

Recd Oct 25/03 p. D2

Those nights of the 1960s when some streets around this area used to come alive with the sounds of revving engines are long gone but the memories of those times are still bright in one former city resident's mind.

"Street racing was a big thing in this area in the '60s," said David Benn who made a career out of drag racing for 39 years till he retired in 1999. "At the time, many people in the Belleville area had great cars. There was a lot of drag racing then but there were done on the streets. So, those days, if you were coming in to Belleville from anywhere you had better bring yourselves in fast cars because you were going to be in those races at one time or the other."

Benn and his friends used to participate in almost all of those street races held around here.

"We used to street race in Hillier, Mudcat Lane and on Highway 33 just out of Batawa. We had fun. We all had fast cars and we were a pretty tight bunch out here. We didn't let anybody come into town and beat us up. Let's put it that way," he laughed.

The events never lacked for audience, he recalled, although location for street racing could not always be planned.

"The cops were always watching where a street race was taking place. You'd say you were going somewhere and then go do it some place else. I remember one time when we were racing in Hillier, about a thousand people turned up to watch us race from

their parked cars in a farmer's field."

Benn retired from professional drag racing just four years ago. His earlier goal had been to play professional hockey. He recalled playing hockey with Bobby Hull until a severe knee injury forced him out of that sport at the age of 17. Although he had participated in a number of street races earlier, it was only after this incident that he began to be drawn to the allure of and the money in professional drag racing career. All those years ago, he said, he depended on the wins from races for his livelihood.

"It was the '60s. The Beatles were the hot stuff then. The radio played good music. We'd wait till 3 o'clock in the morning and then drag race for bucks. It wasn't like going out there to prove who had the fastest car. We were racing for bucks."

He said his biggest win at a race was when he won \$8,000, which, he noted, was a big haul for those days. "When I was young, I used to work all week just to go to the tracks the next weekend and win. Not winning was not an option. It was my

livelihood."

Car manufacturers such as Ford, Chrysler and General Motors backed a lot of teams at the time, he continued. "I was approached by Ford of Canada. They were forming a team and they asked me to join them. So, I did." As Ford representative Benn participated in many events both in Canada and the United States.

Those days the only racetrack around here was near a former military airbase at Deseronto, on the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, he said. The Shannonville racetrack came later.

Born and raised in Belleville, Benn left to live in Ottawa after his close friend died in a horrible drag racing accident many years ago.

"Lots of people drive all their lives and never get hurt. In 39 years of my drag-racing career I had just one incident of a roll and scrape. I'd say that's a pretty good average," said Benn matter-of-factly.

He recalled being nicknamed 'Gentle Benn' after the then popular television

program called 'Gentle Ben', a show about a large brown bear whose survival became his human friend's struggle.

"We used to have a big panda bear in the passenger seat of the car and every time we go somewhere one of my friends would take it and give it to one of the little girls at the track. They kept getting me bears to ride with me to the tracks."

When he retired from his racing career in 1999, things have started to change the way drag racing is performed, he said.

"Today, nobody drives race cars anymore. The driver's role is pretty much gone. Now it's all computerized. Today, it's about how well you set up your computer to make the car race."

The first car that Benn raced with was a '51 Chevy and a '69 Camaro Convertible was his last, he recalled wistfully.

"I miss it big time especially the actual driving but I don't miss the hard work preparing for events and the expenses that went with it. Every time you come away from a race you come back home, break it apart and carefully go through all the parts. Three days of the week I would be in the garage fixing my car and getting ready for the next battle."

Benn is now a grandfather of two and lives with his wife Jo-Ann in Ottawa.

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