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# Squad cracks down on street racers

BY MARTIN DERBYSHIRE  
Staff Writer

Under cover of night, they risk their lives and those of other motorists on York Region's roads.

Street racers with a need for speed sprint across the region's southern municipalities and into Toronto and Peel Region at all hours looking for a place to race.

Like characters from *The Fast and The Furious* films, they gather in parking lots of donut shops showing off the ride and awaiting the next challenge.

Street racing, with sometimes cash and always ego on the line, is nothing new here.

"They've been doing it in Vaughan for almost 15 years. Only the makes and models have changed," says Staff Sgt. Thomas Carrique of York Regional Police's traffic enforcement bureau. "It used to be the five-litre Mustangs, now it's all modified imports."

Another, more startling, wrinkle is people are dying in and around street races at an alarming rate.

Over the past five years, illegal street racing has been linked to the deaths of 26 people in the Greater Toronto Area.

Together with Toronto Police, Peel Regional Police, Ontario Provincial Police and the provincial ministries of

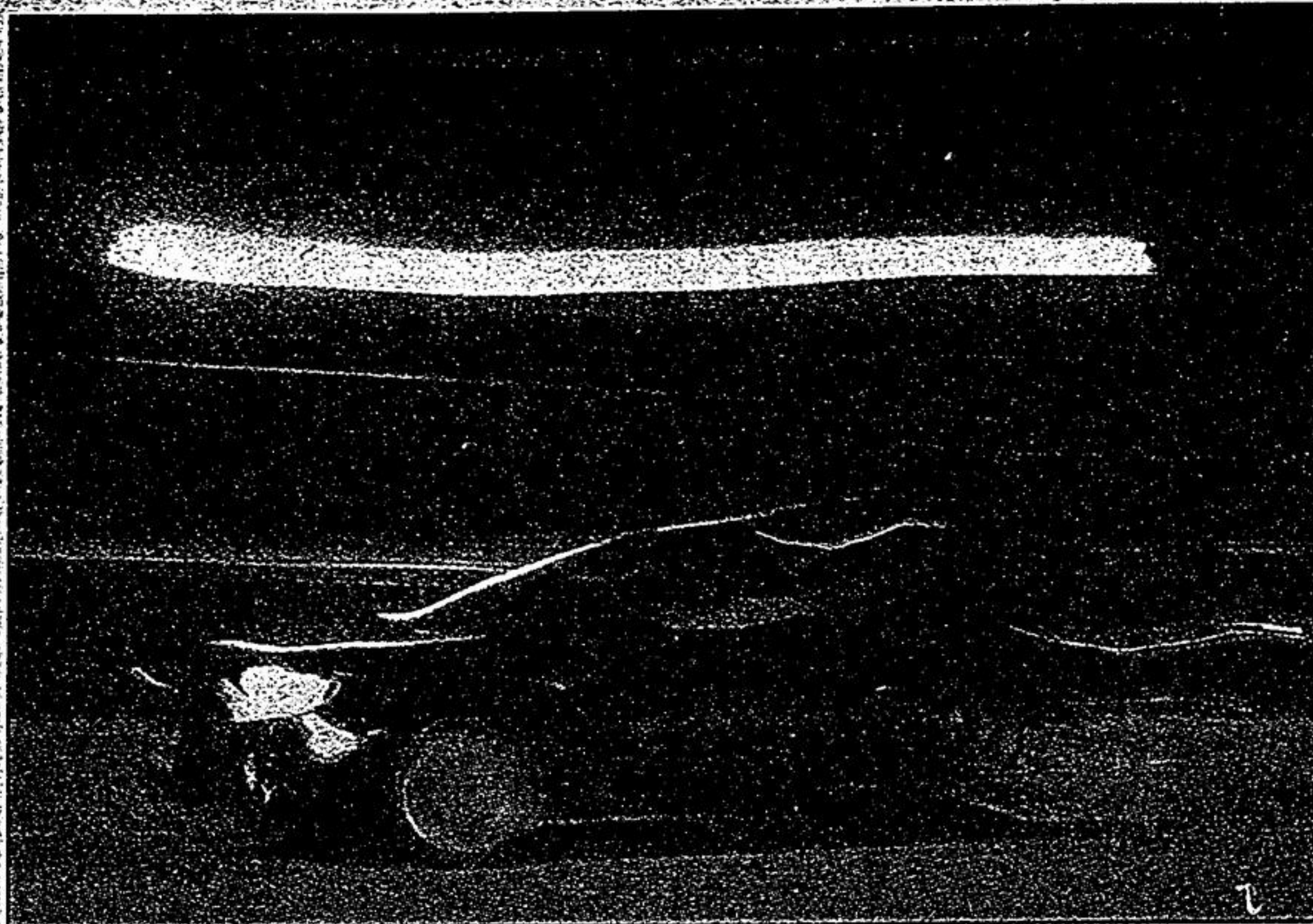


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION/STEVE SOMERVILLE

A joint task force comprised of police and provincial ministry enforcement officers is cracking down on illegal street racing in York Region and the Greater Toronto Area.

transportation and the environment, York officers have been trying to put an end to the dangerous activity.

Staff Sgt. Carrique and other officers involved in Project ERASE, which

stands for Eliminate Racing Activities on Streets Everywhere, spend their weekend nights playing a cat-and-mouse game with street racers.

Aug. 14, the York Region Newspaper Group hit the streets with Project ERASE, riding in the back of a marked police SUV with Staff Sgt. Carrique and York Regional Police civilian traffic analyst Rick Andrews.

9:45 p.m.

Forty officers from around the Greater Toronto Area have just been briefed on possible hot spots for racers and other car enthusiasts. They spread out across the south end of York Region, parts of Toronto and the eastern part of Peel.

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Hondas, Acuras and Volkswagens are among the automobiles of choice for street racers.

But the high performance precision stock engines are just a start.

Some spend as much as \$50,000 on modifications to add a little muscle and style to their compact cars.

Project ERASE may not catch every street racer, Staff Sgt. Carrique says, but officers will pull over any modified vehicle they spot. Taking even one illegally modified car off the road could mean stopping a race and saving a life.

In the past, racers, mostly 16 to 25, have been known to frequent parking lots near 16th and Woodbine avenues in Markham and Martingrove Road and Hwy. 7 in Vaughan.

"Ego plays a big part in it," Staff Sgt. Carrique says. "Everyone wants to be the king of the hill, the top dog, the one all the other street racers want a piece of."

10:45 p.m.

A call comes in regarding a vehicle with a stripped interior. While there's nothing illegal about removing the back seats and contents from a vehicle, officers say it's a good sign the car is used for racing. The late model Audi appears a bit banged up and appears to be nothing special.

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Project ERASE officers have stopped 2,981 vehicles so far this year. Eight people have been charged with racing, compared to 10 during all of 2003.

Officers have issued 1,844 provincial offence notices, many for illegal equipment and modifications. Four people have been charged with dangerous driving, 467 with speeding and 49 unsafe vehicles have been taken off the road. This Audi makes 50.

11:30 p.m.

Toronto Police, working with project ERASE, have pulled over a car traveling 164 km/h on Hwy. 407 near Keele Street in Vaughan.

It turns out the driver has a G1 license, which does not allow him to drive on highways. His license is suspended, but that's the least of his problems. Officers run the plates and it turns out the car has been stolen.

12:52 a.m.

York police helicopter Air 2 reports it has picked up a motorcycle traveling at very high speeds in Markham. Attempting to stop at a red light, the driver skids dangerously through an intersection, narrowly missing oncoming traffic. Air 2 officers are unable to coordinate with ground patrols to catch the speeding bike.

1:04 a.m.

A Ministry of Transportation enforcement officer, who is a member of the ERASE team, spots a van weaving in and out of its lane on Hwy. 7 near Keele. Officers who pull the vehicle over find the driver showing signs of intoxication and his 10-year-old daughter sitting in the passenger seat.

1:30 a.m.

More than 50 cars, many imports, many clearly modified, fill the parking lot of a plaza near Hwy. 7 and Keele. Project ERASE officers cruise the lot recognizing many of the vehicles and their drivers.

"It's not us. We're not the problem. It's all these crazy kids out here racing," explains car enthusiast Jeremy Morrison, a Vaughan resident hanging around the lot.

"They're crazy. The cops should be going after them instead of harassing the same crews every night. We're not racing, we just came here for a cup of coffee."

Almost like an alarm bell went off, dozens of cars leave the lot in unison, driving up and down Hwy. 7 in packs.

2:07 a.m.

Seeing a late model Acura with suspension so low to the ground it looks as though the body of the car would be damaged any time it turns, officers pull into a gas station where the driver is about to fill up.

Mr. Andrews and Staff Sgt. Carrique take a look around the tires for any signs of rubbing damage to the body. The Ministry of Transportation is called to take a closer look.

The owner of the vehicle, 18-year-old Daniel Padovani, says including all the modifications he has made to the car, it's worth about \$25,000.

"But I think I pay more in tickets," he jokes.

New rims, an H22 engine imported directly from Japan, suspension that can be lifted or lowered as he pleases and a virtually weightless carbon fibre hood are just a few of the modifications.

"Girls like it," he says. "I don't race it. It looks too good for that."

When Ministry of Transportation officers show up, they find the car's suspension is too low to be safe and other illegal modifications. The plates are pulled and despite Mr. Padovani's stern protests the car is safe, he must arrange for it to be towed.

"I knew I was stupid to come to Woodbridge. The cops are always out here harassing us," he says to the officers.

4:00 a.m.

After a few routine traffic stops, many of the project ERASE officers shut down for the night.

"It hasn't been too busy tonight," Staff Sgt. Carrique says. "But I guess that's a good thing. Maybe people are getting the message."

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