

Like the atomic bomb going off
(Top Fuel diggers)

From *City of Speed*

The Winternationals, Pomona, Calif., winter 1969

Los Angeles invented organized drag racing in the 1940s and 1950s, and then the sport appeared to get lucky in the 1950s when Detroit let loose a parade of its biggest ballbusters ever, 350-plus-cubic-inch Pontiacs, Lincolns, DeSotos, and especially hemispherical combustion head Chryslers – raw chunks of huge V-8 muscle. Quarter-mile supermen going big-game hunting in the Top Fuel dragster class gyrated to those series 300 Chryslers. They were built the strongest and had the best bore-and-stroke ratio and, of course, those slippery hemi-heads.

After first opening up the Mopar package to a volatile 450 cubes, L.A.'s best digger boys, like Ed Pink and Keith Black, loaded up monstrous 671 superchargers lifted off GMC 18-wheelers, doped everything up, and spectacularly exploded horsepower to a monstrous 2,200. Whereupon everybody stepped back and, somewhat apprehensively, waited for speeds to rocket and elapsed times to tumble.

Which promptly happened, so that 200-mile-per-hour velocities suddenly were routine, as were 6-second ETs. Such numbers may now sound puny, but they were more than sufficient to get the chauffeur of a sling-shot digger bumped off in the 1960s.

Lefty Mudersbach perished at Irwindale, Mike Sirokin bought it at Lions; platoons of other strong dudes caught it, too, but why rub it in? In point of fact, the blown Chrysler Hemi was vicious. Under the violent pressure of

its 2,200 horses, it was prone to flinging its wailing steel intestines straight back into the driver compartment.

Throbbing connecting rods threatening to blast grenade holes through the cylinder block...the Jimmy blower preparing to backfire and burst free of the block...crankshaft journals flexing...pistons making ready to disintegrate...savage arguments threatening to break out between pumping rods and thrashing valves...the overworked electronic ignition going bananas searching for the cylinder it didn't like so it could burn it down...searing exhaust gases blending with flickering yellow alcohol fumes. Inside a supercharged hemi was a hideously dangerous place, heaving with mayhem and destruction. Especially when you goosed, gagged, and radically stressed out everything with that 95 percent load of nitromethane.

For the unlucky digger driver, there was very little warning. One instant he was hauling the mail at 200 miles per hour. Then suddenly there came the roar of pistons shattering, cylinders shifting, and then the whole slingshot shuddered as a massive internal explosion ripped through the engine and the driver was savaged by a hellish rain of molten metallic fragments, scalding coolant, and quarts of boiling oil.

I never knew many digger men, compared to sports car and circle-trackers, but one I did know, Johnny Mulligan, had already lived through such a nightmare, skidding backward through the timing traps, burning, at 200. Then there was an anxious wait while track firemen, a full quarter mile away, took a long time coming to his rescue.

Johnny was a man of few words, but still remembered the incident: "The mill made a noise deep down in its gut like I never heard before," he told me. "Like

an atomic bomb going off. A 15-pound chunk of engine hit my helmet and split it in three pieces. Knocked me koo-koo. Afterward I said, 'OK, this is it. Build me a rear-engine before this thing kills me.' But that was a year ago. Nothing bad has happened since then. And we've won the Winternationals."

It was summer of 1969. Johnny was absolutely out of this world at tire-hazing when the Christmas tree went green -- the best in the business at opening up a one-length advantage out of the hole. His 6.43 ET allegedly was fast time of the decade. He and his big Top-Fueler had, indeed, just conquered the Winternationals at the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds. Now he was preparing to depart for another big fueler meet, the Summernationals at Indianapolis.

Johnny was short, chubby, 25 years old with a big round face and double chin, and he smoked rotten smelling small cigars. I liked him. At his small garage in Huntington Beach, called "the Cave," I asked him if I could sit in the digger. Tight fit. My legs straddled the differential, my feet bumped against the throttle. A butterfly-shaped "wheel" worked the steering. A small handle fired the parachute. There were no dashboard instruments of any kind. Leaning back in the bucket seat and looking straight ahead, all I could see was the formidable hung of Hemi with its gargantuan belt-driven Jimmy windmill.

"How do you see out of this thing?"

"You don't," Johnny replied. "You sort of look down the side of the car and guide yourself by the white line or the guardrails at the side of the strip."

Two years later, drag racing embraced rear-engine diggers at last, saving lots of lives...but not Johnny's. He dressed in flame-proof socks and boots and a full fire suit,

but they weren't enough to save him when he experienced a second atomic bomb explosion during the Summernationals.