

Where There's Smoke, There's Tire

Sometimes happiness requires only a blown retread and a corn dog

Story and photography by Mark Vaughn



Sure, there's opening night at the Met, Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon, and the Nobel dinner in Stockholm, but, really, wouldn't you rather go to Smoky Tire Burnout Night at the Orange Show Speedway in San Bernardino?

Sure you would. And you'd stick around for the flamethrower contest afterward, too, just like us.

In this complicated world where you have to update your software more often than you fill your tank with gas and where a nickel cup of coffee now comes in 42 flavors and costs \$5, a smoky tire burnout contest cleanses the soul. It's simple: The guy who spins his rear tires for the longest time wins.

Competitors drive up,

linelock the front wheels and step on the gas. The rear wheels spin and then the smoke starts—smoke, smoke, smoke, smoke. White clouds pile high like billowing cumulous on a summer day, the California Air Resources Board be damned. One guy lasted 14 minutes and chewed all the way through the Speedway's asphalt, his dually coming to rest on its axle. That was the exception, and that man will be held up in smoky tire burnout lore as a hero for years to come, his legend passed from generation to generation. But in most cases one of the rear tires simply wears to the steel belt, showering sparks behind, then explodes with a satisfying "Kablam!" The crowd cheers.

We saw Smoky Tire

Burnout Night listed in a local calendar of events. It's put on by the Over the Hill Gang, a hot rod club. We'd seen the event listed before, along with its brother event, the flamethrower contest, where raw gas is fed out the exhaust, ignited by an exhaust-mounted spark plug, and sent into the atmosphere in a Promethean plume of glory sure to please CARB. We had to go. The trip to 'Berdoo, 90 minutes east of Los Angeles, was well worth it.

Like most satisfying evenings, this one included dinner. Specifically, one very fine corn dog with loads of oozing ketchup squirted from a plastic bottle that looked like it had been sitting at the Orange Show Speedway's snack bar since

the '70s. It was delicious, the perfect melding of sugar and grease, of outer crunchiness and inner nutrition, like the competitors themselves, the hardscrabble exterior belying an inside of pure beef byproducts. Squirt the ketchup in a swirl pile atop the dog, crunch, chew, repeat. It was so good we forgot to ask for a receipt. If we were restaurant critics, we'd point out that there was only Pepsi to drink. "No Coke," said Rusty, our corn dog proprietor. "Hey, I'd like a Coke," he said, shaking his head at the unjustice of whatever backdoor deal was cut to eliminate choice for the Speedway's clientele.

Satisfied, we moved up the tunnel entrance to the Speedway, eager to see this wheeled art form. But all the

tunnels were blocked by fans, so popular was this event. Later, the crowd would be estimated at 4000, just about the entire north grandstand at the Speedway. Truly Smoky Tire Burnout Night was a big deal.

So we found the nicest security person in California, a lady who looked like someone's mom, and talked our way into a pit pass. Imagine one of Bernie's goons even being polite, let alone believing you.

And then there they were, lined up like the chariots in *Ben Hur* (more or less): Chevelles, Mustangs, pickup trucks, an El Camino, a ratty Galaxy 500, a race Pinto, a Volvo. It was run what ya' brung.

Torrance Flickinger of Redlands spent \$85 on a tire for this event. Just one tire, on the right rear of his '94 Dodge Dakota. He'd drive home on what was left of the left rear. The truck still sported the "Pizza Pirates" logo, the firm for which he delivers pizza. Was he sponsored by Pizza Pirates, we asked?

"No way," he said. "The guy who owns it, I mean, he's a really nice guy, but he doesn't like to spend money." (Dude, Torrance just got the name "Pizza Pirates" in a national magazine, cut loose with some pizza money.)

Had he set up the truck for this competition, other than the tire?

"I'm pretty sure it's got a limited-slip differential," said Torrance.

Kory Merrill drove his '98 Dodge Ram truck in from Riverside for the Burnout. Why?

"It's the thrill from the crowd," he said, the excitement still evident in his voice from his burnout minutes before. "When you first start out, your leg's shaking from nervousness, but when

you hear that roar from the crowd..."

He shakes his head, smiling.

"One guy one year went all the way around the track doing a burnout, it was the greatest thing I've ever seen."

Then we meet Steve Cook, the man who ground the dually into the pavement. Cook is not only a master at the tire burnout, but holds the Speedway record in the rollover competition (there's a rollover competition??), at three and a half rolls, and is the defending demolition derby champ. We sense we are in the presence of greatness.

"I live for racin'," he says.

What's his technique for burnout greatness?

"There's no technique," he says. Wow.

Paul Hattrup put a small-block Chevy in his 1970 Volvo 242 DL and a stout set of Michelin tires on the wheels. From Hattrup, we learn there are two basic kinds of competition, actually, the timed runs, and "freestyle." Freestyle is just what it sounds like, competitors fly all over the Speedway's

Torrance Flickinger changes his \$85 tire (right). The Galaxy cabrio (far right) sported a "For Sale" sign. And of course, the perfect evening was capped off with the traditional flamethrower contest.

paved infield, squirreling and squealing their cars to the delight of the crowd. It's the crowd's cheers that determine the winner of the freestyle competition. Hattrup was a Volvo technician for 29 years, and has this down to a controlled science. His technician's acumen means he approaches burnouts almost as if he was in a laboratory. While a freestyle competitor behind him slides all over the infield like a caged, frightened weasel, Hattrup sniffs, "I do it with a lot more control than that."

And he does, the mighty small-block muffled and the hard Michelin tires wearing forever but giving off less smoke. The crowd claps politely. Then Frank Ochoa's 5.0-liter Mustang roars to life and squeals right from its parking spot and doesn't stop roaring and squealing for five minutes, spinning around and around until it disappears in its own tire smoke, the headlights shining intermittently through the smoke

like an automotive light-house turning in its own fog. Ochoa wins.

"Pedal to the metal and turn the wheels," he says later.

The flamethrower contest is more subdued. It, too, is judged by the crowd, with five cars lined up, tailpipes aimed at the stands, belching pure fire in violation of every emissions law ever written since the EPA was formed decades ago.

Chris Sandquist wins it in his '68 Sedan DeVille, using a flamethrower conversion kit he bought at the Pomona Swap Meet for \$100.

"I'm young and stupid," he says.

We are not psychologists, sociologists nor any other kind of gists, so we cannot give the underlying reason for such a strong human response to this phenomenon. We only know that we want to go to the next one, with a bunch of friends, and a cooler. And maybe a set of used Wilderness ATs... ■

