Survival of the Fastest

Twice a year, 150 road warriors travel to a barren stretch of desert highway. There, they stage the most dangerous race in America. Length: 90 miles. Experience: not required. Speed: whatever turns you on.
By Randall Lane

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HOT WHEELS: **Speed merely kills—235 mph destroys.**

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YOU VETTE YOUR LIFE: **The author's ride (with extra insurance).**

That each died was certainly tragic. How they died, however, was predictable. All of us possess stupidity and hubris to some degree, though the two tend to counterbalance one another, with an abundance in one area often translating into a shortage in the other. With the case of the Silver State Classic Challenge, though, you're dealing with a rare breed that feeds off megadoses of both traits. The basic premise of the Silver State is simple: bring a road worthy car and drive it as fast as you dare for 90 miles. The stupidity and hubris come into play when you study the details.

For starters, the ten-year-old race isn't run on a track, but rather on a barren two-lane public road,

Nevada State Route 318. The road isn't banked like a race course; it isn't even flat, but more arcshaped, with the middle raised up like a hot cinnamon roll so that water will drain off when it rains. Instead of the protective walls and infield spinning areas of a track, Highway 318 offers a shoulderless plunge into a gravel filled drainage ditch and, beyond that, the cactus-filled desert brush. While most race tracks are simple ovals, this route winds frequently, including an eight-turn sequence through a 500-foot-high canyon known as the "Narrows." Highway 318 boasts many other features you won't find at Watkins Glen: dipsy-do bumps that send cars airborne (two years ago, one bump shot a car off the course at 200 miles per hour, seriously injuring the driver), occasional wild animals (one entrant hit a roadkill feasting turkey-buzzard that was probably accustomed to cars that travel half as fast), plus your assorted stones, wind gusts and other desert pleasures.

Then consider the speed: the winner of the Silver State usually averages more than 190 miles per hour. A nineteen year-old named R.J. Gottlieb once took is 1969 Camaro through the course at top speeds of 220 miles per hour. (Last year's Indy 500 winner, Eddie Cheever, Jr., averaged 145.) By and large, these are amateur drivers driving (and passing each other) in street-legal cars. "This is a car race for wannabes." says Phil Henry, one of the organizers. "It's for people who want a real professional racing experience." Taken all together, it's one of the most dangerous activities that you can do legally in Americal - a real life Cannonball Run.

No suprise, then, that it's in Nevada, a state that has long catered to the ill-advised desiers and raging egos of America. Like anything else in Nevada, the race's laissez-faire underpinnings are rooted in politics. Longtime Governor Robert Miller understands the political importance of catering to Nevada's rural sections, and it doesn't get any more rural than White Pine County. Highway 318 links U.S. 50 (the infamous "America's Loneliest Road") with Nevada Highway 375 (the still more infamous "Extraterresterial Highway," so named for its frequent sightings and proximity to Area 51). When the big Kennecott copper mine shut down fifteen years ago, the area's economy was crippled. So when Cliff Jones, a vintage auto club president, met Ferral Hansen, the White Pine County Chamber of Commerce president, back in 1988, the state government had the good political sense to see the benefits of helping a struggling rural area draw some tourists. Two months later, 51 drivers were tearing down Highway 318.

around $500 apiece to participate in each race, which has been run semiannually since 1991. For most, the Silver State is a once-in-a-lifetime thrill, a chance to experience raw speed, to drive their own car flat out on the same type of road theyre stuck bumper-to-bumper on the rest of the year-all while the cops can do nothing but stand by and watch. Dangerous, yes, but for these certain few, also extremely seductive, the type of rush that appeals to their unrelenting hubris and seduces their abundant stupidity and makes them want to experience this thing, comfortable in the belief that the inevitable crack-up will happen to some-one else. "Where else can you get five quarts of adrenaline shot into each arm at one time?" asks five-time defending champion Kelly Sievers.

That argument proved persuasive as I succumbed to the Silver State's siren song. Cognizant of the risks, and confident that it wouldn't happen to me, last September I boarded a plane for Las Vegas.

To gain perspective on the Silver State Classic Challenge mentality, it's instructive to walk through the parking lot of the Showboat Hotel and Casino, the race's grubby Las Vegas headquarters, and start with the license plates. In just one row I found 1SIKPUP; ITLL FLY; 4 THRLS; SKREAM; KWIKRNU; ROKTEER; WARP9.6; TOOFUN; 205 MPH; OHHYEAH; NO HOPE; XCITMNT; as well as ONE BITE, a Dodge Viper with a custom-made license frame reading VENOM THIS STRONG ONLY TAKES ONE BITE. The cars themselves were equally macho.

LINE IN THE SAND: **The rush-hour view at the start of the race.**

There was James Bond macho (a 1967 Aston Martin), all-American macho (a 1995 Chevrolet Camaro) and retro macho (a 1965 Corvair). And then there was macho macho, courtesy of a professional stunt man named Michael Ryan, who was intent on taking his tractor trailer cab, a 1999 Freightliner Century, and ramming it down the highway at triple-digit speeds.

In such company, my 1970 Volkswagen Beetle, with its rotted-out floorboards and temperamental engine, didn't cut it-and probably wouldn't have survived the crosscountry trip. Fortunately, the Silver State event officials are evangelical types: in keeping with the spirit of the race and the host state, theyre generally looking for reasons to say yes to anyone interested in joining their ranks. The paperwork, for example, isn't particularly arduous, nor is the driving test. So rather than go through all the hassle just to be flagged at the start line, I pulled aside one of the top race officials and asked him a "hypothetical."

"Given this is a legal race, what would happen if someone entered a legally rented vehicle?"

"Well, you didn't hear this from me," he responded, "but every year we have one or two people in your predicament who do the exact same thing." The racing world's version of a "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Thusly blessed, I tore through the phone book looking for a Corvette. If the Silver State had an official car, that would be it. Thirty-@even Corvettes ran in September's race and, historically, more than half of the nineteen overall winners drove Vettes, including Sievers, who has won on seven separate occasions. After twenty phone calls, I was sitting in my prize, a black 1996 convertible. This poor beast clearly had stories to tell: it already had 44,000 miles on it, every single one of them put on by somebody determine to get is 179-a-day's worth. The windshield was cracked, the driver's seat ripped, the radio antenna permanently mashed into its hole. Nevertheless, it was a car that had its priorities straight -- 300-plus horsepower engine and twenry-gallon gas tank, in lieu of luxuries like a back seat, trunk and glove compartment that only hinder the Corvette's mission: to go fast. Extra insurance? Yes, thank you. And with that, I was off to the Las Vegas Motor Speedway, site of the three-hour course required for first-time drivers.

Implemented after the race's first fatality, the Speedway class familiarizes rookies with the art of 11 apexing" (taking the straightest angle through a high-speed turn), the perils of coyotes, grasshoppers and other animals and the hazards in the Narrows; we were also updated about roadwork that had been ongoing on Highway 318. For me, the most interesting part of the class, however, was matching faces with all those cars. In sizing up the competition, I saw a roomful of cowboys (out of 158 drivers, only eight were women, and only eleven were from east of the Mississippi). Any mention of speed and the room would hoot and cheer and laugh; any mention of danger was met with a loud chorus of guffaws. They cleaved for the most part into.two camps-old, rich country-club types, to whom fast cars are a hobby; and young and scrappy guys who save and sacrifice because going fast is their passion, their

love.

From there, the breakdowns got even sharper. Silver State drivers are a clannish lot. Once I was paired with mycar, no one asked me where I was from, or what I did. No, I was and would be for the rest of the weekend simply a

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"Vette guy." "We're gonna get those boys," an older Vette guy grumbled to me as he walked past my car. "Those boys" would be, in no particular order, the Porsche drivers, invariably tagged with the "wine and cheese" label; the Dodge Viper guys, who get the "I drive the biggest car so I'm compensating for something" stereotype; the Ford Mustang guys, who spar gleefully with the Vette crowd over whosecars are faster and whose women are uglier; and everyone's favorite whipping boys, the DeTomaso Pantera guys. Much like a DeLorean, which the Pantera resembles in look and attitude (think sleek and unreliable), this Italian sports car was imported for a few lonely years in the midseventies. Seattle's Dennis "Mad Dog" Antenucci, a bandanna-swathed fireplug, serves as the Pantera group's spiritual leader, cursing, chiding and inspiring with his personal slogan, "If you're not on the edge, you're taking up space." As a caravan of competitors plowed north on the four-hour drive to White Pine County the next day, I made a mental note to stay as far away from Panteras as possible.

For most of the competitors, the Silver State Classic Challenge isn't really a flat-out race as much as the world's most dangerous math puzzle. Since only half a dozen entrants have a real istic shot at catching the likes of Kelly Sievers, seven years ago the event's nonprofit oversight organization carved out fifteen speed categories, ranging from 95 miles per hour to 165 miles per hour, as well as "unlimited." For all but the unlimiteds, the goal becomes avenging your target speed. No easy feat over a 90-mile course, especially since minimum and maximum speeds prevent drastic midrace corrections. Suddenly, every driver has a chance to win, provided he can harness his ego and accept his limitations, while also using his brain enough to work through the necessary calculations.

Out of all these divisions, the one most full of genuine crazies isdt unlimited, but rather the II 0-miles-per-hour class. As crashes have mounted over the years, so have regulations. The Speedway course and driving test were implemented, along with technical specifications and an inspection. Five-point seat belts, roll bars, collapsible steering columns, special tires, racing suits, onboard fire systems and previous Silver State experience all start coming into play as the intended speed increases. Between the 95 and I 10 target speeds, though, all you basically need is a car that works, a license and a helmet. Thus, the 1 10 offers the most possible speed for the least possible preparation, a confluence of the least-experienced drivers with the biggest egos driving the least-qualified cars. Psychologists, take note: it's also the race's most popular division, with 23 entrants, eight of whom, myself included, were driving Corvettes. It would prove the most competitive division, by far, and the pre-race consensus was that the winner would have to nail his target time within one second to win. As triple-digit speed doesn't lend itself to monitoring the second-hand of your Tag Heuer, most drivers bring along a copilot. Buddy tandems and father-and-son teams abound, and while only a handful of women drive in the race; three dozen, mostly girlfriends and wives, serve as navigators. In many ways, these navigators have the hardest job; while the driver just has to stay on the road, they have to do math on the fly, and advise the driver accordingly.

That's where Dr. Shaggy came in. A high school buddy who earned the nickname for his uncanny resemblance to Scooby Doo's sidekick, Dr. Shaggy was just finishing his Ph.D. in physics. If I couldn't out-speed Kelly Sievers, Dr. Shaggy could certainly out-think most of my fellow cretins in the 110. Sure, they had more than 24 hours experience with their cars, but I had my own personal physicist, plus the clipboard, three stopwatches and the six-inch stack of permutations spit out by the University of Delaware physics department's mainframe that came with him.

On our way north, Dr. Shaggy and I decided to examine the race course. The rest of the caravan was detouring around Highway 318 because the state was still finishing a long-promised repaving that would smooth the cracks and flatten the bumps, but we were too curious. Heading up the course, we were pelted by loose tar pellets. Department of Transportation construction trucks were everywhere, less than 48 hours before the race, laying tar and sealant that should have been finished months earlier. About two miles up from the Narrows-which was a hairy drive at just 55 miles per hour-we spotted two shirtless highway workers taking an afternoon break in their pickup at the side of the road.

We pulled over. The driver had no front teeth, while his partner sported a beard that would have impressed ZZ Top, especially given the desert heat.

"They should cancel the race," said the driver without any prompting. "If they dodt, we're going to sit up on the top of the canyon on Sunday and watch, 'cause four or five of you guys are going to be sliding off the road right there."

"You guys are all cra-zy," ZZ chimed in, drawing out the final word. Dr. Shaggy shot me a nervous look, and we continued up the course to Ely. We were stopped three times for road construction, and forced to tail state cars, which took turns leading traffic through on whichever side of the road wasn't being ripped apart. It took us almost three hours

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NARROW'S-MINDED: **The twisting turns of Highway 318.**

to go the 90 miles we were supposed to come down in 49 minutes two days later.

Ely, Nevada, population 7,000, elevation 6,250 feet, is the biggest town in White Pine County, the place the race is meant to help. Ely got its start with the Pony Express, and to this day remains little more than a highway crossroads, an oasis for long-distance truckers four hours north of Vegas, four hours west of Salt Lake City and six hours east of Reno. It boasts numerous auto parts stores, gas stations and lube shops-and two of Nevads legal brothels, the Big 4 and the Green Lantern, both sponsors of the Silver State.

The town itself serves as the event's pre-race base camp, and it does its best to entertain the influx of visitors. There's a parade for competitors, a display of cars on the high school football field and special parties at the tow's three motel/casinos. The highlight comes Saturday night: the annual "Hooker's Choice Awards," during which the Green Lanter's motley band of professionals choose their favorite-looking car and create a T-shirt in its honor. (It was unclear what the winning driver's prize was.)

It all would have been a lot of fun, had the group not become collectively fixated on the road. The majority of drivers are first-timers, but even these rookies were savvy enough to sense that something was seriously wrong. Several other cars had also driven up the course - at least two of them now featured cracked headlights-and word spread quickly that the race was in jeopardy. At a welcome dinner Friday night, the drivers stopped dumping on the Pantera owners long enough to pepper the organizers with questions. The party line: We can't control the transportation department and we won't run on a course that's unsafe. "Open road racing is like an Ely brothel," one race official shrugged. "You never know what you're going to get.

Throughout the bars of Ely that night, the drivers weren't so sure. "Do you really think they're going to risk not running this race?" argued one old salt holding court at the 70-year-old Hotel Nevada. "They've got people from all across the country. They've got $ 100,000 in entry fees they'd have to refund." And they had something called the "Public Highway Land Speed Record," a title they were intending to bestow at this event. Governor Miller had even agreed to display the trophy in the state capitol, in perpetuity. Kelly Sievers was the prohibitive favorite, but other challengers had come from as far as Saudi Arabia. And lured by this new record, ESPN2 had sent a crew, as had the BBC. It would be a gutsy decision indeed to call the whole thing off.

Dr. Shaggy was concerned, and attempted to distract himself with a few too many beers, a mistake for a Delaware boy at such high elevation. He spent Saturday basically catatonic. In some ways, I was envious; reality had tempered the bound in my step and I was now full of nervous energy. I spent twenty minutes stickering our number, 168, all over the car. I filled the tank with 104-octane racing gasoline. I hired a pit crew of one: Jason, the seventeen-year-old attendant at Elys Cruise-In Lube Center, who changed the oil. I sponged tips from fellow Vette guys. Anything to help me feel like I was taking steps to minimize our risk.

Our car received a final inspection in Ely, and I asked the race technician if I could run it in the race with the top down. "Why not?" he replied, without even looking up from his clipboard. "At the speed yotire going, if something happens, that convertible hood won't do you a lick of good anyway." Stupid? Yes. Hubristic? Yes. But I couldn't help thinking that zooming along with the top down would be a hell of a lot of fun.

At the final driver's meeting that night, Gary Patterson, this year's race director, delivered the verdict: the race was indeed a go (whoops and cheers went up all around) albeit with a catch. A ten-plus mile section in the middle of the course had been deemed unworthy for racing. Our 90-mile race was now a 79.44 mile race, and Dr. Shaggy's thick stack of calculations was now worthless. Perversely, this gave us a big advantage. Most of the other competitors

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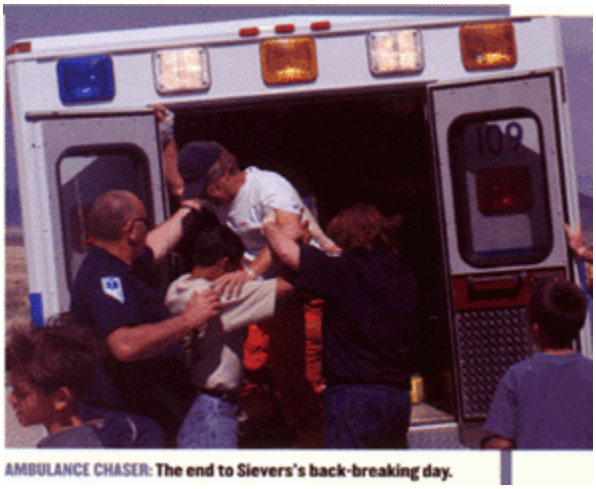
had calculations based on a 90-mile course, but none of them had a personal physicist on the premises for instant recalculating. As we scrambled into action, the nervousness ceased. Similar ebullience spread among the other rookie drivers. *Yes, the road is a mess, but we're still going to race!* We were as confident as a bunch of lemmings.



AMBULANCE CHASER: The end to Sievers's back-breaking day.

Of the 158 people registered, all 158 were on the start line the next morning. The Silver State starts cars in quick intervals, in descending order of speed, beginning with the 150-miles-per-hour division. Once the 95-miles-per-hour crew had cleared the course, the fastest of the fast, the untimiteds, would barrel down. Michael Ryan in his Freightliner was slated for very last; it was decided that no one deserved to look in his rear-view mirror and see a 4.5-ton rig bearing down at 100 miles per hour.

Dr. Shaggy and I were lined up behind Paul Kraght, a young computer programmer from Glendora, California,driving a Ford SHO-essentially a Taurus on steroids. On first glance, he was a geek who didn't even have a navigator and thus couldn't win. We showed off our Global Positioning System, more accurate than a speedometer or odometer and thus the must-have tool of the Silver State. Between the GPS, the car's measurements and the stopwatches, which could be coordinated against sporadic landmarks and mile markers, we felt we had a technical edge.

Little did we know we were playing "Chopsticks" in front of Beethoven. Utilizing a video sent to all competitors to familiarize them with the course, Kraght had produced mathematical algorhythms analyzing the perfect speeds at each point in the race. Based on these charts, he had recorded an audio CD, describing, second-by-second, where he was on the course, what was coming up and his exact speed. We listened in: "I 12... 112... 112.5....112.5 ... approaching curve number three... " In the background, there was a systematic beep, which could be synchronized against his three stopwatches. To prevent a mistake at that level, the stopwatches were synchronized to an atomic clock. Kraght then mounted the stopwatches on the front of his steering wheel. "I have no driving skills," he shrugged. But the man had math skills, and hubris aplenty, which were clearly going to take him far. "If all goes well, I should finish within .04 seconds," he said. "At that point it's really just human error." The race hadn't even started yet and Dr. Shaggy and I already saw that we were playing for second place.

By 10 Am, the cars in front of us began revving their engines. Pretty soon, the starter pointed at us, and said simply, "It's time." Two minutes later, we were at the line. Our top was down, the sun was out. Kraght started to our right, and we waited through the 30-second countdown. The light tower flashed down, the green flag flew, and before I had time to think about it, my foot hit the pedal.

My role was easy. Drive fast, do@t crash, listen to what Dr. Shaggy shouted out. Dr. Shaggy planned on cutting the race into five sections: the start, the ten-mile construction zone, the pre-Narrows, the Narrows themselves and the homestretch. The idea was to average a bit more than 110 in the first two timed legs, so that we could afford to crawl through the Narrows at 70 and still be on schedule to finish the course in 43 minutes, 19.85 seconds. As we accelerated, we soon discovered that the biggest problem was not the road; Highway 318 was damn near immaculate. Somehow, in less than 48 hours, the road crews had managed to sweep the entire road of pellets and rocks; while they still had not finished that one ten-mile section, the other 80 miles were peach. It wasn't the car, either; the Corvette wasn't even straining. Our problem was communication: as we zoomed toward 120 miles per hour with the top down, hearing each other would have been near impossible even if we weren't wearing helmets. The race

became a one-word screamathon.

We were a little behind schedule going into the untimed construction area; coming out, however, I found my comfort

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zone and was no longer worrying about curves. I accelerated up and up, skirting 125 miles per hour, our maximum allowed speed. Kraght was on the horizon, perfectly paced. Still another Corvette was 30 seconds behind me. Occasionally, we'd pass a broken-down car. One was a Firebird, which, appropriately enough, was on fire. The other three were Panteras. After 70 miles at 100-plus, the slow run through the Narrows hardly felt intimidating. I straightened the turns aggressively, even clipping the side of the road in order to better my angle (Dr. Shaggy didn't like the fact that I didift announce that first). Upon exiting the two-mile sequence, my partner informed me that we had gone through averaging 90.

Thus, the final leg was all about slowing down. We were several seconds ahead of schedule, and minimum speed requirements forbade us from just slamming the brakes or pulling over. We took it down to 105. Speed drunkenness had set in; 100 miles per hour felt like we were crawling. Spectators are largely barred from the course, but since the race cuts through government land, an intrepid few had snuck on the night before and camped in mobile homes, and were now watching from behind a fence. I began waving. Nervousness had turned into euphoria. This was a victory lap.

As we approached the finish, Dr. Shaggy had one last chance to make corrections. With two miles to go, I was told to slow down more. Still more with one mile to go. With a half-mile to go, however, I was ordered to "Hit it!" and I did, taking the Vette up from 90 to 110 just as we crossed the finish line. Dr. Shaggy figured we came in somewhere between one and two seconds ahead of schedule. A strong showing, we thought, until we saw Kraght, who confirmed that he felt he had hit his .04 second target. Nonetheless, the mood at the finish line was one of relief, exhilaration and joy. The Green Lantern team was there, passing out Meister Brau, Hamm's and Keystone. Vette guys and Mustang guys and Porsche guys and Pantera guys were all laying into one another. People high-fived and hugged and swapped stories. There were some breakdowns, like any year, but the day had been accident free. The worries about the road seemed unfounded. A local radio station blared tunes live from the finish, and everyone looked up the course to wait for the inestimable Kelly Sievers and the other unlimited drivers.

An hour after the last of the 95s had finished, we were still at the finish, waiting for Sievers. Then came the announcement: Sievers, a 48-year-old who owns an aerospace components company in Oregon, had "gone off the course." That was the euphemism used at the finish line. Up the road, it turns out, Sievers's Corvette-calculated as traveling 235 miles per hour-had burst its right rear tire, veered right, struck the side of the road and shot more than 100 feet through the air. Upon impact, the car burst into flames, which were temporarily doused by the onboard fire system. Sievers somehow managed to climb out through what was once the roof; the car reignited and was reduced to char. Sievers wound up with a broken vertebra, a concussion and burns over most of his body, including his hands and face. "It was a good day to die," Sievers said later. The rest of the race was scrapped, including Michael Ryan and his Freightliner. "The Public Highway Land Speed Record" trophy sitting in the capitol still has no name on it.

Of course, none of the details drifted down to those of us at the finish line. That night, at the awards ceremony at the Showboat, Sievers's name was barely mentioned, his condition largely cloaked from the audience. Most shrugged it off as part of the game.

Finally, the trophies were given out. When a Ford Cobra was announced as the third-place winner in the 110 division, 1.01 seconds off the target time, we knew we were in trouble. We had twenty-one other cars left against us, one of which we knew had kicked our ass. So it was total shock when Dr. Shaggy and I were announced as the second-place winners. We had been .80 seconds ahead of schedule, for an average speed of 110.034. Napoleon, of course, is famous for describing how people would die for medals. I was genuinely surprised at the rush of pride that came over me as Dr. Shaggy and I walked to the podium, kissed the trophy girls, accepted our hardware and waved to the crowd, which, thanks to our Corvette affiliation, was providing us a rousing cheer. Overall, we wound up fifth-most-accurate out of 150 or so finishers. (Kraght, at .15 seconds off-damn human error!-was second overall.)

As I walked back to my seat, part of me was brimming with confidence and itching to come back and nail first place next time-at a higher speed. But a larger part understood why most of the people who race in the Silver State do so only once. I had flirted with death; I had won.

Two months later, I phoned Kelly Sievers to see how he was doing. He had fully recovered, even if his car had burned to a crisp. He had flirted with death in a far more immediate way; Plus, he had seen it up close once before, when Terry Herman, one of the race's two fatalities, died driving Sievers's Porsche. So I asked him the obvious question: Would he ever go back? "The car's being rebuilt, and I'm going to smash that record in May," he responded. "In this race, you either win, break or you die." Stupidity? Hubris? The answer, of course, is both.

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