

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DRAG RACING

Why People Drag Race

by

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"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

Henry David Thoreau
Walden, 1854

Question: "What is the major thrill of drag racing for you?" Answer: "When I win, I feel like I will live forever." Question (asked of a Funny Car driver): "Can you describe the feeling of going that fast?" Answer: "It's like the best you've ever felt in your life - two degrees above an orgasm!" These are typical of the responses we got during our interviews with 41 drag racers.

In the course of our ten month study, it has been our privilege to talk with some of the most prominent people in drag racing today: Don Garlits, Dick Landy, Don Schumacher, Dennis Bacca, Don Nicholson, Tom McEwen, Gene Snow and John Weibe. In total, we talked with 23 amateur and 18 professional drivers. Most of our interviews with amateur drivers were done during regularly scheduled weekend meets at Fremont Raceway in Fremont, California between October '72 and March of this year. To meet and interview the pros, we focused our efforts on the American Hot Rod Association's World Championships in October and the Northern Nationals in March.

What are people like who drag race? How long have they been doing it? Do their families approve? Do they feel afraid? What do they personally get out of racing? We found some unexpected differences and similarities between professional and amateur drivers on these questions.

We started our interviews by asking the drivers their ages and how many years they had been racing. The average age was 31 years. The pros had been

racing an average of 14 years and the amateurs an average of 12 years. It would thus seem that length of time in the sport is not related to professional or amateur status. While some drivers start out as amateurs and soon rise to the ranks of the professionals, others are content to race occasionally on the weekends and remain amateurs. One of the real strengths of drag racing is that anyone can participate, driving almost any type of car, and become as involved as they choose.

OCCUPATION

Our next question related to occupation. The responses indicate why we sometimes had difficulty making a clear distinction about who were professionals and who were amateurs. We asked the drivers what their main source of income was. Twelve of the 18 pros received the greater part of their incomes from racing activities. Three of the other six were supported by automotive-related work and three were not (one student, one secretary, and one businessman). It is a tribute to the diversity of drag racing that more than half of the amateurs we talked with earn their livelihoods in non-automotive types of employment. Represented were such varied occupations as: student, fireman, plasterer, scale repairman, electrician, navy crewman, salesman, housewife, and foreman in a chocolate company.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: SUPPORT AND CONFLICT

Most of the drivers we talked to were family men. Roughly three-fourths are now, or have been married. The figures for the professionals and the amateurs are comparable. Of the 14 married professionals, 13 had children. Thirteen of the 17 married amateurs had one or more children.

How do the families of the drivers feel about their drag racing activities? Two divorced drivers felt that their racing activities contributed to the break-up of their marriages. In contrast, several other divorcees said their ex-wives

had supported their racing interests. Two pro drivers who have never been married felt that they had to choose between marriage and racing. Essentially, the drivers felt that they could not do justice to both racing and a family.

We asked each driver whether or not his family supported his racing activities. While drag racing was heavily implicated in the break-up of several marriages, in other cases it seemed that "The family that drag races together, stays together." Family groups are much in evidence on any Sunday at the drags. Some watch from the stands, while other families are more actively involved, driving the pushcar or pouring chlorox in front of the tires at the starting line. One amateur driver received a blower from his wife for Christmas, a clear indication of her support for his racing.

The amateurs felt support from their families more often than did the pros. Drag racing for pros requires frequent trips away from home, and it is often not possible for the families to accompany the drivers. Some of the families of pro drivers attend the races as often as possible, but travel stops attendance in many cases. Particularly interesting is the fact that the pros felt more of what we have called 'reluctant family support' for their racing. This reluctant support would be typically defined in this way: Although not happy about it, the driver's wife and children had learned to live with the negative aspects of racing, such as the danger and the amount of time spent away from home. Significantly, a larger number of pros felt no family support for their racing.

Do the drivers feel personal conflict between drag racing and family interests? Seventy-five percent of the pros, and half of the amateurs did feel conflict. Drag racing is a time consuming sport. To become involved in it means risking some conflict with family interests, and our results indicate that the more involved a driver becomes, the greater the likelihood he will experience this conflict.

Figure 1 illustrates what some of the roots of this conflict may be. We

found most of the amateurs spend between 10 and 50 hours a week related to drag racing. For a man with a full-time job and a family, the source of potential conflict is obvious. Of course in some families this conflict is minimal due to the whole family's participation in drag racing. In these families, the wife might be seen piloting the family race car through the quarter mile while the kids cheer her on from the stands.

The pro drivers spend from 20 to 80 or more hours a week related to racing. This could involve time racing, doing mechanical work, traveling or doing promotional activities. Here the potential for conflict with family interests is even stronger. Considering the danger, the time and financial demands of drag racing, it is remarkable that so many drivers are able to work out satisfying family relationships along with their racing.

WOMEN IN DRAG RACING

Women, too, are finding drag racing to be an addictive hobby as well as an exciting profession. They are equally as turned on to the thrill of speed, the competition and the challenge of the car and driver working together. All of the women in our study had husbands who race and who helped them get started. In one case, when the husband bought a new car, he gave his wife the old one to race. Some of the ladies wrench on their own cars.

The women in our study were: a sixteen year old girl racing for the first time, an amateur who had raced for seven years and a professional who had been racing for thirteen years. The sixteen year old was very excited about her drag racing debut and eager to try again. Her parents who were less than enthralled with her new hobby, were nervously watching her compete. The amateur racer had been encouraged by her husband, and cheered on by her two children. Asked if she had felt sex discrimination in drag racing, she replied that she had not. The professional driver, however, had felt sex discrimination,

especially when trying to obtain her AA/F license. She was required to make more passes on the track than the men were. The officials doubted her ability to keep her cool in the event her Top Fuel car went out of control at high speed. She wants to be friends with the male drivers, with the hope of eliminating the male-female competitive aspect of racing. She is a part-time legal secretary. Her two sons are proud of her and have invited her to come to their school several times to speak about racing.

Male drivers had a variety of opinions about women drag racers. A few felt that women simply do not belong on the race track, ever! One said that while women had the right to compete, they were incompetent. Several men admitted feeling that it was fine for women to race, as long as they were not beaten by one. An amateur driver, whose girlfriend races, found that the most difficult thing for him to deal with was the idea of a woman getting injured in a crash. In contrast, some men were glad to see women getting involved in drag racing and welcomed them as competitors.

STREET RACING

Curiosity prompted us to ask the question: "Did you begin by street racing?" At first it seemed that the question was unnecessary. Anyone who gets seriously involved in drag racing obviously starts out by punching-off from stop lights, long before he sees the business end of a Christmas tree. Not so!

Eighty-four percent of the amateurs started racing on the street. About what we would expect. While two-thirds of the pros did start racing on the street, 34% of them did not. This is a surprising result. Most typically, they were introduced to drag racing by a friend who took them out to the drags one Sunday. They drove through several times, got turned on, and from then on were hooked; but they still make a clear distinction between street and strip racing, and don't participate in the former.

Some real heat was generated by this question. Many drivers felt a sense of pride that they had never street raced, believing such activity to be "unprofessional." One Funny Car driver, an ex-test pilot, responded with disdain, saying that street racing was for "squirrels." On the other hand, some drivers not only began street racing and are proud of it, but are, to this day, unable to pass up any opportunity to blow the doors off some unsuspecting stop light challenger. For these men, drag racing is the main event, when or where is not important.

As a historical footnote to this question, Don Garlits and Don Nicholson each recalled being chased off abandoned military air strips by MPs for drag racing. Both men were instrumental in helping to establish the country's first drag strips, Nicholson in Santa Ana, California, and Garlits in Zepher Hills, Florida.

ATTACHMENT

Whether professional or amateur, the drivers have a personal attachment to their cars. There was more agreement on this than on any other question! Since many drivers build their own cars, they are proud of their workmanship and believe this to be as important as their driving. For example, one amateur cared little for the speed, winning, or the competition of racing, but found his major satisfaction in building up Pontiac engines to out-perform the rival MoPars and Chevys of his class. Don Garlits said if it ever got to the point where he could not build his own equipment, he would quit racing. Some drivers take additional pride in knowing that they not only built their cars, they also designed them. Garlits, by the way, was the first to design the rear engine dragster. At that time he was recovering from a partial foot amputation due to a clutch explosion in his front engine dragster.

Most racers emphasized that the driver and the car are a team in drag racing. Both amateurs and pros described their cars as being like a part of themselves.

As evidence of their attachment, some drivers mentioned that occasionally they talk to their cars. Whatever else this sport is about, most assuredly at its heart is the relationship between man and his machine.

INJURIES

The most wildly differing answers came in response to the question: "Have you ever been injured?" More than half (53%) of the pros, but only a few (15%) of the amateurs had ever been injured! This is the greatest variation between the groups in our study. Why?

To start with, most pro drivers make their livings by drag racing. They race more often than amateurs and so are more frequently exposed to the possibility of crashes. In addition, the pros are usually piloting faster cars - Top Fuelers, Funny Cars and Pro Stockers - as compared to the gas dragsters, super stock and modified production cars driven by the amateurs. Finally, the pros push themselves harder, driven by the determination to be the best that initially led them into the professional ranks. Although this hard charging wins races for them, it also puts them in the hospital more often. Dennis Bacca put it this way: "No matter what I do, I have to win, I can't settle for second best!"

Almost without exception, drivers felt that if they thought about the possibility of crashing, their performance on the track would be less than competitive. "You can't worry or you'll baby it," said one racer. Another stated flatly, "I just don't think about it." The question about injuries prompted many drivers to respond in one of two ways. First of all, they gave brief testimonials to the safety of the sport. "I feel safer on the track than I do on the freeway!" was a common response. Recent improvements in car safety such as the rear-engine dragster, on board fire extinguishing systems, fire suits and roll cages were mentioned. To illustrate how safe it is, drivers would describe some absolutely hairy crashes they had survived. Don Nicholson men-

tioned going airborne in a Funny Car at 170 mph, then end-over-end. He suffered only a slight concussion and a headache for a week afterward.

The second observation drivers made related to the old argument that accidents don't "just happen," they are caused. Commonly drivers referred to their ability to prevent crashes through their own volition. As if speaking for many of our racers, Don Schumacher summarized the whole ball o' wax in these words: "Danger never has bothered me much. I know the longer you do it, the better the chances you're gonna get hurt. I don't think drivers do think about this - if they did they would have to quit and get out because it would hamper their performance. If you're smart enough to get the job done right, then you're not gonna get hurt at it. If you make a mistake, then you're gonna get hurt, and I don't look to making any mistakes."

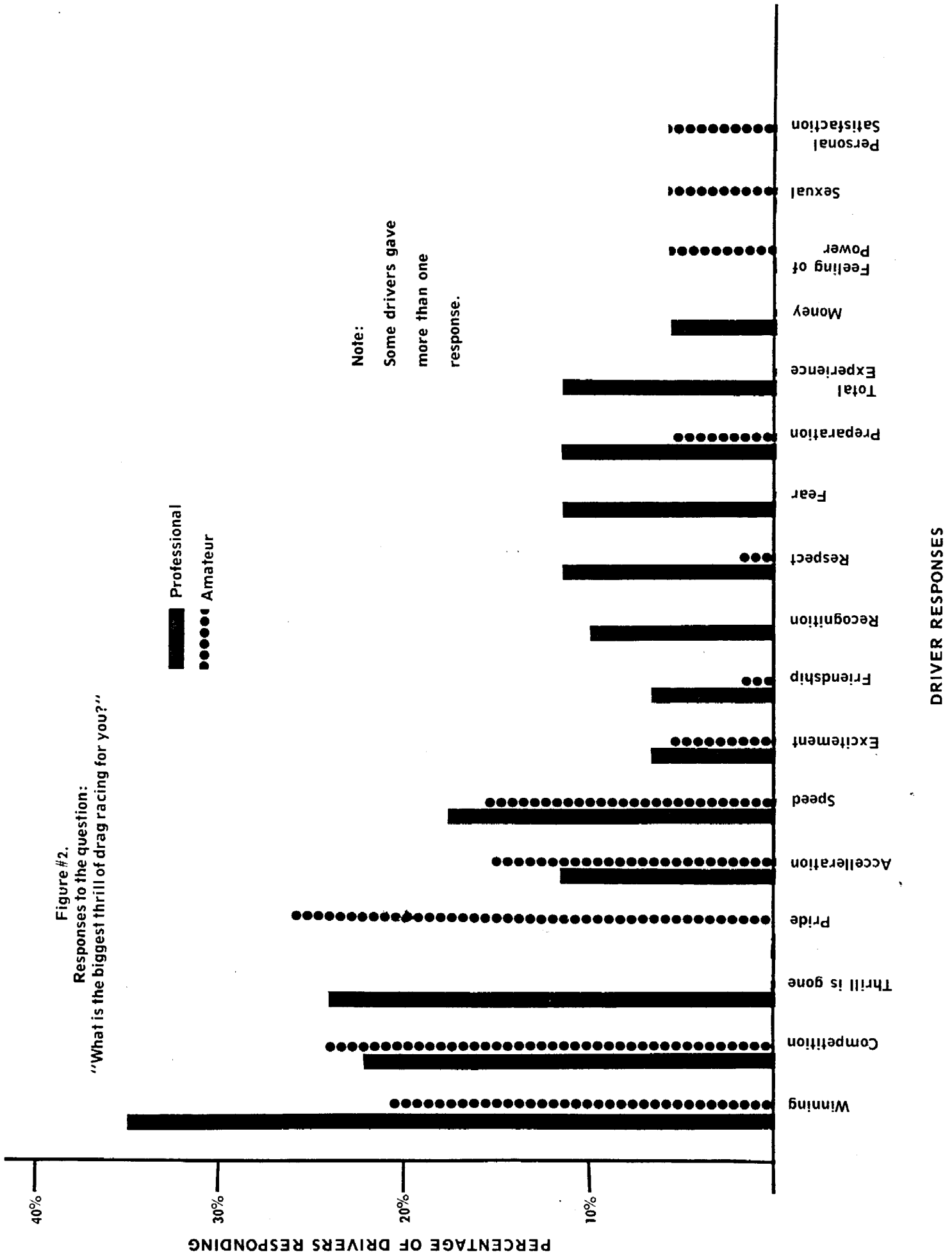
MAJOR THRILL

To discover why people like to drag race, we asked these two questions: "What is the biggest thrill of drag racing for you?" (see Figure 2) and, "Can you describe the feeling of going that fast?" These questions are the heart of our study. The responses indicate that the essence of drag racing is centered around three main factors: competition, winning, and speed.

Professionals and amateurs find similar thrills in drag racing. However, there are some interesting differences between the two groups. Foremost for pro racers was winning. Leroy Chadderton of the "Hawaiian" mused, "Nobody wants to be a loser, but the winners are the ones who want to loose the least." Competition and pride ranked higher for the amateurs than did winning. In fact, a feeling of pride in building a car that would perform well on the track was the biggest thrill for over a quarter of the amateurs.

Speed and acceleration were high on the list for both the amateurs and professionals. The answers to our requests to describe the feeling of going

Figure #2.
 Responses to the question:
 "What is the biggest thrill of drag racing for you?"



Note:
 Some drivers gave
 more than one
 response.

Professional
 Amateur

DRIVER RESPONSES

PERCENTAGE OF DRIVERS RESPONDING

40%

30%

20%

10%

that fast told us why. Many drivers, 31% of the pros and 30% of the amateurs, said that fear was the main feeling they got from going fast, but felt that it was crucial to put such thoughts out of their minds. To feel fear or to let themselves be afraid would hamper their ability to drive. One prominent Funny Car driver described the fear of going fast as: "It's knowing that what you are driving is almost out of control."

Thirty-eight percent of the pros and 30% of the amateurs had no describable feeling at all during a race. Many said that there simply was no time to feel anything because they were so busy during these six to eleven second races. Some drivers told us that when they get in their cars, all thoughts leave their minds.

QUITTING

Over half (53%) of the professionals admitted that at one point or another they had wanted to quit racing. In contrast, fully 80% of the amateurs had considered quitting. Why such a difference between the two groups? For one thing, the amateurs have less financial incentives to keep them racing. The amateurs, unlike the pros, are not sponsored and must finance their own racing activities. In addition, bigger and more frequent winnings accompany professional status. Amateurs, furthermore, receive less public recognition and acclaim than the pros do. Finally, since racing is a hobby for most amateurs, quitting would not cause the same kind of financial hardship as it would for the pros. Several pros told us that they would like to get out, but they simply could not afford to. Apparently, in drag racing, when a driver is losing consistently, breaks his car for the third time in as many weeks, and his wife is packing her bags in search of a non drag racing mate, amateurs are quicker to think about giving it all up. With the financial rewards and public acclaim usually going to the professional drivers, this finding is not so surprising.

ALTERNATIVES TO RACING

"What would you do if you didn't drag race?" The professionals responded: own a speed shop, sell real estate, own a liquor and import company, open an electronics company, work as a legal secretary and work with kids. Only one pro driver responded with a recreational activity. Two amateurs answered with an occupational activity. Seven responded with recreational activities or hobbies such as: boating, camping, road racing, dirt bike racing, water and snow skiing, coin collecting, model airplanes, bowling and fishing. Many drivers had never thought about what they would do if they did not drag race. In their responses, the two groups told us about one aspect of what drag racing means to them, e.g., the pros saw it as an occupational activity, while almost half the amateurs saw it as recreation.

BLACK DRAG RACERS

Twelve percent of the drivers we talked to were black: one professional and four amateurs. Two of these men told us they had experienced some form of racial discrimination in drag racing. Corky Booze, the pro driver, gave us an eye-opening account of the subtle discrimination he has personally experienced. It occurs not on the track, but in the refusal of sponsors to finance black drivers. He believes this is why professional drag racing is almost totally devoid of blacks.

At one time he was fully factory sponsored by American Motors, but now, campaigning a Pro Stocker, he is having a very difficult time finding a sponsor. In spite of the fact that only a few years ago he was winner of his class (Super Stock) in the Western Division, and has an impressive history of consistent winnings to date, he lacks sponsorship. He has approached over a dozen of the biggest sponsors in drag racing. As a black man he feels he must do more than his white counterparts to get the financial support a pro driver

needs to stay competitive. From his experience, sponsors are just not ready to underwrite black drag racers. This is ironic since a good percentage of drag racing fans are black.

Booze was unique among the drivers we talked to by way of his very special feeling for kids, especially ghetto black kids. He makes himself and his car available to their questions and their eager curiosity. He sees drag racing and the automotive world as something kids should be encouraged to get involved in. All of his pit crew are black and under eighteen.

In comparing responses given by professional and amateur drivers, we were surprised to find that there were only a few areas of similarity between the two groups. Both groups started racing at about the same age and have been into it for nearly the same number of years. They are also similar in terms of marital status and number of children. In addition to these descriptive facts, the two groups are strikingly similar in their feelings of attachment to their cars. This attachment really defines in a basic way what this sport is all about. Regardless of whatever differences these two groups of drivers may have, the most obvious similarity is a love of cars. With a background of these basic similarities, the real differences between the two groups stand out in sharp contrast.

These differences are mainly a result of the drivers being either professionals or amateurs. For example, the greatest difference between the groups was in number of injuries. More than half of the pros had suffered some major injury during their racing careers. Only 15% of the amateurs had even been injured. This clearly has to do with number of races driven, power and speed of the cars and the strength of the driver's personal desire to win. Also consistent with the differences between professional and amateur status, was that over 80% of the pros, and only 48% of the amateurs work in automotive-related occupations.

Since drag racing is an occupation for most of our pros, it follows that only 53% had ever thought about quitting, while 80% of the amateurs had considered quitting. The pros felt discontent not from the racing itself, but rather from the pressures to keep their machines competitive, the time away from home and the amount of travel. The amateurs were more hassled by the everyday frustrations of drag racing, and feeling no financial ties to racing, thought about quitting more frequently.

Professional drivers felt more conflict between their family and their racing interests. They also felt no support or reluctant support from their families more frequently than the amateurs. These results are not surprising in light of the fact that pro drivers are away from home more often. In contrast, the amateurs work on their cars at home and are often able to involve their families in their racing activities.

While these differences grow out of the separation between professionals and amateurs, they reflect more basic psychological differences between the individuals in the two groups. The pros seem to drive themselves harder to be the best. They value winning and thrive on competition. They can tolerate the greater possibility of getting injured and the family conflict in exchange for public recognition and the financial support that goes along with professional status. In addition to winning on the track, many of the pros were highly successful in other money making ventures. The amateurs were less concerned with winning and not so driven by a need to be the best. While some may have hoped for pro status one day, most were unwilling to make the necessary personal sacrifices.

Whether amateurs or professionals, people who drag race are individualists. In talking with these men and women, we were reminded of the frontiersman personality. They are self-reliant and place a strong value on taking full responsibility for their actions. They live in a world of physical success or failure.

A strong competitive spirit is present in their relationships with their fellow man. They are not the dreamers or self-doubters of this world. They are the doers. Their reality is clearly outside of themselves. They do not look inward for the solutions to life's dilemmas.

By designing, building and racing their cars, the drivers exert a kind of control over their lives that is rare in modern society. We live in a 9 to 5, pre-fabricated, plastic-fantastic, computerized, mass produced society that can turn the individual into a marshmallow. Drag racing is one place where an individual can pit his ingenuity, determination and skill against the deadness of mass society. Drag racers are affirming their own lives by flirting with death. It does not seem that drag racers are men and women living in quiet desperation.

TABLE I (cont.)

Personal attachment to car			
Yes.....		80%	89%
No.....		20	11
	* *	*	
Any injuries			
Yes.....		53%	15%
No.....		47	85
	* *	*	
Wanted to quit			
Yes.....		53%	80%
No.....		47	20
	* *	*	
Alternatives to drag racing			
Recreational.....		8%	47%
Occupational.....		69	13
Noting, Don't Know.....		23	40