

Life is a gas at raceway

By Kevin Mitchell, The StarPhoenix June 27, 2009

Dwane Park has no movement below the ribs -- except on race night at Saskatchewan International Raceway, when his whole body approaches 150 km/h.

Park, who has been a paraplegic since a 1993 snowmobile accident, is a fixture at the local drag racing strip. His 1977 Ford short box stepside took him to a second-place finish in the street legal point standings last year. He races again today at SIR.

"Being in a wheelchair, you're limited in what you can and can't do," says Park, 44, who lives in Lucky Lake. "You see all these other guys doing it and say 'Geez; I can't do it, but there's got to be a way I can do it somehow.' It's just a matter of going down the right avenue."

Park first raced at SIR two years ago and ran a full schedule for the first time last summer. He has spent lots of time working on a way to run the gas and brake with his right arm while shifting and steering with the left.

Numerous modifications and a certain amount of ingenuity led to a set-up that works.

"You can't go to a disabled shop and buy a set of hand controls, then go down to the quarter-mile and race," notes Park, who races both in street legal and sportsman classes. "There just isn't a set there that would work to your benefit."

Park is a novelty of sorts; as far as he knows, he is the only active paraplegic racer in the country. He'd love to see other physically-handicapped drivers come out and he is willing to help set them up with the proper controls.

Physically, Park has lots of bad days. He still gets bladder and kidney infections, for example. But he loves racing -- placing it second, on his list of priorities, after family.

"Some days are better than others," Park says. "It's part of being paralyzed. Some days you want to lay in bed and don't want to be around anybody; the next day, you're out and about, trying to do something. But sick or not sick, I always pull myself out of bed and get the heck going."

Park, who has always enjoyed "monkeying around" with vehicles, thought for years about heading to the track before son D.J. talked him into it.

He is a strong believer in street legal racing. He lost both a brother-in-law and a cousin to what he says was fast and senseless driving.

The alternative, he said, is natural: The track is sitting there, waiting to be used by anybody with a vehicle and an itch for speed.

His whole family is into the sport and he says they've been front and centre in his burgeoning career. Wife Brenda started driving her own car -- a 1974 Comet -- at the track this year in the street legal category and 15-year-old D.J. hopes to race next year.

"My kid doesn't play ball and hockey, so what do you get into that's a family thing?" Park says. "I don't go to the bar and I don't drink; I'd rather go and race and make it a family thing. It's like guys going to the lake who like fishing and camping out. This family likes going to the racetrack."

The racer gates open at 9 a.m. today and time trials commence at 12 noon. The featured jet dragsters run in the evening.

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