

STRAIGHTLINE

Asphalt Racing Gains Traction

By Lynn Keillor



Jack Gligora converts his trail sled to an asphalt racer each spring and bracket races at his local IHRA track.

Jack Gligora loves a sore loser — especially if it's a young male on a hotrod street bike.

"They're out there doing their wheelies and think they're hot crud with the teenage girlfriends hanging on their arms," he said. Then, the 46-year-old Gligora pulls his asphalt-prepped Ski-Doo next to them on the drag strip, and typically whoops them good.

"Some get mad, some curse, some throw you the finger," he said. "We just laugh at them."

Gligora, of Rochester, N.Y., is part of a growing fraternity of snowmobile asphalt drag racers that is attracting the attention of the motorized race world. There are now two official asphalt race series — one based in Maine, the other in Michigan — and individual bracket racing events at drag strips across the country.

Behind-the-scenes players and up-front racers are working hard to legitimize this form of racing, not just to snowmobilers but to drag race fans as a whole.

"Asphalt racing is taken more seriously every year," said Kristin Stanley, president of the Maine-based National Speed Association (NSA). "It has taken a tremendous amount of hard work to achieve the respect and support that we have today, but it is all worth it because more and more sponsors, spectators and snowmobile enthusiasts are enjoying what we do."

Professional Racers

In his role as president of the Michigan-based National Snowmobile Drag Racing

Association (NSRDA), Rich Stumpf wears a number of hats.

He's the main contact between the circuit and the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA), which runs snowmobiles as an exhibition class at divisional and national events. He negotiates the schedule, is in charge of the rules, keeps the Web site and solicits sponsorships. His wife, Kelli, is the secretary, handles membership and helps with sponsorships. On race day, when Stumpf is more concerned about racing, Kelli runs the show.

He tries to run every aspect of the organization with professionalism, which he feels is a key to becoming better regarded as a serious form of racing.

On race day, professionalism means that all racers and sleds are at the right place at the right time. "We can't hold up the show," he said. "They can't feel like we're taking up too much time and are not worth the trouble."

Prior to race day, it means presenting his best self to potential sponsors. There is little to no support from snowmobile manufacturers. He's trying to cull sponsorships outside of the motorsports world, which can be a tough sell.

"To go out and do cold calls, they think you're a little nuts to ride in the summer, and some have a hard time understanding the concept," he said. "I try to tell them that their products will be exposed to snowmobilers, drag racers and to NHRA, which is an elite organization." He uses the John Force/Powerade relationship to leverage his

own cause. "I let the sponsor know that we can introduce them to that venue or to that type of event." He also has promotional videos that include asphalt racing exposure on the ESPN2 show "NHRA Today."

Gligora knows something about sponsorships, too, both as a racer and a business owner. He sells new and used performance parts, as well as asphalt racing parts, through Elite Motorsports.

"I've sponsored people in the past, and come to find out that the only thing they know about my company is it's a sticker on the trailer," he said. "When I go out and get sponsors, I make sure they know they're getting a bang for the buck." He makes videos, sends out picture and makes a résumé with his past accomplishments and future goals. His company also donates a prize to the person with the fastest reaction time in the first round of racing — something that gives his company, and snowmobile racing, more recognition.

Stumpf said he'd like to race more national events — the only one on the schedule is at Brainerd International Raceway in Minnesota. NHRA, so far, has denied the request, telling Stumpf that it needs more mass appeal. So he's working on that, too, especially through outside sponsorships.

Stanley counts on professionalism to secure race venues, too, but also the "crazy" factor. "A lot of tracks simply take a chance that we are professional based on their conversations with me," she said. "Many of the venues that we visit are expecting something wild to add variety to their show."

Another selling point? Speed. "The sleds don't take up too much track time, which is a benefit in promoting the series to busy track managers," Stanley said. "We can run through all 16 sleds in under 5 minutes. Remember, if all goes well, it only takes 8 seconds for each sled to get down the track."

NSA will run a four-race schedule this year, NSDRA will run six.

Different Strokes

While both NSA and NSDRA promote asphalt racing, they are not affiliated.

Geography and rules separate the two circuits, though they make a conscious effort not to counter-schedule events.

Both organizations also have different philosophies on the sport's direction.

For NSA, bigger is better. It allows engines up to 1500cc with a comprehensive weight penalty structure. Ignition and front-end construction (including tube front ends) are open to personal choice.

At NSDRA, displacement is capped at 1000cc. There's less leeway in ignition, and bulkheads must be the original aluminum. Suspension pieces can be swapped out, but the new pieces must use the original mounting locations.

NSDRA will also offer a Super Stock 800cc class this year, which Stumpf compared to "minor league baseball." He feels that cost is a big barrier to entry for potential drag racers (Stumpf estimates his own machine is a \$40,000 unit), and this class will be more enticing to newcomers.

But for real newcomers, Gligora suggests the bracket racing. He races nearly every weekend from spring until late fall at the New York International track in Leicester, N.Y., which is affiliated with the International Hot Rod Association. It's a "run-what-you-brung" class, and depending on the day, he's lined up against other sleds, motorcycles, ATVs or even cars. Machines are indexed, or handicapped, to make for even competition.

Cost of entry is relatively inexpensive for bracket racing. Gligora estimates the cost of a used asphalt track at \$250 to \$300; skis at \$150 to \$250 and about \$75 for quick-disconnect cool-down fittings, a marine pump and a cooler of water to cool down a hot sled.

Gligora is building his 1999 Mach Z to run in the NSDRA Super Stock class this year, but will continue to run his snowmobile trail sled, a REV-chassis MX Z, in the bracket racing.

"People think the sled looks funny with the IHRA stickers and the sponsor stickers. It looks like we're a moving billboard in the winter," he said, noting that he has made asphalt converts on a snow-covered trail. "This year I got 100 miles on the snow, and 350 miles on asphalt. One quarter mile at a time." ❧



above: Asphalt racing plays in front of some large, auto-racing type crowds, which exposes sponsors to a different motorsports market.