

## Mad Dog VI

In the summer of 1957, on the high-banked oval of Monza in northern Italy, an Indy-car roadster – Tony Bettenhausen’s Novi – lapped at 177.038 mph hour, making Monza the fastest race track in the world. In 1959, at Bill France’s imposing new Daytona International Speedway in northeastern Florida, George Amick, in a Quin Epperly laydown Meyer-Drake Offenhauser roadster, threatened the Monza mark with a speed of 176.887 mph. One week later, in the same car, Amick crashed and died during a 100-mile race sanctioned by the U.S. Auto Club. The USAC subsequently banned its machines and personalities from Daytona. France judged this an affront. To lay to rest the notion that Daytona was too dangerous for open-wheel race cars, he offered a prize of \$10,000 to whoever clocked Daytona’s first 180 mph lap. This was in 1960. Lots of aspirants tried for the money, but none of them as relentlessly as Bob Osiecki. He was the proprietor of a speed shop in Charlotte, North Carolina and a drag-racing strip in Chester, South Carolina. The racing community considered him to be a wild personality and promoter. Osiecki considered himself an engineer and went after France’s \$10,000 with his own cars. He designed and built three leviathans, all failures. Then, in 1961, he discovered a discarded Indy roadster: A worn-out Kurtis-Kraft once used for tire testing by Firestone. It had no engine. To develop the thrust needed to get it going three miles a minute, Osiecki did something that his friends considered completely in character. He took a 413-cubic-inch, fuel-injected, 15:1 compression, hemisphere combustion Chrysler V8, got Ed Iskendarian in Los Angeles to bolt a supercharger on top of it, and made it fit in the roadster. It gorged 8 gallons of methanol per lap. Started up, it could be heard in downtown Daytona Beach, six miles away.

Being that it was his fourth, and with luck final, record car, Osiecki called it “Mad Dog IV.” The name was apposite. As someone wrote, Mad Dog IV looked and sounded like something only a madman would drive. Curtis Turner examined it and found it resistible. Brian Naylor, a visiting Briton, actually got going 157 mph, then got out. During February and March three others who came and looked were Buck Baker, Tom Pistone, and Larry Frank. Frank alone stayed. Finding himself sitting in something named Mad Dog IV did not surprise him. He was 29. At that time in his life he still considered himself almost suicidal brave. Born in West Virginia, a former prizefighter, he was a 14-year racing journeyman. He regarded himself a good race driver in need of acclaim. One test lap – the engine roar almost vibrated his eyes and ears off – convinced him the Mad Dog IV could beat 180 mph. Its problem wasn’t that it lacked power. Its problem was that it had too much to control. Frank treated the Mad Dog IV with unheard-of courtesy. He wore thin boxing shoes and balled up his toes to dab the throttle gingerly. He never completely uncoiled his foot. He didn’t need to, because even at quarter-throttle on the straightaways the Mad Dog IV was exceeding 200 mph. Negotiating Dayton’s 31 degree bankings, Frank had to slow to what felt like walk. He suggested to Osiecki that they examine the chassis and when they did they found the torsion bar bushings rusted and frozen shut. It was not a good sign.

March passed, and part of April. Frank fretted. Since Osiecki wasn't going to do anything about the chassis, Frank decided he was going to uncoil his right foot. He told Osiecki he was "going to see the tach standing on end" or go home. "The tach standing on end" meant that the cockpit tachometer was going to be pegged at 6000 rpm, more engine revolutions than ever turned before. The ride that followed lasted for 2100 feet – six and a half football fields. While doing them, the Mad Dog IV hit things. It clobbered its nose and split open its radiator, and its starter shaft cut a guardrail post in half. Frank felt every impact, counted every spin, and wasn't hurt.

Osiecki took the injured leviathan back to Charlotte. It returned in July with three new and eye-catching appendages. One was a tall dorsal fin on the tail, and the two others were a pair of airplane wings sprouting from each side of the cockpit. They'd add stability and prevent further spinouts, Osiecki assured Frank. An engineer from Douglas Air Craft and Georgia Tech had developed them. Frank looked at Osiecki's wings suspiciously. They were at jugular height, which was so to say, if they ever snapped off and came back into the cockpit, Frank would have to look for a new head. He drove a reconnaissance lap, and afterward told Osiecki that the Mad Dog IV felt absolutely no different with the wings than without them. Then he quietly left the track He'd decided there must be other ways to advance his career. (Four years later, on Labor Day 1965, Frank won the Southern 500 at Darlington, South Carolina).

Undaunted and more enthusiastic than ever, Osiecki now decided that since the Mad Dog IV's engine really was a drag racing engine, he needed a drag racing driver. Dan Garlits was then the sport's biggest name. Osiecki elected to go for Garlits' protégé, a 26 year old Tampa, Florida, slingshot pilot known in the violent 200 mph Top Fuel Division as "the green kid." That was Art Malone. He was a 6-foot-1 inch, 200-pound blond. Setto Postoian, the AA fueler driver from Chicago had created Malone's nickname. "Why, you're nothing but a green kid," he exclaimed the first time Malone beat him in one of Garlits' cars. Much like Frank, Malone had no fear. He didn't think he could crash. He knew he couldn't get hurt. In August, when he was in Minnesota competing in some exhibition meets, Osiecki telephoned asking him to come to Daytona to drive the Mad Dog IV. Malone said no. He didn't care about left turn racing. Besides, he told Osiecki, Mad Dog IV sounded like a silly name for a race car. Osiecki pressed. Come to Daytona and at least look at it, he coaxed. By coincidence, Malone's wife and 3-month old daughter were flying back to Tampa that afternoon. Malone negotiated. If Osiecki spent \$80 for his wife's plane fare, and another \$80 for his own, he'd come. Seeing the Mad Dog IV made him understand the name but didn't change his mind, nor did his earliest laps around Daytona. On the straightaways the Mad Dog IV felt uncontrollable; and when plunging into the 31 degree banks and 18 degree curves in front of the main grandstands, it wallowed. Pulling off the track shaking his head, Malone was ready to leave. Osiecki told him he'd averaged 167 mph, the Mad Dog IV's fastest lap yet.

Without knowing it, Malone repeated the trick that Ralph Hepburn played on the original Novi at Indianapolis 21 years earlier. To prevent the throttle from going clear to the floor, he put a 2 X 4 under it (in all the miles he logged, he never was more than two-thirds throttle). Then he began "practicing" by allowing the Mad Dog IV to wander in and out of any grooves it wanted. Because the wings would scrape it if got to close – and because like Frank he wanted to keep his head –he avoided getting close to the wall. His speed rose to 170, then 172 mph. He had no idea how to go faster until Jim Rathmann, who'd won the 1960 Indianapolis

500, told him to drive deeper still. Malone was certain that Rathmann was mad but did as he said. This threw the Mad Dog IV into wild and potentially deadly four-wheel drifts and power slides, and Malone at first almost drowned his own nervous perspiration. Eventually, he relaxed again. His average rocketed to 175 mph.

At that speed, Malone was quoted as saying, he could wear out a complete set of Firestones in five laps. They were hard stiff Monza eight-plys, and the supply was diminishing rapidly. The Mad Dog IV itself was showing signs of wear, too. Its engine began losing all oil pressure, and then its clutch, a multi-disc unit meant for an antique Meter-Drake Offenhauser, began to slip. Osiecki stopped the slipping by drilling a hole through the plates and bolting them up. But he couldn't restore oil pressure. Malone continued driving regardless – nonchalantly traveling nearly 180 mph without oil pressure and no way to disengage the engine should it lock up.

On August 5, Osiecki told Malone he'd restored oil pressure by moving the pump to the rear of the oil pan. Daytona's timing clock caught Malone at 177.479 mph. This broke both the late Amick's Daytona record and the late Bettenhausen's world record. On August 21, Malone got faster still – 178.54 mph. The \$10,000 reward was less than two mph away. Two days later he took his longest skid yet, one covering 1610 feet, almost a third of a mile. On August 28, a 12-knot win was gusting. Malone took three warm-up laps, followed by a careening one. As the Mad Dog IV swerved into the front straightaway bulge where the cocks for measuring speed were located, Osiecki, from the engine sound, estimated its speed at better than 220 mph. The Mad Dog IV jumped completely sideways and almost crashed. The clocks said the lap time was 49.57 seconds. A moment later, a telephone from the official timing tower to the track's infield rang. Bill France, who'd come out to watch the Mad Dog IV's run, answered it. Mr. France, "his chief timer told him, "that last lap just coasts you ten grand." While Malone pitched his helmet high in the air in celebration, and Osiecki embraced and actually kissed him, and the small crowd in the grandstands whooped, word arrived that Mad Dog IV's \$10,000 lap had been achieved at 181.561 mph.

Poor Osiecki barely got to savor the moment and glory. A heart attack took him just three years later, aged only 42. (1988)

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