before moving out cruising past the grandstands high on two wheels, down the straight,



Photo courtesy Gold Leaf



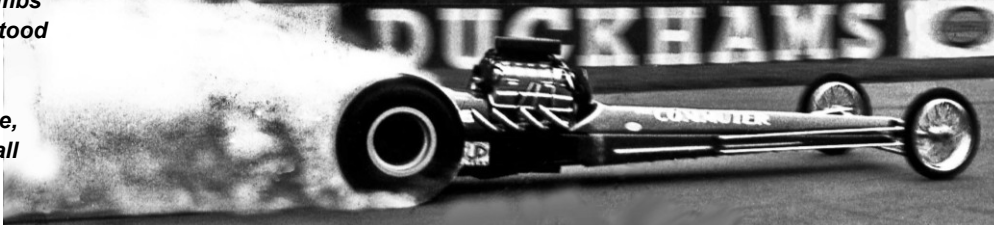
Colin Taylor photo courtesy Speedworld

sliding back down to earth, turning slowly before the bridge and moving back to the start area lifting high again on the shift and rolling back. It was seven minutes past one, we'd run out of programme and still had eight minutes left! Hustler and Gold Rush were hurriedly called' out, moved rapidly to the line, got flagged off with the big 427 Chevy really laying down some smoke as they stormed away. Then the Pop lit 'em up, got sideways and really close to Hustler which in turn got out of shape and real close to the pit wall -fans loved it!

jbPix DragRod



The Bandit and Good Vibrations made a side-by-side two way pass and we still had time left! A call was put out for the Stingray, Roy Phelps leapt into the driver's seat, storming up to the line, waited a few seconds then lifted her slowly all the way back to the castors before a series of short slow lifts down the straight, turning at the bridge and returned, staged up then punched hard and loud, all the way back to the castors, punching it hard again halfway down and spun her out like he'd been born to it as another announcer moved in to take over. The hamburger stands were empty and we had a 10 minute break before our last spot, no problem, we all needed breather. Back then I suggested "the gorgeous Gold Leaf girls wanted to see Commuter run again;" In truth it was Mr Big who sent me the call to "Please can you bring the Commuter back out again." The crew said okay, getting busy packing the 'chute and checking out the mill, and after 10 minutes of stunt flying we were ready to roll. The big Ford moved onto the line, Peter B gave a thumbs up, Stu made a wild leap waving his flags and Tony stood loud, lighting 'em up like an AA fuel dragster should, thundering into the straight, got crossed up about 50 yards out, getting so close to the pit wall it wasn't true, lifting and then back on the power again, smoking it all the way to the bridge before popping the 'chute. The Stingray came back out, pleasing the fans again on a



two-way pass, but before he'd returned to the grid the circuit cars were already rolling out. It was over, 14 short minutes in a 7-hour programme, but with Commuter's black trails burnt the length of the straight you knew they'd not forget the day NitroPower was unleashed at Silverstone in a hurry. The memory still brings a big grin as things got kinda wild for Ric and I as the Gold Leaf girls were impressed with everything we'd done, even more so when Big Mr came and thanked us personally! After the prize giving it was party time and what with Gold Leaf gals and our usual supply of Colt 45 strength, it truly was a Silverstone Spectacular. It had been a big year for Gold Leaf in circuit racing, and sometime later my PR pal phoned offering a sponsorship deal, saying that the whole team had been "incredibly impressed" with Commuter's stunning display of NitroThunder - thought our other cars were amazing and wanted to get involved! It was easy to suggest a race series; they offered "Banners, Gold Leaf and the babes, stacks of publicity, maybe TV..." What a buzz! When I told the powers that be, basically they said Foxtrot Oscar to the idea; they didn't even want to talk about it! Oh well, like I said, big time would've, could've and should've... Talking of which, if we'd not taken so much space you'd have read of our unique finale – next time folks, an' you'll never guess what it involves!

"Hey Mike," Ric chuckled, "Don't forget you're still designated driver!" Shortly later he and the boss babe left, with me as chaperone!

Photos courtesy Gold Leaf

