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THE UNSPOKEN CODE OF CHIVALRY AMONG DRAG RACERS

by Gretchen Lutz



At a typical race among “outlaw” pro mod drag racers, spectators see relentless competition among perennial rivals. During warm weather months, fans gather at local drag strips to see the show put on by Texas Outlaw Racing, an organization of pro mod racers. To the observer, it appears that a racer is single-minded in his or her need to beat the car in the other lane. And that is true. But that is not the whole truth. What the fan does not see is how the racers interact with one another before and after that four-second-pass down the track. Until the moment the tree goes to green, the typical pro mod racer will do anything he can to make a fellow racer’s car go faster. An unspoken code of chivalry informs the way racers behave toward one another, creating an enigmatic, even genteel brotherhood that the unrestrained speed, power, and dazzle of the sport belie.

To the spectators, the pro mods are indeed outlaw racers, not being restricted by the rules imposed on bracket racers or even on the pro stocks. Pro mods can run with nitrous oxide, with blowers, with extreme scoops, or with outrageous wings, the functional features exaggerated by flamboyant paint jobs. With only the restrictions for safety and the requirement that the cars be “door slammers”—that is to say, have two doors—anything else goes. Some racers play up this outlaw business by racing under nicknames, such as Madman and Bounty Hunter, almost reminiscent of the WWF.

To the spectator, the outlaw nature of this brand of racing might imply that racers are sworn enemies, intent on doing anything to see the other car come in second. And for the four seconds that the opponents make their pass, that is true. What the spectator does not see, however, is how the racers treat each other

in the times before and after the actual pass. Before the tree light goes to green, a typical outlaw pro mod racer will give his time, his advice, his expertise, his equipment, his tools, his sweat, and sometimes even his blood to make another racer's car go faster.

For all the super-trick technology and the awe-inspiring speeds, the typical pro mod drag race appeals in much the same way as the knightly tournament appealed, with the racers fulfilling the role of knights. Much as the well-configured steed was essential to a knight's success, for the racer the car is his all, trumping all personal, human desires in an effort to perfect the machine. To echo ZZ Top, the racers themselves, despite the showbiz swagger some appropriate, live their real lives in relative humility, adhering to the motto: "Let the machine speak."

Although each race car is a unique creation made especially for racing and not at all for the street, racers invariably make their cars appear to be modified stock cars, ones that might have been displayed on a showroom floor. Although pro mod racing would allow fully fanciful door slammers as creations of an individual's imagination, in actual practice the race cars look familiar, offering a nostalgic connection to the past for racers and fans alike, reminding them perhaps of a beloved family car, the car one first learned to drive, that first new car, or maybe even the longed-for dream car. At a national NHRA race, one will see scores of '69 Camaros. The '63 Corvette is also popular, as is the '53 Corvette. Though there is no real reason for it other than personal taste, approximately ninety percent of the Texas Outlaw Racing organization drivers race GM models. Despite having the option to have cars that look like nothing at all familiar, there is a sort of heraldry in place, a system whereby the racer says who he or she is by means of the apparent make and model of the car and the signature paint job.

Fans flock to their favorite kind of car, vicariously attaching to themselves the qualities and virtues of that particular car. Oddly, the driver himself is rather irrelevant. Once, at an NHRA national race I observed a car crash. The driver, a man known throughout the country for making beautiful car bodies, what the racers call simply "the car," walked away, and as he was leaving the track, the

announcer asked the fans to give him a hand, declaring: "He is a credit to the kind of car he makes."

When I first attended a drag race as a guest of a racer, I was surprised to see that during the hour between the passes, during that short time the racer and crew have to "thrash" on the cars before making the next pass, racers visit one another in the pits, offering advice, parts, and tools, and working on the other person's car, even the very person who will be in the next lane. I have seen racers give fairly expensive consumable parts to an opponent. I have seen racers get sweaty, dirty, and bloody thrashing on the opposition's car. For the racers, making the car go faster trumps all other considerations, even if it is someone else's car.

During the time the racers are away from the track, it is not at all unusual for some of them to meet together to do what is called "bench racing," getting together to talk about racing, with the underlying theme always to make the car go faster. During the workweek, racers communicate by phone and on the Internet in private email or on the racing organizations' bulletin boards, offering advice, answering another racer's questions, and occasionally reliving past races. Sometimes on the various organizations' web sites there may be some "smack talk" about how a racer will beat another, but the emphasis is always on who has the better car, not on the character or even the driving skills of another racer. The unspoken code of chivalry dictates that one not speak ill of another racer personally.

And as a result of quite a few trips to the races as the guest of a veteran pro mod racer, Tommy Adams [name changed at the request of the actual driver], I decided that the general public should know how racers interact with one another during the time they are not roaring down the track. To do a little last minute research, I met my racer friend at Lonestar Raceway Park in Sealy, Texas, where he was competing in the sixth annual state championship.

It was a perfect day for racing, moderate with low humidity. We expected fast times, and we were right. My friend qualified, and while he was thrashing on the car for the first round of competition, I walked through the pits, observing racers helping each

other out. A few racers, who had their cars adjusted to their satisfaction, walked from race car to race car, doing a little bench racing and offering help and advice to their fellows who were still thrashing to prepare for the next round.

My friend suggested that I go to the starting line to observe. The racers lining up in the starting lane would shake hands with their competitor and make calm small talk, sometimes about past races, occasionally about the condition of the car, frequently about the trip traveling to the track—all sorts of racing-related talk except the one subject they never discuss: the upcoming pass for which they are lining up.

When racer Adams got to the starting line, he began the rituals I had seen so often. First was the burn out, prepping the slicks so that they keep traction with the track. Then a crew member gestured him forward to the line. He expelled the nitrous and waited for the tree to go to green. When the tree went to green, Tommy got the hole shot as they say, meaning he was the first off the line. For about four seconds the cars howled down the track. Then right after the times (the e.t.a.'s) went up on the boards at the end of the track, the car in the right-hand lane crossed the center line and clipped the rear of my friend's '69 Camaro. The Camaro leapt into the air, rotating five times as it spun toward the field to the right of the track. When the car came down, it was crumpled beyond recognition but had not burst into flames.

The ambulance crew got to Tommy quickly. He had no serious lacerations or apparent broken bones; moreover, he was conscious. Following a crash like that, though, medical personnel were adamant that the driver be checked for head injuries. After opening up the wreckage with the jaws of life, the EMTs extricated my friend and put him on a stretcher and into an ambulance. During all this, the other racers and their crews had gathered.

Suddenly the focus was no longer on the car but upon the driver. The racers started talking about Tommy, commenting that he had been driving that '69 Camaro since he bought the prototype street car from a dealer back in 1969. One crew member of

another racer asked me what Tommy did in his life outside of racing, what he did for a living, what family he had, what his life was like off the track. Everyone was telling a Tommy Adams story, sharing some memory of Tommy's long career.

After the EMTs determined that Tommy should be Life-Flighted to Hermann Hospital in Houston, some sixty miles away, the focus returned to the car. Tommy's crew chief was concerned about putting the mangled Camaro back into the trailer. Immediately, other racers and their crews started volunteering to help pick up the pieces and to get it all put back into Tommy's trailer for the trip home. One racer assured me that he would see to it that the car would get back to Tommy's home near Dallas, some 250 miles away. He urged me to drive to the hospital where Tommy was being transported by helicopter. The crew chief was going to stay with the demolished car and trailer and would drive it back. The racers had come to Tommy's aid, postponing the racing until both Tommy and his car were taken care of.

I drove east on I-10, getting into the sort of heavy traffic that Houston's Katy Freeway is known for. In a little over two hours I arrived at the hospital, where I was allowed in to see Tommy. When I approached and started asking how he was, Tommy stopped me, saying, "Did I win?" Despite all that had transpired and the possibility of death, to Tommy, the race was still the point. As it turned out, I told him, he had won. By that time the racer had become irritable because he had not yet been seen by a doctor and was still strapped into the head harness that the EMTs had put on him to keep him stable. It seemed that seventeen other patients had been brought by helicopter that night. I told Tommy that it was a good sign that he had not been seen by the doctor yet. That meant that the triage nurse had checked him over and decided his injuries were not life-threatening.

While we waited for the doctor, word came to us from the reception desk that Tommy's family was insisting to know what his condition was, having called the hospital's administrative offices. This news was puzzling and a bit disturbing in as much as Tommy

had no immediate family. We later learned that the wife of one of the racers back at the track was using the family ploy to get information about Tommy's condition. She knew that the hospital would give out information to the immediate family only. Shortly after the mysterious call from the alleged family had come, several of the racers phoned me on my cell phone to check on Tommy. The racer whose car had clipped Tommy was absolutely beside himself. Everyone was saying that if there was anything they could do, they were ready.

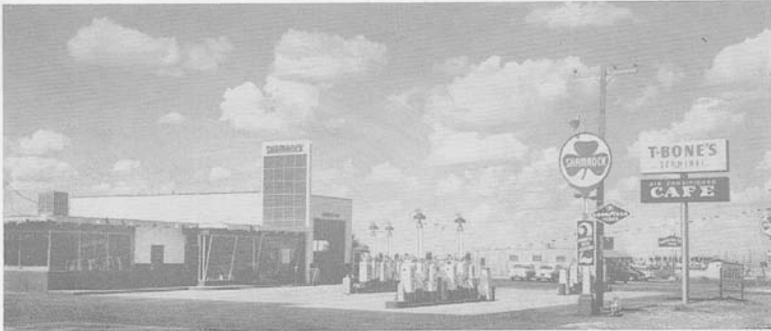
Finally, the doctor came. X-rays showed our racer had some broken ribs but no other damage to his body. He was still experiencing dizziness, so the doctor decided to keep him in the hospital for observation. In the meantime, the crew chief had arrived with the trailer and the wreckage. He had had to park quite a distance away, at the Hermann Park Zoo parking lot, to find a place anywhere near the hospital large enough for the truck and trailer. When he found his racer was going to have to stay the night, he set out to find a hotel, again with the problem of finding a place that could accommodate trailer and truck.

Tommy stayed in the hospital for another day while an ear, nose, and throat specialist monitored the dizziness. The ENT doctor concluded that the otoliths, tiny "ear rocks" in the inner ear, had been dislodged, not unlike what happens when one turns over a snow globe. The dislodged otoliths were causing the dizziness. By the time Tommy got back from seeing the doctor, flowers had come from the family of one of the competing racers. Once in a regular room, Tommy was visited by a television celebrity, Dr. Red Duke, who was followed by an entourage of young doctors making rounds. Dr. Duke asked what had happened, and then the doctor and the racer engaged in talk about, what else? Racing. It seems that the famous doctor was a fan of motor sports, too.

By the time Tommy was ready to make the drive back to Dallas, he learned that his fellow racers had organized a fund-raiser to compensate him for the time he was going to have to lose from his business. Racers had donated goods and services for a raffle to be

held the following week at the next race. Texas Outlaw Racing's website publicized the raffle, as more racers and fans contributed prizes and bought tickets. On Monday a week after the crash, racers gathered at Tommy's machine shop business to give him the funds they had raised on his behalf. For a change, the car was not the main thing. The human racer was. Racers came together without talking about it or thinking it over much in advance. They did what needed to be done for a fellow racer. And that is how it is among the outlaw racers on the pro mod circuit.

Now Tommy is gradually putting the pieces of his old race car together to make a new one. After thirty-four years of the '69 Camaro, Tommy is fitting his old chassis inside the body of a '53 Studebaker, thereby resurrecting his racing life, made possible in no small part by the chivalrous behavior of his fellow racers.



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