

# The Dallas Morning News

## Drag racing revs up tension; officials try to clear streets Undeterred by police, car enthusiasts feed on adrenaline rush

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By SERGIO CHAPA / Al Día

The idea for this front page feature story was generated while doing separate story featuring enforcing a new youth curfew. We spent several nights with the racers and walked away with a good package and video.

The parking lot of the Quick Stop Conoco at the corner of Royal Lane and Emerald Way is packed with customized cars, sport motorcycles and people.

Every Tuesday and Thursday night, the group gathers here – sometimes attracting several hundred spectators from across the Dallas-Fort Worth area – to participate in an underground racing scene.

More than 100 people have turned out on this particular evening. Hip-Hop and reggaeton blare as young men and women of all races check out one another's cars, talk with old friends and greet newcomers.

“This is the gathering spot,” said Brad Harvey, a 20-year-old street racing fan from Coppell.

His conversation with a friend is cut short as a group of eight Ford Mustangs from the Smokin' Performance Car Club rev their engines and start a caravan out of the parking lot.

It's time to race.

The underground scene in the empty warehouse districts of northwest Dallas has been going on for decades, even though street racing is illegal and dangerous, said Lt. Paul Wisdom of the Dallas Police Department's northwest patrol.

And police are somewhat hamstrung by a June 2006 policy that allows them to pursue suspects only in serious felony crimes where there is a great public danger, officials said.

A man who calls himself “La Uva” gives two cars the go-ahead in a race along Interstate 635 and Northwest Highway last week.

Police records show that arrests for racing peaked in 2005, with criminal charges filed against 32 people citywide. But that number fell to six arrests in 2007 – largely due to the June 2006 policy, officials said.



[To Watch Video – Click Here](#)



Still, Lt. Wisdom said, the department has vowed to disrupt the races, arrest whomever they can and issue tickets to make the outlaw hobby as expensive as they can for anyone who participates.

“Cars can be impounded, people go to jail and licenses can be suspended,” Lt. Wisdom warned racers and spectators.

Under state law, drag racing is a Class B misdemeanor punishable by up to six months in jail and a \$2,000 fine. Spectators can also be jailed overnight or receive fines of up to \$500 for various Class B or Class C misdemeanor crimes. And the state's point system for driver's licenses also applies annual surcharges of \$100 or more based on the number and type of tickets drivers receive.

More than three years ago, a 20-year-old man was left nearly crippled by a car accident caused by racers off Marsh Lane, Lt. Wisdom said.

The northwest patrol maintains a task force of four officers to deal with racing and the accidents, public intoxication, curfew violations and other crimes that come with the scene.

Complete figures for 2007 were not available, but Lt. Wisdom said officers assigned to the task force made 855 traffic stops in 2006 resulting in 22 felony arrests, 51 misdemeanor arrests and 1,129 citations.

“If a major incident did occur, you could expect that resources would be allotted and you would see a big, big presence over there,” Lt. Wisdom said. “The current status is that we do have a presence over there and we move it around and we keep an eye on them and try to disperse them as much as we possibly can.”

### **Seeking a good time**

But that doesn't do much to deter the crowd here on this night.

Mauricio Valladolid, the 23-year-old president of the Smokin' Performance Car Club for Ford Mustangs, said most of the young people who participate in the Royal Lane scene stay out of trouble. They just come to have a good time and meet new people, he said.

Tracks in Grand Prairie and Ennis offer a place to race legally, Mr. Valladolid said, but they are too expensive because of racing fees.

And those who pay don't always get to race because the lines are so long and they have to share the track with higher-powered racing vehicles.

“A lot of the guys here have small children, so they don't have money for that,” Mr. Valladolid said. Aside from the risk of fines or jail, he said, street racing is free and racers usually get to compete several times before the police show up.



“We come to this place because it's at the corner of Dallas and Farmers Branch, so it's easier to run from the police when we need to go,” Mr. Valladolid said of Royal Lane. “When they run us out from one place, we just go to another.”

Most of the members of the tight-knit group have come to Royal Lane for years, he said. And many of those who participate said they grew up with their fathers racing.

Today, some people bring their own children and show off their babies as proudly as they do their cars. “The only problem we have with the police is that it's illegal to come here and race just like everywhere else,” Mr. Valladolid said.

## **Rolling in**

Regardless of police enforcement, a long caravan of cars carrying hundreds of people leave Royal Lane and follow one another to well-known spots along Interstate 635, Regal Row and Northwest Highway after area businesses and warehouses close for the evening.

MySpace pages and Web sites belonging to the racing enthusiasts and car clubs often refer to Royal Lane as “Royalajara, Mexico” or just simply “Mexico,” often light-heartedly implying a “bandido” or “outlaw” culture of running from police.

The crowd is mostly between 18 and 25 years old with participants from all races, though Hispanics make up the largest group.

The races never last too long before police show up.



But on this Thursday night, several dozen sports cars, trucks, motorcycles and customized cars race one another from one-eighth of a mile to one-quarter of a mile for more than 30 minutes.

“It's definitely an adrenaline rush,” said Mario Nuñez, a 19-year-old motorcycle racer from Grand Prairie. “It's way better than playing any video game.”

The racing ends when somebody yells “police” about five minutes past midnight. Some head back to the gas station where they were earlier, others go home and still others just move to the next spot, leaving their makeshift drag strip empty and silent.

The same thing happened two nights earlier on a street off Northwest Highway near the Dallas-Irving border. But that night, two people were stopped and ticketed.

## **Expensive hobby**

Mr. Valladolid admits that the street-racing scene and their cars come with a high price tag. He's collected and paid more than \$10,000 worth of traffic tickets since he started driving – most of them related to racing.

He recently had to pay \$2,000 to get out of jail for driving with a suspended license – in addition to car impound fees.

Chris Cervantes, a 20-year-old member of Smokin' Performance Car Club, said he has five pages worth of traffic tickets but will continue to race.

“At a car show, you win a trophy, but out here you win bragging rights,” said Mr. Cervantes, whose father participated in the scene when he was a teenager. “Ever since cars were invented, people have been racing.”

Adrian Madrigal drives his customized Honda CRX about one hour from Terrell to meet with the street racers off Royal Lane.

He said the Dallas street racing scene reminds him of where he used to live in Los Angeles.

“Over there, there would be a mile of all racing,” Mr. Madrigal said. “We had cars, motorcycles and go-carts too. They would block off the whole street, and they would do it from 6 in the afternoon until 4 in the morning.”

William, a Web site designer and photographer who identified himself only by his first name, said he believes the Dallas scene could be larger if they could keep it low-key and control the undesirable elements.

“They could be out a lot longer if they didn't blare the music so loud,” he said. “But the cops are going to come, and they're going to go down the road and peel out.”

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## Fielding Complaints

Police records show an average of several thousand complaints for racing and speeding each year. Here's a look at the numbers.

Year	Citywide Complaints	NW Dallas Complaints	Percent of Total
2005	3,498	965	27.6%
2006	3,925	695	17.7%
2007*	2,674	568	21.2%

Source: Dallas Police Department

\* - Complaints through Friday

## FATALITIES AND INJURIES

- Juan Martinez was killed in an alleged race March 4, 2006, off South Masters Drive in Pleasant Grove. Court records show that Terry Lex Hebb II, 18, was charged with racing on a highway causing serious bodily injury or death. The other racer, Jose Alberto Garcia, 23, was hospitalized and charged with racing on a highway causing serious bodily injury or death and driving while intoxicated. Both cases are pending in state courts. Racing on a highway causing death is a second-degree felony punishable by two to 20 years in prison and/or a \$10,000 fine.
- Nicasio Favela Castro, 25, received two years of prison in May after pleading guilty to racing on a highway causing serious bodily injury or death for a fatal accident in the 8400 block of the C.F. Hawn Freeway on Nov. 24.
- Court records show Christopher Soliva, 27, received five years' probation for a racing accident in northwest Dallas on June 30, 2004, in which a baby was injured and had to be hospitalized.

SOURCE: Dallas Police Department