

The Queen of Speed aims ever higher

“The World’s Fastest Female Motorcycle Racer,” Arizona’s own Valerie Thompson, and her quest to run “The Fastest Motorcycle on Earth.”

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Say “Bonneville” to any motorsports enthusiast and they know you’re talking Land Speed Records on the salt. Well, a few may picture the Triumph Bonneville motorcycle, but even it owes its name to Bonneville Raceway on the Salt Flats just east of Wendover, Utah.

The Bonneville Motorcycle Speed Trials (BMST) is a yearly six-day event held at the Salt Flats. Records are certified by FIM (Federation Internationale De Motocyclisme) and the AMA (American Motorcyclist Association).

We headed there to join Valerie Thompson of Scottsdale, The World’s Fastest Female Motorcycle Racer, and Denis Manning, owner of Team 7 Racing and the BUB Seven Streamliner in which Thompson had set the standing measured mile record here at 304.163 mph on September 1, 2016.

That’s a speed determined by the average of two runs through a measured mile in



the middle of a ten-mile course. The runs are made in opposite directions: if a driver runs a record-setting speed in one direction, they turn around and make a return run for an average they hope sets a class record.

Some, such as Team 7 Racing, haul the whole support trailer—their pit on wheels—to the end of the course to prep the cycle for that second run, refueling

and repacking parachutes. (One rider we met in the pits had put his bike into quarantine—because performance enhancing changes are not allowed between the two runs—so he could rest and rehydrate before making his return run.)

The Team 7 Racing crew consists of 16 people listed on the side of the BUB Seven Streamliner. It’s a family affair, Denis Manning says. He’s a third-generation salt racer; also on the team are Peter Manning, Jack Manning and granddaughter Charlotte Manning, while Delvene Manning happens to be the BMST owner and event manager.

Valerie had not yet made a run. The BUB Seven Streamliner is slippery as a fish (in fact, its shape is inspired by a salmon, tail fin and all), requiring winds of 0-3 mph, but the breeze had surpassed that for two days. The plan was to return at 6am Monday morning, set up pits at the starting line, be ready—and wait again for calm.

We arrived at the BMST entry at 5:30am Monday in total darkness. The Salt Flats are simply otherworldly, especially riding five miles out to the pits, following a blue-stained line on the salt past the only three-dimensional objects for miles around—orange highway cones spaced out farther than a motorcycle headlamp shines. Even in daylight, space and time are difficult to judge out on the salt, with no normal reference points and the mountains so far away they change little as the miles go past. We’d passed someone setting up a camera a quarter-mile before stopping at the Team 7 trailer. Pre-dawn is silence like we’ve never experienced, being almost the first to the pits. There’s no sound, because there are no people, no animals, no insects, no breeze whatsoever, and not even a bird, it seems, ventures here—why would it?

As the sun begins to reveal a horizon, we note



virga, rain streaming from clouds, to the southeast. Finally, there’s the sound of vehicles coming across the salt, as racers arrive with a video crew, who quickly set cameras on the sunrise. This is the other crew with Valerie and Team 7 for six days on the salt. P51 Pictures LLC is filming *Rockets and Titans*, featuring the only three vehicles of this type competing for the two-wheel land speed record.

The BUB Seven is one. Another is the current world record-holding Ack Attack Streamliner of Mike Akatiff, ridden by Rocky Robertson. Third is the Triumph Streamliner engineered by Matt Markstaller and ridden by Guy Martin. Triumph has a long history at Bonneville, being the namesake of their most famous motorcycle.

Valerie is after the absolute world speed record, gender aside, and Akatiff’s 367.382 mph is the number she must beat. And then some. Being the first to 400 mph is the goal of all three teams.

Valerie, her husband Ray and the Team 7 crew begin preparations by moving the streamliner trailer, tool truck and bus out to the VIR (Very Important Racer) pit. This puts the whole operation at the starting line, so if wind conditions are optimal, all other racing stops, and they run without delay.

Different classes start at different mile markers



on the course, depending on the speeds they run and how many miles they need to accelerate before the measured mile. We were 3.5 miles from the pit area, with motorcycles that run 175 to over 200 mph in staging lanes only about a quarter-mile from us, using about 3.25 miles to accelerate into the measured mile speed traps. Staging lanes and speed traps closer to the pits are for slower classes that need less acceleration time.

Valerie's start will be at the 1.5-mile mark. She'll run just 250-300 mph on the first pass, a shake-down to check the streamliner top to bottom, then use the full course for an all-out record attempt.

By 7:30am, the BUB Seven is under the trailer's canopy being prepped. We recognize the smell of methanol immediately. A small ice water tank at the nose is being filled, to cool Valerie's suit. Another water tank will spray water on the chain, which gets extremely hot at over 300 mph and could blow its O-rings all over the engine compartment (learned by experience, we are told).

Arch Owens is the team's IT guy, and he hooks up his laptop to check all systems during warmup.

All is well, except the warming sun has created a light breeze, so we will wait. We learn that the blowing silks on mile markers are the worst thing in the world to see. Even when they fall flat at our 1.5 mile marker home, the radio may say there is still a 5 mph wind 8 miles away, at the other end of the course. Patience is the operational word.

Denis has stories of speed trials past (he's been here 51 years) and explains weather patterns around the valley. The pause is an opportunity for film production—Valerie steps on-camera for

some rider coaching from Denis, while other film crew fly their drone for aerial shots of the scene.

The engine is understandably of unidentified origin. It's a turbocharged V4, double overhead cam, with highly machined everything. John Jans is the expert machinist. The crew is amiable, but beyond what the camera and the eye can see, they're not giving up any secrets. Questions are answered politely but vaguely, and who can blame them?—every piece is their custom work. Denis says only that the motor is of their own design, though someone mentioned an engineer and university professor contributed to it.

Overall length is about 25 feet, wheelbase about 12 feet and the Goodyear Eagle tires have been tested to 450 mph. Front suspension travel is about 1.5", and that big beautiful swing arm in the back seems to be a hard tail. The full body is carbon fiber covered with lightweight, rigid Kevlar.

Unlike on a motorcycle, Valerie has a foot throttle and brakes. Much as on a conventional motorcycle, she uses both hands to steer with left and right yokes, the right side having the shift button for a four-speed transmission. Denis says, "It felt kind of funny putting that 400 mph gear in there," while telling Valerie it was up to her when to shift into fourth gear. Though it looks round from a lot of angles, the streamliner really is a tall oval—like a salmon—with retractable skids on both sides, so it does not fall over when stopped. Incredible work has been put into the balance of the ma-



chine, but it still needs to be towed up to 50 mph, at which point Valerie retracts the skids, like an aircraft going wheels-up, and releases the tow rope, like a glider cutting loose. Shift points are 7,500 rpm into second and third gears, putting her well over 250 mph, then fourth gear depends completely on how the ride feels. At the end of the measured mile, she has three parachutes to deploy and almost five miles to stop, again dropping the skids when she's down to about 50-60 mph.

The day began cool, but by midafternoon temperature had reached 96 degrees. By then, with the reflective white of the salt, even shade doesn't feel like shade. A breeze just over 3 mph is really almost imperceptible—you feel no cooling but see the ride-killing silks blowing.

Walking the pits was like seeing the history of motorcycling from the 1950s to today. It seems anything that has ever run on the salt still does, with engineers tweaking bikes of all types for record attempts in their class. We kept one eye at all times on our small group 3.5 miles away, the Team 7 pit, looking for signs the BUB Seven was moving to its starting position on the course.

About 4:30 pm, the breeze calmed, the silks fell almost still, Denis said "go," and the team moved trailer and streamliner onto the course between the marker flags. Everyone began active preparation for the run, as Valerie disappeared into her bus to suit up. The film crew took up positions, with their drone circling above to capture it all. Delvene Manning was on site with radio, relaying wind reports to Denis from down course and ready to stop the other classes' runs if conditions were perfect for Valerie's run.

Unfortunately, conditions were never perfect. Somewhere over the 8.5 miles the wind was over 3 mph, and in a vehicle with virtually no downforce that's just too much breeze. As the

sun got lower and the temperature began to drop, it only got worse. At about 5:30 pm, Denis called the run off, and the crew turned to packing it in and returning to the pits, as all speed trials end at 6 pm. It was disappointing, but Denis kept everyone optimistic, saying, "We pack it ready to go, come back at 6 am tomorrow, move it back up here and get a shot in the still of the early morning."

His prediction of a still morning was not just optimistic, it was correct. By 6:30 am, the Team 7 trailer, Valerie's bus and the film crew were already at the 1.5-mile marker and preparing to run. It was a beautiful sunrise on the salt, with about 30 people gathered—friends of the crew from Grass Valley, California and other riders who wanted to see Valerie's run. With the silks lying flat on the mile marker poles, it seemed all systems go. An engine warmup was initiated, as Arch hooked up the laptop and started running down his checklist. We were not privy to the details, but there were computer glitches in the streamliner's systems (including one we overheard, indicating the parachutes might want to deploy on their own).

Arch and crew members worked diligently, but the rising sun and temperature were going against them, and soon the breeze was back. The doors in the tail were open, exposing parachutes and the plungers that push them out, and Arch had IT in Australia on the cell phone all morning. Denis's mood was much more serious. He becomes the captain of the ship when it's run time and needs to remain so. It was not a time to ask questions.

Fully suited up and ready to go when the problems crept up, Valerie needed to stay both occupied and relaxed. The film crew kept her busy for awhile, but when it was apparent the waiting would continue, she headed to the bus to get out of her driving suit. (And we spent some time with a Leatherman, chipping salt off our own motorcycle's pipes and from between the fins in preparation for the ride home to Arizona.)

By noon, Arch was still on the phone with Australia. The breeze was maybe 5 mph—2 mph too much, regardless. Arch did win the tech war, but over two more days, the conditions never allowed for a run. We quote Valerie: "It's not failure, it's unfinished success!"

Valerie Thompson, Denis Manning and Team 7 Racing returned to the Salt Flats September 20-24, during Mike Cook's Bonneville Land Speed Shootout, to try again. The weather did not cooperate, however—after four days of wind and substantial rain, the event was curtailed on the morning of the fifth day.

Further success remains unfinished, but we are confident it is in the cards. Records, after all, are made to be broken. ■

MOTORCYCLE SPEED TRIALS



Valerie Thompson's record run was scheduled during the annual Bonneville Motorcycle Speed Trials (BMST), August 26-31. This dual-sanctioned event offers a chance to set AMA national and FIM world records. Indeed, dozens are usually set, broken and set again, as often as not within thousandths of a mile per hour. Classes are many, from run-whatcha-brung to multi-million-dollar streamliners. For this year's complete results, visit bonneville-speedtrials.com. ■

GETTING TO THE SALT FLATS



There are lots of ways to get from Arizona to the Bonneville Salt Flats, near Wendover, Utah. All include spectacular scenery and wide open spaces. Some routes use more Interstate, some are classic two-lanes, and most combine the two. Figure 11 or 12 hours plus gas, meals and maybe an overnight. We rode north past Flagstaff on US 89 to Kanab, Utah, then I-15 to Salt Lake City and I-80 west to the Salt Flats (or you can cut off the SLC part with some two-lanes). Or you can go via Nevada, to Las Vegas, then north on US 93. The Salt Flats are near the Utah-Nevada line, with most hotels and restaurants on the casino side. We returned via Salt Lake, but exited I-15 at Nephi and took US 89 south. Our overnights both ways were in Fredonia, Arizona, just south of Kanab. Our total ride was 1585 miles—761 up, 824 back. Being Bonneville Motorcycle Speed Week, we did the trip on two wheels, in the saddle of a 1995 Honda CB750 Nighthawk. ■