



Harry Strunk, former editor in chief of the Daily Nebraskan, is currently working on a biography of Don Schumacher and the history of his racing teams as well as a novel set within the world of drag racing called *Burning More Than Rubber*. To gather research for these projects, he's signed on as a crewmember for Don Schumacher's Jack Beckman-driven Mail Terminal Services Funny Car during the Western Swing and will chronicle his adventures for NHRA.com readers. Strunk can be reached at hstrunk100@gmail.com

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A week in the life of a crew member

As a novice fan, drag racing reminds me of my days as a soccer parent.

I have a basic understanding of the sport but am usually too embarrassed to ask many questions. Diving in and asking dumb rookie questions for only a week now, I realize how little most fans probably understand about the complexity and time commitment involved in top fuel competition.

Monday is teardown day in Denver. It's like going to the office from 8 to 5:30, except the office is on a hot asphalt parking lot and you don't leave for lunch. It is another steady stream of activity cleaning up, preparing parts for next week, packing away the trucks and reviewing Denver's results. It reminds me of the bartender who is continually cleaning glasses and keeping busy.

The MTS team had a very good week in the parts department with only minor failures. Even without much damage, it still requires measuring and tearing apart clutch plates, cylinder heads, measuring and matching pistons and rods, tearing down and servicing engine blocks ... have I lost anyone yet besides myself?

I was shocked with the amount of work involved in getting ready to move on to Seattle, not only on the racing side, but also in the hospitality areas. Catering is a very important part of the racing experience. Providing sponsors and their guests with an enjoyable experience includes time-consuming setup and preparation. It also includes taking care of the racing crews and support teams. This whole racing scene reminds me of a finely catered party where the guests simply show up for an evening of dining and entertainment and go home from the evening oblivious to the planning, execution and clean up necessary for the event.

Tuesday is a full travel day with a 5 a.m. departure and 16-hour day. When you have 20 hours to drive in a day and half, you don't stop for breaks until the tank is empty. I plan my drink intake accordingly.

The scenery blurs by in uninteresting fashion when you know you can't stop to enjoy it. "I've been by the Grand Canyon 20 times and still haven't seen it," comments MTS' Jim Marcellus. Jim is also the Road Mom. With crew chief Todd Okuhara and assistant Phil Shuier in the air, the Road Mom is in charge of getting rigs and vehicles to Seattle including a night over in Coeur d' Alene, Idaho.

Racing crews are like big families; tensions over who gets to drive, where they are going to eat and that they all show up on time. The crew spends more time together than with their own families during the year. According to Marcellus, every team is different with personalities and dynamics all playing a part. Most of the time conflicts are worked out on the road, but if not they are referred up to Okuhara later in the week.

Our trip requires more than one-hour delay to clear up trucking permits due to new regulations on the Montana/Idaho border. Dinner Tuesday is late and another early departure Wednesday morning requires retiring early for the evening.

"You have to love the sport; it's more than just a cool job," says Tom Boyington, in charge of the "rack" of pistons and rods. I find it harder to put into words as I estimate how difficult it has been to keep up with these guys for a week and multiply it times 23 race weeks. I'm usually scratching my head as to where we are, where we are staying and where I'm to be next ... but don't tell the Road Mom.

Seattle pit parking opens Wednesday in carnival fashion. Trucks, rigs, and vehicles get bathed by their crews and wait in endless lines scratching slowly along on their way to find assigned spots. Aligning the trucks and setting up the proper pit area takes a few hours in between the Seattle raindrops.

Thursday is prep day with another 8 a.m. departure from the hotel. A small city has sprung up around the cherished black strip. Track officials are already busy heating, rearranging, and grooming it for the incoming mechanical monsters which will soon scream down its grooved surface.

A new chassis is brought out of the trailer, surveyed, and cleaned in preparation for building it up from a bare bone frame. On Monday after racing, this skeleton will grow into a bright new shiny blue and yellow racer.



MTS tire technician Wes Knop picks over new tires at the Goodyear booth like his mother does buying new apples. Goodyear delivers tires to every race since space is limited aboard the two MTS semi trucks. Knop makes sure he is early. He wants to single out the best tires based on straight lines chalked around the outside diameter. This will indicate whether a tire will roll true.

Thursday ends early. The crew starts heading home at 4 p.m.

I awake Friday with a tinge of excitement and anticipation for the first qualifying sessions. Qualifying doesn't start until mid afternoon and, with possible rain delays pushing racing into the evening, the crew is allowed a late morning start of 10 a.m.

As I get off the hotel elevator, I hear a lady mention she is glad it's Friday so she can get home from a week's worth of business travel. I sit down to let the words flow over my laptop once again, and the lady's words keep ringing in my ears...

And so the show begins again in Seattle.

Signing off,
From the Road

