



A Day in the Life (Near LA): Top Fuel Drag Boat Racing

THE INSIDE STORY

Story and Photos: Dave Wolin



The other day Lou Osman, owner of the Speed Sport Top Fuel Hydro* team and a friend of ours for many years, called to let us know that he'd be at the Lucas Oil Drag Boat Series opener at Lake Ming the next weekend.

Lake Ming is a scenic 104 acre man-made lake on the Kern River just east of Bakersfield. Owned and operated by Kern County, it's a great camping and picnic spot that comes alive once a year with the sights and sounds of 10,000 horsepower top fuel drag boats, along with a full field of alcohol fueled and gasoline powered boats.

Osman and the Speed Sport team have been involved in boat racing for close to 50 years now and have competed in the Top Fuel category for the last 30. And if anyone has this sport dialed in, it's these guys.



The team has 5 hard fought world championships under their belt with adversity to match. They endured a calamitous boat destroying crash a few years back, only to have a tornado destroy their St. Louis area shop the next year, taking no prisoners which included all their racing gear, their trailer and their race boat.



Lou and the team took last season off to lobby for shorter distances and lower speeds. And he speaks with experience ... his boat holds the record of 258 mph over 1000 ft., which he believes is way too fast and way too dangerous. Osman is outspoken in calling for a 250 mph maximum acceptable speed based on current safety equipment. He has had drivers injured and a never ending



quest for top speed seems hardly worth the costs. And causing great bodily harm to participants is never a good advertisement for any sport.

Lucas Oil, as the sponsor of the series, has consolidated all the drag boat racing associations under one banner with events beginning here in California, going just about coast to coast and ending in Phoenix in November.

The sanctioning body listened to Osman, and others call for a shorter race length and reduced the distances to 875 feet. These incredible machines still clock over 200 miles per hour in just under the length of 3 football fields and put on a great show. Lou feels that the somewhat lowered top speeds will reduce the risk to drivers. This opening race at Lake Ming was the first at this distance, and it was thrilling.

Not being a boat guy, I thought I'd just hang out with my friend and follow their efforts. As one might expect, Top Fuel boats are a major efforttractor trailer, spare motors, a dozen crew and highly technical tuning.

Almost the same as Top Fuel Dragsters, the team's 596 cubic inch Keith Black supercharged motors make 10,000 horsepower, are fueled on an explosive witches brew of nitrous oxide and nitromethane, and drive the boat's counter-rotating (so the boat won't just spin around on a single one) propellers at 20,000 RPM

Setup day had everyone scrambling; the 50 foot trailer, (an ex Kalitta dragster hauler for you NHRA fans) carries the boat up top, engines, spares and equipment down below. The awning alone requires a half dozen people to put it up (and that's with no wind).

The boat, a 22 ft long "Bullet" hydroplane, was built in Madera, California and is designed to the latest safety standards with the driver protected in a capsule that includes an F-16 fighter plane windshield, and it's transported less engine and sponsors.



Once at the track (er...dockside) the first job the crew has (that's after getting that gigantic awning up) is to assemble the boat for its first practice runs. They go about attaching the sponsors and installing the engine while Crew Chief Del Fowler oversees blending the nasty fuel load which is a highly technical and secretive process.

Long time tuner Amos Satterlee (renowned for his top fuel expertise on both cars and boats) makes the initial settings on the computer and nitrous systems. An Interesting sidelight to the fuel business ... nitromethane is now regulated by Homeland Security, whose agents are on site to inspect and make sure the team doesn't have too much on hand.

The first practice, while trying out a new computer and fuel management system, resulted in an engine explosion, fire and substantial collateral damage. That of course called for racer's Standard Operating Procedure, an all-nighter (I didn't stick around to watch) which included cleanup and damage assessment, installing a fresh engine, an almost complete rewiring and replumbing of the boat and other miscellaneous repairs.



The next morning qualifying showed that all the hard work paid off as driver Jarret Silvey out-qualified all the other top fuel boats by a couple of tenths (that's a million miles in boat drag racing). Even at that he reported the motor feeling "soft" (probably only making a weak 8,000 horsepower) so another engine change was mandated

Mind you, these motors are like 50 grand each!! The Speed Sports guys seem to have it handled; watching them change these monster engines between rounds was like a mechanical ballet.

The race proved again that hard work can often pay off in good results as Silvey in Speed Sports boat easily dusted the competition, Frank Burgess in "Locked and Loaded", with a new record (for 875 feet) of 3.34 seconds and 204 mph.

Silvey said he lifted early due to some stability issues but still beat the second place boat easily.

Packing up is the reverse of the unloading process, after that they were headed first to their St Louis shop for a complete redo of the boat (which is standard procedure after each event) and then to the next stop on the tour, Lucas Oils' own "wet raceway" in Wheatland, Missouri.

For more about the Speed Sports Top Fuel team, take a look at their Facebook page. Their appearance schedule is there as well as some cool T-shirts and even a diecast model of race boat that you can make waves with in your bathtub.

LACar Lifestyle Suggestion: If anyone is planning a run over the grapevine to Bakersfield for the next race try not to miss the Kern County Museum and Pioneer Village - www.kerncountymuseum.com. The closest place to stay near Lake Ming is the Hampton Suites at highway 58 and Rt 184. There are many other hotels in the Bakersfield area, just check TripAdvisor for the best deal.

As for food, we can recommend Tony's Firehouse at Mesa Marin, at the intersection of highways 184 and 178, the place is nearest to the lake that serves up some great pizzas and steaks. **-DW**

For more on the Lucas Oil Racing Series: www.lucasoildragboats.com

**Hydro here is an interesting word, it's the first half of the word: "hydroplane" which literally means "flying on water", which is precisely what these hot rod speedboats do...*

