

TRACK HELPS CONTROL NEED FOR SPEED

Street legal racing participants angry about senseless death

David Hutton, The StarPhoenix

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Lisa Rudiger, a blonde, pony-tailed 20-year-old, can't sit still.

It's her first time racing in the Saskatchewan International Raceway's street legal racing program and she's five cars from the front, edging forward, awaiting her turn.

Rudiger's always had a need for speed, an addiction to the adrenaline rush she gets from driving fast, she says, and she has been dying to know what kind of time her red 2004 Mitsubishi Lancer will clock down the quarter-mile that lies ahead.

"It's better than sitting on the couch watching TV," says her boyfriend, Adam Archambault, 20, who sits shotgun holding their two-month-old purebred boxer dog, Aimee.

The death of 64-year-old retired teacher Barry Grosse and the alleged street race that led to it is all the buzz at the track Sunday afternoon, and for all the wrong reasons. It's a feeling of disappointment, even anger, that such a senseless tragedy took place and that the race wasn't out on the track instead.



Drivers at the Saskatchewan International Raceway line up Sunday before a race
Photograph by : Richard Marjan, The StarPhoenix

"People street racing are doing a dumb and dangerous thing," says Trevor Jacek, 27, president of the Saskatchewan Drag Racing Association. "We want to give them an alternative where they can come to prevent something so brutal and tragic from happening."

Jacek is spending his time trying to get people to realize the benefits of racing in a controlled environment, where there are emergency crews on hand in case something goes wrong and a wealth of knowledge for people serious about racing their cars. During the summer months, the street legal racing program runs on Friday nights, moving to Sundays in September.

There are no hard statistics to prove it's been working -- and, indeed, many people say one of the drivers involved in the Eighth Street crash had raced at the track in the past -- but Jacek says the program has helped reduce the amount of street racing in Saskatoon.

"You know, 10 years ago it was just old muscle cars out here but now it's both . . . the older guys are still here but now there's lots of younger modified cars, too. That's a sign it's working."

The Saskatoon street racing scene was once more organized, Jacek says, but now it's mostly "punk kids driving their parents' cars" or teens and 20-somethings who want to show off their cars. There's no organized showdowns on Eighth Street, he says, just people who stop at a red light and can't seem to help but rev their engines, looking for a race. It's those drivers Jacek would like to see stop and think, and drive out to the track instead.

Though growing more popular, the street legal alternative isn't going to wipe out the action on the street, says Aime Decae, a retired police officer who's behind the wheel of the Saskatoon Police Service's modified patrol car. Kids will always race cars, and police officers will always chase them, he says, but that doesn't mean the situation can't be improved.

"The goal here isn't to stop foolish driving all together," he says. "That's impossible. It's education. It's prevention."

On this cold, windy afternoon, more than 140 cars snake from the start line into the nearby parking lot. Cars line up before the start line to burn in their tires -- spinning them to warm them for better traction -- sending acrid smoke billowing upward

As her car idles before the start of her race, Rudiger's hands tighten on the steering wheel before the start light turns green, sending her accelerating down the track. Her goal is to run the quarter-mile under 18 seconds. She finishes in 17.

"That was awesome," she says, eyes wide, ready to go again. "I don't need a street to get the rush I do here . . . too many accidents, too many obstacles."

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