



SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

ELECTRIC RACING GAINS POPULARITY

BY STEVEN COLE SMITH

SHAWN WAGGONER ORGANIZED the Fourth Annual Battery Beach Burnout in Jupiter, Fla., and despite what you might infer from the event's name, racing was involved.

"I grew up in Daytona Beach in the shadow of the Speedway, so racing has been in my blood forever," he said.

The event, the Southeast's largest annual gathering of electric-car enthusiasts, is targeted at Ed Begley Jr. types, many wearing "Who Killed the Electric Car?" T-shirts. But amid the plug-in Toyota Priuses and electric scooters, there were some odd-looking vehicles that competed in a one-hour "endurance" race.

This year marked the Beach Burnout debut of Electrathon racing, and it was . . . quiet. Unless the sound of a ceiling fan bothers you, there is no need for ear plugs.

Electrathon vehicles are built either

from a kit or from scratch. You have three or four wheels, sealed batteries that weigh less than 65 pounds total, one driver and one electric motor. Some teams embrace complex aerodynamic packages, usually made of aluminum, while others trade aero for less weight. Drivers must weigh 180 pounds, or the car has to carry ballast to make up for thinner drivers. If you weigh more than 180 pounds, forget it.

The track is either a road course or, as at Battery Beach, a quarter-mile rectangle defined by orange cones in a parking lot. Whoever covers the most laps in an hour wins. No recharging is allowed.

Technology and strategy are the keys. An Electrathon car can travel faster than 50 mph, at the expense of battery life. Go too slow to conserve power, and you will still lose. The happy medium wins.

University of South Florida students built the fastest car, an aluminum-clad entry with a plastic windshield held in place with duct tape. It first circled the track at more than 30 mph but was down to walking pace by the end.

The Electrathon was won by Team Rolling Thunder, with Miami private detective Lance Barlow driving a car built by his father, Dana, and friend Rex Hollinger.

Hollinger said they built the car from scratch for about \$1,000, though you can spend as much as \$5,000 if you purchase a kit and add lots of features. Rolling Thunder completed 126 laps, two more

The ASME car drained its batteries too soon, allowing the car lined up directly behind it to win, driven by private investigator Lance Barlow.

than the second-place car.

Prize money? Nah. "Just bragging rights," said Hollinger. The entry fee was \$10 per vehicle.

Rolling Thunder's car looks basic, but the chassis is hinged front and rear, allowing it to lean into turns. Brakes are

paper-thin discs, and the tires are bicycle tires. The battery choice for most competitors was a pair of red-top Optimas.

Waggoner also hosts electric-powered autocrosses at his events. He invites gasoline-powered cars to participate as benchmarks. At the Beach Burnout, an Audi TT was the fastest gasoline-powered autocrosser. A Volkswagen Rabbit-based pickup truck, converted to battery power, beat it soundly.

"At every event we've had, an electric vehicle has won," Waggoner noted.

"Talk to people, and you hear the typical myths: Electric vehicles are all oversized golf carts that won't go very far or very fast and probably shouldn't even be allowed on the street," he continued. "We tell them that when it comes to gas cars, you have your daily drivers that are underwhelming in performance, and you have your high-performance gas cars. Same thing in the electric field. We have models designed to get you back and forth to work, and we have high-performance models."

And you have Electrathons making a mark—quietly—on racing. For more info, visit www.electrathonamerica.org.