

Dead heat

Three recent fatalities point to the 'insane' street racing scene in the city

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Out on the western reaches of Airport Road, in the predawn hours of a rainy Thursday, Nicky S. is preparing to add a five-litre Mustang to his kill list. He twists the key and his Honda Civic comes to life with the blood-curdling yowl that comes with more than \$12,000 worth of high-performance engine modifications, some of them made just hours ago in his parents' garage.

"Listen to that pop-off valve!" he says as he shows off his new turbocharger, which cost him more than \$3,000 but has given him just a few more horsepower than his old one. He knows tonight's race will call for everything he has, but if all goes as planned, Nicky will beat the Mustang to the Highway 427 on-ramp, about three kilometres away.

If he's there first, the Mustang goes on his kill list. If not, he goes on the Mustang driver's. The race begins with a rolling start -- Nicky and the Mustang cruise side by side, then hit full throttle at the same moment. Within seconds, the two cars have accelerated to more than 150 kilometres an hour, then 200. They scream around the curve at the north end of Pearson Airport's main runway, and the Mustang begins to slide, barely missing the curb. Nicky keeps his foot on the throttle, and hits more than 240 kilometres an hour before finally putting on the brakes. He pulls into a deserted parking lot where his friends sit waiting in their

cars, which are all lowered, with cannon-sized exhausts, custom rims and powerful stereo systems that shake the pavement. One has a video screen that's showing a porn film.

"Good kill," says one of them.

Nicky is one of an army of young street racers who cruise the roads of the Greater Toronto Area. Most of the time, they exist in their own self-referential, late-night universe, but occasionally, they make the news -- usually when things go wrong, as they did last weekend, when 22-year-old Saleem Scott was killed in a high-speed crash on the Queen Elizabeth Way.

Just the week before, two 21-year-old men died in a race in downtown Toronto when their modified Honda hit a tree at Parliament and Adelaide Streets. Over the past five years, 26 deaths have been attributed to street racing in the GTA.

For professionals in the field, the deaths point to deep-seated social issues that underlie the phenomenon of street racing.

"There has been street racing ever since the second Model T came off the assembly line," says York Regional Police Sergeant Dave Mitchell, who runs a program known as ERASE (Eliminate Racing Activities on Streets Everywhere).

"I think the real problem is that to some degree, racing is socially accepted. There's always been a back road where the guys could go to put the hammer down."

In many ways, Nicky is the prototypical street racer. He's 19, he lives with his parents, and his car insurance bill is over \$6,000. He left school in Grade 10 and works in a

plumbing-supply warehouse, where he makes \$13 an hour. He estimates that he has spent more than \$25,000 on modifications to his 1993 Civic, some of it financed through a loan co-signed by his father. He has had three accidents in the past 18 months. In the most recent one, he lost control on the ramp leading from the Don Valley Parkway onto 427, causing more than \$5,000 in damage. He's philosophical about it.

"If you want to find out where the edge is, you're going to go over it some time," he says. Sgt. Mitchell says street racing is influenced by the entertainment industry. He notes that when Smokey and the Bandit came out in 1977, countless young drivers -- he was among them -- bought black Trans Am Firebirds like the one Burt Reynolds drove in the movie. Since then, countless movies have provided outlaw role models, from 1955's Rebel Without a Cause to 2001's The Fast and the Furious.

Like the cowboy, the street racer has become a fixture in North American culture, with artists like Bruce Springsteen writing songs about it ("I got a 69 Chevy with a 396, Fuelie heads and a Hurst on the floor . . . Summer's here and the time is right for racing in the street. . .").

Young people looking for a way to define themselves in a mass culture largely driven by consumption are eager converts. Every Wednesday night, members of the Toronto Civic Club gather outside a Tim Hortons coffee shop in the Kennedy Commons Mall to swap information, compare cars and be with kindred spirits.

Among those on hand this week was 19-year-old Tyler McDermott, who was there to show off the latest modifications to his blue Honda del Sol. His driver's seat was held in place by just two bolts, since he was waiting to install a pair of new leather seats.

"There's always something to do," Mr. McDermott said. "A car is never finished."

Enthusiasts like Mr. McDermott bring a Martha Stewart-like perfectionism to the process of car ownership -- theirs is an endless quest for the perfect vehicle. Mr. McDermott, for example, has installed custom alloy wheels, a white fibreglass interior and a steering wheel like a

Formula One car's. His car has no door handles -- instead, the del Sol can be opened only with a remote control that activates electronic openers buried inside the car.

"It looks smooth," he says. "But it would be bad if the battery died. You'd never get in there again." Like Nicky's, Mr. McDermott's fanatic devotion to his car is costly. He spends "every cent" on parts, and his insurance costs \$6,700 a year, not including collision coverage. Last year, he was fined \$800 after a police officer clocked him at 187 kilometres an hour on the

401. "That was a wake-up call," he says.

Many others are still waiting for theirs. York Regional Police recently recorded several street racers going through a red light on Markham Road at more than 200 kilometres an hour, and used a helicopter with night-vision equipment to videotape late-night street racing sessions that included "banzai runs" through suburban neighbourhoods.

"What they're doing is insane," Sgt. Mitchell says.

Joe Conde, the owner of Altech, a Toronto shop that specializes in modifying Hondas, says he's saddened by what he has seen in recent years. Mr. Conde can name three customers who died in their cars, and countless more who have had bad accidents or serious trouble with the law. "I tell them all the same thing --- go to the track. If you want to go fast, that's the place to do it. There's a fire crew and there's an ambulance."

Mr. Conde is a reformed street racer himself. In the 1980s, he used to go to abandoned

roads north of the city with his friends for late-night drag races. "It was stupid," he says. "But it was nothing like what they're doing today. These guys, they don't think at all." Steve Stavrianos, who manages a Mississauga performance shop called JRP, says an unfair stereotype has arisen. "There's been a lot of negative media coverage. Not every guy with a spoiler on his car is a street racer . . . Enforcing the law is one thing, but what's going on now is more like racial profiling."

Mr. Stavrianos says it's not the modifications that cause the problems -- instead, it's the approach of the young drivers. He recalls a recent crash in which a 16-year-old died racing his mother's Pontiac. "The car doesn't make much difference," he says. "You're dealing with guys 16 to 22. It's the most volatile age group of them all."

Veteran OPP Sergeant Cam Woolley says street racing appears to be a problem that can be controlled, but not eliminated: "We're having a tough time convincing young people that it's dangerous. They think they're invincible, and they tend to see traffic laws as an inconvenience, or as something the police do to make money."

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Sgt. Woolley will admit to his own youthful indiscretions behind the wheel and realizes now that he could easily have died. "I remember thinking -- I'm a really good driver, it can't happen to me. But it could have. I was just lucky."

Sgt. Mitchell's years with the ERASE program have shown him the tragic reality behind street racing's fantasy. Although he has seen countless accidents, one in particular sticks in his mind as perhaps the ultimate illustration of the dangers -- a 2000 crash where the driver of a modified Honda Prelude ran into the side of a Mazda Protegé at more than 170 kilometres an hour.

The driver of the Protegé was a 26-year-old woman who had gone into a Tim Hortons for a cup of coffee. The Prelude, which was racing another car, hit her as she pulled out of the parking lot onto Woodbine Avenue in the middle of the afternoon. She was killed instantly. The driver of the Prelude, who was 24, survived his injuries. He was later convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to two years in prison, and was banned from driving for life.

"What sticks in your head is the senselessness of it," Sgt. Mitchell says. "Her family has never gotten over it. I don't think a day goes by that they don't think of her."