

Serendipity is waking to capture a 747 sunrise, or shooting Ludvig Björnstad's fireball from the start line with a hand-held 50mm Olympus! However I've got nothing on that found by Harlan Thompson, the lone gun legend of my 1980 Hot Gossip scoop. He'd been making a good living for some years as a gun for hire on the East Coast's lucrative Fuel Coupe match race circuit when a serendipitous meeting with Swedish racer Knut Söderquist saw them teaming up and putting together Tre Kronor to race over here

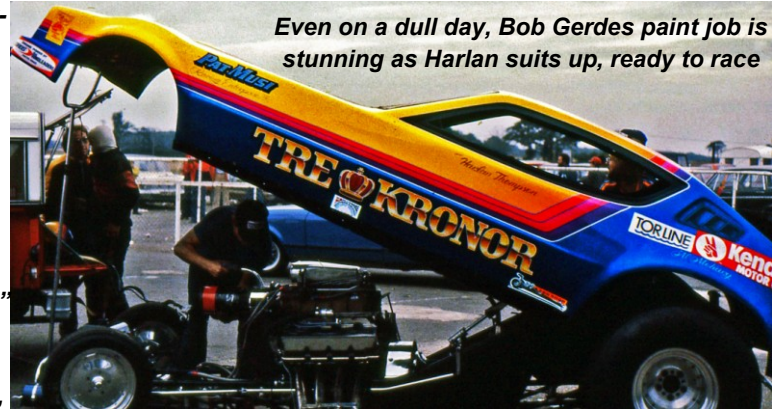
"My first time down the quarter mile in Europe they put me into the guard rail, they took the fender off the car," Harlan told me, adding with a chuckle, "I thought, boy they sure play rough over here!"



That meeting took place at Harlan's long-time parts store, the famed Central Jersey Speed & Machine, and in July 1980 they drove into Santa Pod in a beat-up Mercedes, Harlan suggesting that with shot suspension it made them look like down-and-outs!

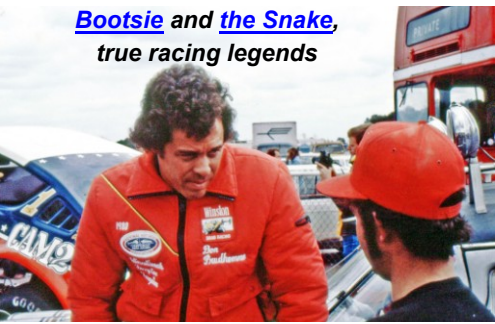


Tre Kronor (three crowns in Swedish), was naked to the elements on an open trailer, its stunning Bob Gerdes' paint job gleaming in the sun for all to see. Harlan first pass was indeed memorable - Hounddog got outta shape, changing lanes and hit Tre Kronor, but with no major damage. Harlan was happy and impressed when Bob Phelps "took the body and fixed it for us while we set the car up for the next pass." They qualified fifth, losing to the pole sitter, British racing legend Bootsie Herridge's new Gladiator in the first round when Harlan's wild out-of-shape pass clipped the centre line and he was disqualified - rain stopped play! But they won at Mantorp Park, setting a new track record then returned to the Pod for the World Finals to face the largest field of fuel coupes ever seen outside the USA (to this day!), including true giants like legendary 4-time NHRA Champion, Don "The Snake" Prudhomme, founder member of the Cragar 5-Second Funny Car Club (with a 5.98 in 1978) and 2-time event champion Gene Snow who "owned" Santa Pod having won the 1979 World Finals in the quickest side-by-side fuel coupe race on the planet (a 6.04 to a 6.00 over reigning NHRA champion Raymond Beadle), and was hoping to make it 3-in-a-row with his "Snowman" Plymouth. Just for the record, that mark stood 'til 1981 when Kenny Bernstein joined Cragar's Five Second Club in the Budweiser King Dodge, his 5.99 at 238.72 just beating Mike Dunn's 6.06 at 233.76 in Roland Leong's King Hawaiian Bread car at the NHRA Gatornationals. And that's a fact, folks. (Data National Dragster 27<sup>th</sup> March 1981) Long-time nitro warrior Tom Hoover was driving Beadle's Blue Max and then we had our own legends, Alan "Bootsie" Herridge, Nobby Hills' Hounddog, driven by Owen Hayward. Dennis Priddle's JWR Monza, Dave Stone, Ronnie Picardo and a host of Scandinavians including Lee-Anders Hasselström, John Andersson, Rune Fjeld and veteran racer Hazze Fromme making up the 16-car eliminator from 20 fuel coupes that tried to make the field. But Harlan wasn't fazed at all, "We felt like it would be a good race, we had an advantage in that we were used to tracks like the Pod and knew that these guys had to play conservative to a point as they didn't have the type of back-up we had at home. Nor could they use all their horsepower, so we thought we had a good chance to beat 'em..." The track was packed with fans for one of the Santa Pod's all-time great races. British drag racing pioneer Bootsie Herridge was glowing, his 6.21 on pole ahead of a 6.22 from the "Snake" whose first round against the Blue Max showed British fans how fickle fate can be in the ultra tough world of fuel coupe racing as Snake's car died before the burnout! Fans also found out about racing luck as Harlan got a virtual bye when his first round opponent failed to make the call, and then a real bye! But a win is a win! And Tre Kronor still needed to



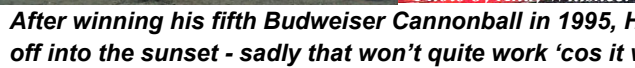
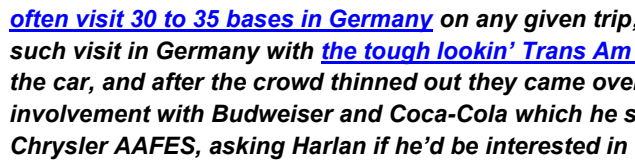
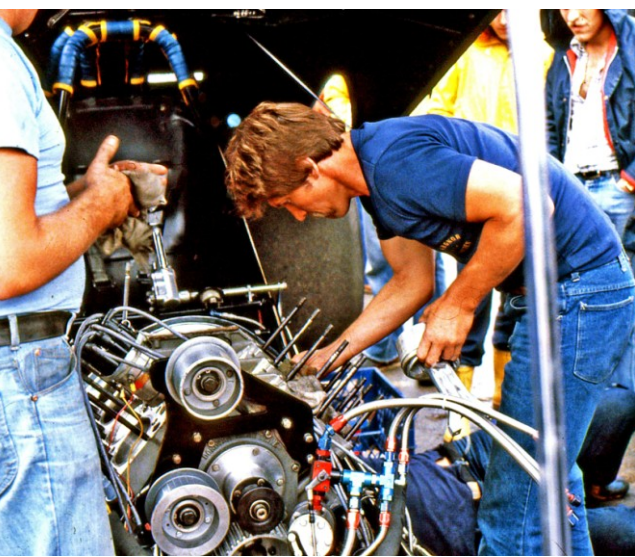
Even on a dull day, Bob Gerdes paint job is stunning as Harlan suits up, ready to race

Bootsie and the Snake, true racing legends

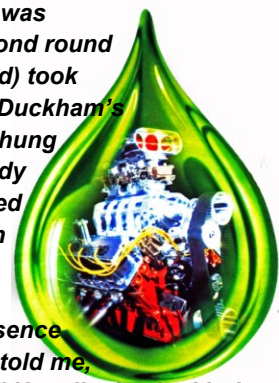


be worked on between times. "You tell me when we didn't have to work on the motor after a race," Harlan said with a chuckle - with the heads off on the next page you know he wasn't joking. Gene Snow also had luck with a red light win then a stout 6.39 beat a troubled Ronnie Picardo





In the semis Snow had another easy run when Lee Anders was disqualified. After his ground pounding burnout in the second round (below), John Anderson's 6.26 at 229 (low ET and top speed) took care of Tom Hoover's 6.38 at 221 in the Blue Max with the Duckham's tower really shaking as the fuel coupes thundered. We j'st hung on enjoying NitroThunder and a stunning view while our lady friends screamed and smiled too. Today we'd not be allowed such a structure, especially as we were packed tighter than the fans below -Health & Safety - what's that?! Duckham's oh-so-cool supercharged teardrop graced a full page ad in the first issue of Street Machine and they had a strong presence at the track led by Frank Johns, their friendly PR man who told me, "Watch out for the Red Arrows Mike, they'll be here soon." Happily they're kinda precise, so when I asked how long, Frank checked his watch, smiling as he said "About 15 minutes..." With nowt happening on track it was easy to stand at the start line gazing into the skies, seeing their lights, I raised my camera and shot them blasting overhead at 500mph! At that speed they'd cleared the track before my second shot! Then came the power wave blasting our ears milli-seconds later to wake folks up, in fact the dude walking towards me didn't see 'em passing by! A mind blowing entrance, and their super-low show was stunning



Harlan's hard work paid off when he met Swedish superstar John Anderson and he did it in style, Tre Kronor's power blur inches ahead of the Monza to win with a 6.35 to a 6.40, both at 224. Then it was back to work, preparing for the finals where sadly Gene Snow broke after the burnout leaving Snowman's crew looking on dejectedly as [Harlan thundered into the sunset](#). He'd won, but even though the chutes came out early Harlan drove it to a 6.32, his best of the weekend at a slowing 196mph. Thanks to technology, you can find the action on YouTube, but now here are some serendipitous moments that took Harlan's drag racing career to a level he'd never dreamt of. In 1982 he met Tom Doherty who ran Anheuser Busch's worldwide program for the US military, visiting wounded warriors and spreading goodwill - with his laid back image and warm personality Harlan was soon invited to join him. The troops also enjoyed this, especially as he was a Vietnam vet and nitro funny car driver, lo and behold Tom suggested he might like to do something similar in Europe for Budweiser, and [the rest is history!](#) Many years later, Tom told me "Harlan would often visit 30 to 35 bases in Germany on any given trip; he'd be on a different base every day from first thing in the morning. During one such visit in Germany with [the tough lookin' Trans Am below](#) in 1988, Harlan noticed some "suits" at the back of the area when he fired the car, and after the crowd thinned out they came over to express interest in the fuel coupe's drawing power, asking about Harlan's involvement with Budweiser and Coca-Cola which he soon explained, leading to one introducing himself as a senior executive with Chrysler AAFES, asking Harlan if he'd be interested in driving a Chrysler? "Sure," he said, "J'st what d'y' have in mind?"

Happy with his agenda, Harlan was asked "What exactly do you want?" Funding, Mopar Performance bodies and parts, support vehicles for the race team and, "I'd like you guys to do more for the military, y'know barbecues, give-a-ways, tee shirts, ball caps an' stuff for the troops..." The executive was all smiles, suggesting it was all fine, thanking Harlan for his time, adding, "We'll be in touch," before taking his leave. A couple weeks later Harlan got the call, "we'd like you to come to New York so we can get your contract sorted out and signed..." Now that's what you call serendipity! And they really came through, allowing Harlan to put together [his own pair of Budweiser fuel coupes](#). Even the great Kenny Bernstein never managed that! The US Navy put this image together with Harlan's US Armed Forces mini funny car on the carrier USS Stennis as a recruiting poster.

A great hole shot, but Harlan overpowered the track, got badly out of shape as Gary Page thundered to victory with low elapsed time of 5.89 at 229

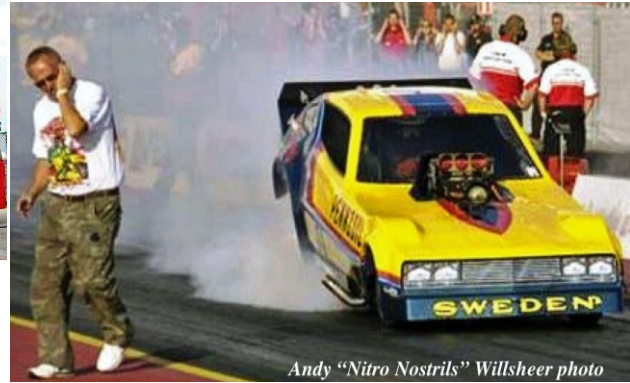
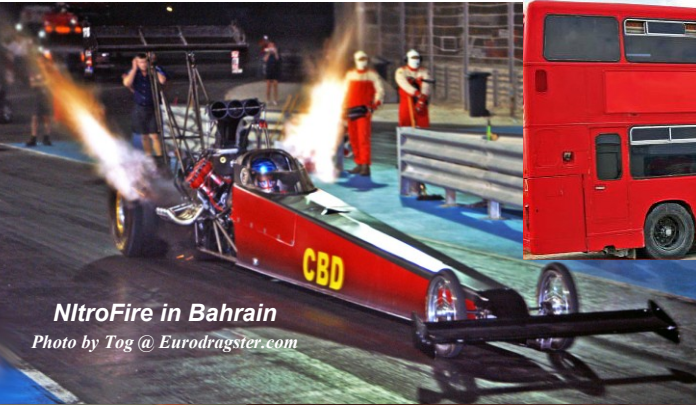
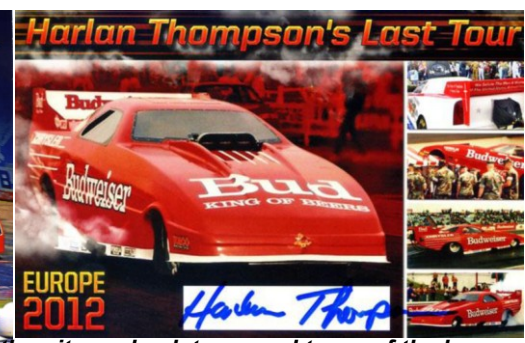
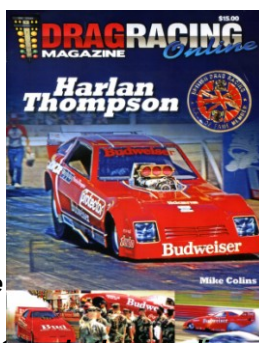
Harlan's favourite Santa Pod memory is racing nitro legend Tom Hoover in them, winning with a 5.63 at 264 when Hoover went up in smoke. Harlan also bought Darrell Gwynn's fueler over, the young Floridian giving Pod fans their first side-by-side 5-second race against Liv Berstad first time out in 1989, and at that year's Finals Al Segrini raced it against Harlan's fuel coupe and won 5.73 at 242 to Harlan's 5.79 at 230. The US Navy put this image together with Harlan's US Armed Forces mini funny car on the carrier USS Stennis as a recruiting poster.

Photo by Andy Willsheer

After winning his fifth Budweiser Cannonball in 1995, Harlan hung up his guns, riding off into the sunset - sadly that won't quite work 'cos it was "pissin' down with rain!"



However with continued support from Budweiser, Chrysler and Coca-Cola, he'd still spend three to four weeks each year touring the US bases with his fuel coupe, and not just in Europe. In 2001, he toured bases in Okinawa, Korea and [Japan](#). Security reasons precluded him running on nitro, yet troops thronged the car, still impressed when he fired up on alcohol. No cackle maybe, but the powerful sound of blown an' injected horsepower would send tingles through young veins and perhaps remind them of their freedom. Thanks to Bud and Chrysler, military personnel and their families could not only sit in the race car for photos, they could enter sweepstakes at each base for a chance to win a new Dodge Neon, Bud Racing jackets, hats and t-shirts and other goodies - then it was back to annual tours of the bases in Europe. But he was back in the saddle again in 2006 when Knut Söderquist once again asked Harlan to drive a Top Fuel car in Bahrain in the Middle East and he said yes - first time out in a modern Top Fuel car Harlan set a 5.23 track record! The next year he was invited to drive at the Emirates Motorplex in Umm Al Quain - this NitroFire PR poster's got to be the biggest ever seen on a London bus anywhere!



NitroFire in Bahrain  
Photo by Tog @ Eurodragster.com

He was reunited with Knut at Mantorp Park in 2009, making many new fans after driving

Andy "Nitro Nostrils" Willsheer photo



Andy Willsheer photo

30 years of Budweiser backing and Harlan doesn't drink!  
This links to 40 pages of [fuel coupe thunder](#) from CHRR 2015

Johnny Nilsson's stunning recreation of the famed Tre Kroner fuel coupe. In [2011 Harlan was inducted into the BDRHoF](#) and I put together features that ran in three issues of Drag Racing Online. Then a lady who used to baby sit Harlan's daughters rang up and asked for a set - it coulda been expensive, so she was told, "For an extra five bucks we'll put 'em all in one issue," and that was super cool! Finally, after 42 years on the road, Harlan made his last tour in 2012, took the Cannonball winning fuel coupe back to the USA and the Thompson brothers [My Girl Drive-In](#) where it still entertains the troops to this day. So [we added another chapter to his story](#) which resulted in the second publication of the mag (seen above), and the suckers spelt my name wrong! No problem, and I'm happy to say that all of the features are now available again at [dragracingonline.com](#), but they've been put up back to front, which is a kinda weird! There y'go, Harlan and I are still good friends to this day, but we haven't met since I took my daughter Sarah to the 2015



Dave Smith photo

California Hot Rod Reunion to celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as drag racers. A year early, but that too was serendipity as it was the last great CHR Reunion, the NHRA making a hash of it in 2016. Talking of which, when I phoned Street Machine Editor Dave Smith to see how things were going he was stuck in traffic somewhere oop north which meant me leaving without breakfast (my faux pas not his), dialling the T'bird into attack mode and knocking many minutes of Google's suggested ET for reaching the venue of the BDRHoF's 2017 Gala - a fun drive to say the least, especially as I found got a parking spot right outside the front doors. But things got really weird for me when Jeff Lutz began talking about his 250mph street machine 'cos all I could think about was my first meeting with Don Garlits in 1976, then the only man on the planet to have made a piston powered pass down drag strip at 250mph Don had told me "Ah came back from that run 'n we took the engine apart 'n it was really a mess, the rods were just bent, big bows in 'em from the power," shaking his head at the memory, "See the strip was holding us and was wantin' to make the wheels turn, but you couldn't've made it go any faster that day with that equipment. It didn't blow up, but it wouldn't have made another run. And it's a wonder it didn't blow up. We tried that whole weekend to do that again 'n we weren't able to. We ran 249.30 on three other occasions, as fast as it'd go." "What was your ET on the 250?" "5.63 an' we ran 5.65 on the run behind it, the 249."



Jeff Lutz, Facebook

"That's truckin' it really is," I'd offered humbly through another sip of bourbon - yet here I was with one of the happiest dudes on the planet chatting to me about [often running 250mph](#) after doing many miles on the highway, and then driving home again! No wonder things went astral 'cos I was only sippin' Burmese tea! Asked what he did to drive the car home, Jeff said, "Put the radiator back in," with a big grin. That's cool, 'cos the first thing you do is slip off the fan belts for extra power - but 250mph, wow! It was amazing, but shortly later Dave arrived to do a proper interview and BDRHoF sponsor Geoff Stillwell suggested it might be a good time for me to take lunch, so I did. Wow, Connie Kalitta was on my left, my mind recalling this recreation of his early Bounty Hunter AAFD with hemi power at the 2016 CHRR - and also Street Machine banners in this shot of Rune Fjeld racing Harlan Thompson. Weird recollections, perhaps!





Not wishing to maybe upset lunch, I handed Jim O this 1988 shot of Connie's late son Scott racing at DeSoto to give him later...



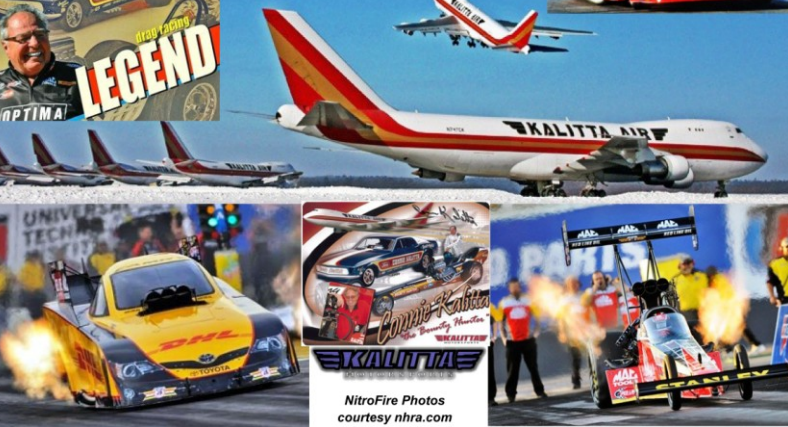
Photo courtesy nhra.com



# Time out with Legends

As an introduction I fired my AA Fuel Zippo, making a fresh beverage, sitting down as Clay Millican came in and began talking with Connie K. "Wow," a fuel car racer who beat Big Daddy in 1964 with today's quickest driver – and a green light Top Fuel race behind 'em!

Clay had the NHRA 1,000 foot record at 3.631 seconds and owns five of the top 10 ET's in Top Fuel history! And what can you say about Connie Kalitta? He's seen more Nitro action than most folks, got one of the largest fleets of 747s on the planet and been thrilling fans with fuel coupes and fuel cars since time began, and still does today. "Guess I haven't done too bad for a one-eyed m\*\*\*\*r\*cker," was overheard later, I'll drink to that any day sir!



Background NitroFire by Eddie Hill (left lane) and race winner Darrell Gwynn



Click the link for this [1990 Gatormationals](#) finals



At the 2018 Winternationals Clay ran 3.628 for a new NHRA record and Doug Kalitta won his 44th race for Uncle Connie and then new shoe Richie Crampton got his first win for Kalitta Motorsports at the Gators.

A legend in his own right, Clay Millican is IHRA's all-time winningest driver with six IHRA Top Fuel world championships, 52 Iron Man trophies and his record setting 51 event wins! Clay drove his PartsPlus/Great Clips car to his first NHRA Mello Yello victory at the 2017 Thunder Valley Nationals. Supporting our sponsors - Great Clips did a cool job on my hair last year at Bakersfield – and I got a good deal too!



Main Event 2014 Batman versus Thunder; Chicken Photos by Wojtek

How're the crazy dudes lookin' at a page this close to NitroThunder UnLeashed!



One of them's j'st noticed - and the babe behind's still screaming! Wow, what a race, and check out Anita's tyre shake!

At the 2014 Main Event Per and Karsten Andersen gave Batman a 3.91 at 309.23 on the new car's first full pull in Wojtek's photo sequence above! Fans at Tierp saw a 3.957 at 311.84 and a 3.955 at 310.97 to set new FIA records. At the 2014 FIA Finals they thundered to 315.51mph and then a huge 316.40, the fastest 1,000ft runs outside the USA. Sadly they retired after losing another FIA title to politics an' we miss 'em! Click this for [MaximumNitroXposure](#) of Andersen Racing's AA awesome performance and much more NitroThunder from Still Ramblin'

It's one minute after midnight, wrapped in a cheerful, tearful embrace with Tracey Boden when Phil Pead and Prid break into "Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday dear Tracey, Happy birthday to you..." It was a kinda wonderful few minutes, much like the magic moments captured in the images of Prid tutoring Phil prior to what I believe was Tony Boden's first Top Fuel race



More Legends next time folks, stay lucky...