

Mulholland Drive has been a mecca for outlaw road racers for a quarter of a century, but it looks like those days are over

THE UNDERGROUND GRAND PRIX



By Cory Farley ■ The 'G' forces in the turn threw me against the door and the howl of the engine was so loud I didn't even hear the sound of my head hitting the window. The car slid sideways and the driver made a series of corrections as the stiffly sprung Corvette skittered from high spot to high spot on the bumpy surface.

The outside rear wheel dropped onto the shoulder and the tach shot to over 7000 rpm as the tire spun in the gravel. For an instant we hung on the edge, mere feet from a sharp drop of 75 feet. Then the differential locked up and we fired down the short straight. My head snapped back and thudded painfully against the rollbar as I reacted too slowly, then hit the bar again on the shift to third.

A mailbox whipped by within arm's reach and the driver lifted his foot and coasted to a stop. The Mazda behind us whined an octave higher, then shut off as it, too, passed the mailbox. The driver of the Mazda rolled down his window with a grin. "Almost," he said. "Wait 'til I get my new tires."

Wait a minute. A mailbox? On a race track? Not exactly. We weren't running hot laps at Riverside or making it through The Hook at Lime Rock, though the cars we were in might be competitive in their classes at either place. We were on a section of Mulholland Drive in the hills above Los Angeles for the umpteenth running of the Clandestine Racing Enterprises Grand Prix.

This is not a put-on, like Midnight Auto Supply or Unbolt & Run Speed Equipment. Clandestine Racing Enterprises is a real organization, the latest of several in the LA area devoted to finding out how fast an automobile can go from one point to another over the tortuous two-lane blacktop around Los Angeles.

If you're a live-and-die drag racer or street enthusiast, you may never have heard of Mulholland Drive and what happens there. Mulholland is to the unsanctioned road racer what Woodward Avenue in Detroit was to the outlaw street racer back in the Sixties: The Place. In the heyday of the Supercar there were *factory teams* running down there in the Stoplight Nationals on Woodward. Engi-

neers from Ford or Chrysler or GM could be found rumbling up and down nearly any night, ostensibly seeing what people were doing to their cars and looking for ideas. All in the interest of market research, you understand, but there are still stories told about some very fast cars that got snuffed by stock-looking units driven by guys who could be found in the engine labs on Monday morning.

There aren't any factory deals running on Mulholland. The time has passed when the manufacturers could get away with that kind of stuff, even in the name of research. But there are rumors of some dealer-sponsored cars, and there are definitely some people getting very good prices on parts for a certain imported car which must remain nameless.

Clandestine Racing Enterprises has been just that—clandestine—for the last couple of years. The predecessor to CRE, the Mulholland Racing Association, was put right out of the racing business a few years ago when a national magazine did a story on their operations. CRE didn't want a repeat and they've shunned the limelight until now. Why the change of heart?

"It's getting too crowded up there," says Rich, a 20-year-old who's been running on Mulholland for two years. "We used to get eight or ten cars and everybody knew what they were doing. But word got out and now we get all kinds of flakes. We're afraid someone will get hurt and the heat will really come down."

Some of the regulars in CRE do know what they're doing. This is serious business to them, much more serious than street racing is to the average drag enthusiast. The cars are set up with Mulholland Drive in mind, using parts from Interpart (that's where Interpart got the name for their now-famous "Mulholland kit"), Sparco and other aftermarket manufacturers, or with junkyard parts and very clever "imagineering." The emphasis is on suspension and brakes, with many of the engines, even of the fastest cars, left stock.

The quality of the driving is surprisingly high in some cases. A few of the CRE members have considerable "legitimate" road racing experience, and at least one is a graduate of Bob Bondurant's School of High Performance Driving. The new Emerson Fittipaldi may not be running on Mulholland Drive, but there are some competent drivers there.

The King of Mulholland right now is Charlie. (We're going to avoid using last names here because CRE says they're through, that the energy crisis and the fear some dumbos will get in over his head and hurt himself have ended the scene on Mulholland Drive for a while. CRE is going straight and they don't want to be hassled.) Charlie drives a 1966 Corvette he modified himself. The original low-po big-block has been massaged and loved, more for reliability than horsepower, but that's not half the story.

The trick on Mulholland Drive is suspension, and Charlie has plenty of it. The stock Corvette front springs have been replaced with cut-down station wagon coils and the rear has been stiffened until you literally can't feel the car move when you push down on the fender. Charlie knows the book says suspension should be soft for a surface as bumpy as Mulholland. He doesn't care. The car feels like a stagecoach and hops around like one when you watch it from behind—but behind is just where you're going to stay, because nobody can touch Charlie on Mulholland Drive.

Charlie's Corvette is at the high end of the financial spectrum for CRE cars. At the other end is Ron's "\$300 Special." The Special is a Datsun 510 sedan with 102,000 miles on it. The engine is trembly and the body looks like a burlap bag full of hockey pucks, but Lord, does it corner. The springs have been cut all around to lower the car and it's got high-performance shocks and fat radial tires. With even these minor changes, the Special will hare around corners like a slot car.

Another low-dollar surpiser is Dave's '64 Tempest, complete with 326-inch V8 and two-speed automatic. Top end is only about 85, but the car handles well. Again, shocks and tires make most of the difference—but what a difference.

The real action comes from the minicars, though. There are a couple of really slick Mazdas that are quick, and Datsun 510s are cheap and plentiful enough to make them a favorite with the small-dollar racers, though few are as inexpensive as the Special. In fact, the Datsun man himself, Pete Brock, confesses to being a Mulholland regular at one time.

"I used to work in Max Balchowsky's shop," Brock says (Balchowsky was the builder of Old Yaller, a sports-racing car that dominated road racing in the Fifties and is considered by some to have been the inspiration for today's Can-Am cars). "I had an 1100cc Cooper, and we'd work on it until we thought it was right, then take it up and test it on Mulholland. There were no houses then, and nobody bothered us."

Brock also says Dan Gurney and Ken Miles, surely two of the best drivers America has ever produced, used to flog their cars on Mulholland Drive back in the Fifties. Miles had his shop on Caluenga Boulevard in Los Angeles and it was just a short run up the hill for him to make a midnight check on the Flying Shingle, his rapid MG special.

Other greats and near-greats who've logged time on Mulholland Drive over the years include Phil Hill, America's only world champion, and ex-Honda Formula 1 driver Ron Bucknum. Actor Steve McQueen is reported to turn an occasional fast lap even today, and it's a safe bet most of the professional LA-based road racers (which is most of the big-time road racers in the country) have at least a nodding acquaintance with the twists and



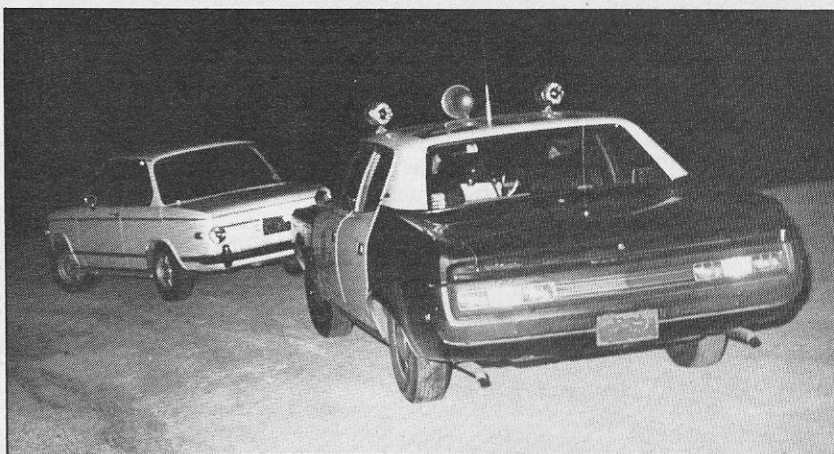
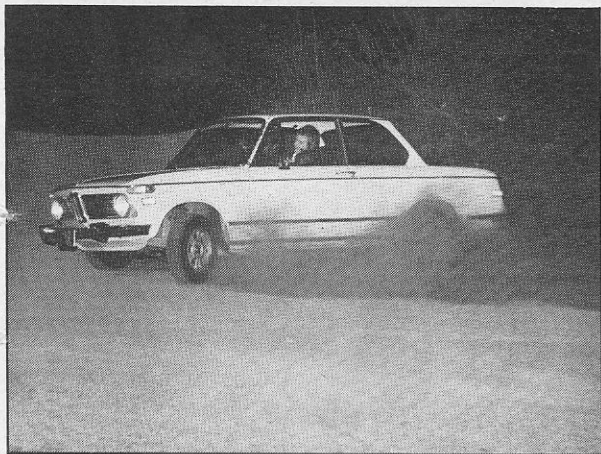
TOP—Everybody wants to get into the act: This kart isn't a regular runner, but shows up occasionally. Note flashlight taped to helmet for headlight. ABOVE—Evidence of overenthusiasm. Police let the Datsun owner handle it himself—without a ticket.

turns of the canyon roads, if not with Mulholland Drive in particular.

Now all this is of course blatantly illegal. Dragging away from a stoplight is one thing; you seldom get over 50 miles per hour and you're going in a straight line anyway. But on Mulholland they're running faster, and they have to go around corners too.

Racing on the public roads is dangerous at best, not only to the participants but to anyone else who has the misfortune to wander into the line of fire. Fortunately for CRE, they have a pretty good safety record. There is an occasional bumper-thumper, usually at the decreasing radius turn which marks the west end of the "course," but serious accidents have been rare. The quality of the driving is fairly good, and the cars are set up to handle and are well-maintained.

The activity involves only two cars at a time, not an entire snarling pack, and they don't run side-by-side or pass. The group congregates at a wide spot on Mulholland, and eventually someone will go out and make a pass by the gathering. If anyone else is in the mood, they will accept the challenge and chase the challenger until they catch him or he gets down near Laurel Canyon on the west or



TOP—This looks like impending disaster, but is really only a BMW driver trying his hand at a maneuver known as the bootleg turn. ABOVE—Clandestine Racing Enterprises makes a rare daylight appearance. Tempest on right and tasteful Mazda are both fast; the \$300 Special is even more tastefully hidden three rows deep.

TOP—The mills of the gods grind slow: Here's the same BMW, followed by an admirer. Understanding LA cops gave him a warning and an escort down the hill, but no citation. ABOVE—Girls can play too! Several CRE members are ladies. This is real (dare we say it?) seat-of-the-pants driving. Driver in second row spun out, but was uninjured.

Coldwater Canyon on the east, where the houses start to appear. When the cars come into a populated area, they slow down, turn around, and do it again the other way. The usual "track" is only about a mile long, though they occasionally run in other areas.

In practice, anyone can choose off anyone, but there is a class structure of sorts. The "NASCAR" racers include Dave's '64 Tempest, somebody's mother's new Monte Carlo, and one or two others. The "Trans-Am" cars, by far the largest class, are mostly Mazdas, Capris and Datsuns, with an occasional Cortina and Opel for variety. The specials, sports cars and one-of-a-kinds are as eclectic a group as you'll see anywhere—they range from Charlie's Corvette through a brand-new TR-6 to a Mazda-powered Lotus Super Seven. The Lotus is a rocket. It weighs only about 900 pounds and puts out nearly 125 horsepower. It could probably dethrone Charlie's Corvette if the owner was interested, but he's going "real racing" soon and doesn't have time for Mulholland anymore.

Since this is plainly an illegal activity, the police must figure in the story. That brings out one of the strangest facets of Mulholland racing history. From the late

Forties, when returning GIs came home with stories of funny little cars that could turn corners (a sharp contrast to the American cars of the day), right up to the present day, when herds of lowered Capris thunder through the canyons, there has never been much police intervention.

There *have* been periodic crackdowns, such as the one that squashed the Mulholland Racing Association and the one that will probably follow this story and may kill CRE, but on the whole there has been surprisingly little trouble with the cops.

On the one occasion when I did see a cop on Mulholland, I asked him about this seeming indifference. "We know they mess around up here," he said, "but there aren't any houses here and they aren't hurting anybody. We've got important things to do—we can't be coming up here to run off 20 kids at one in the morning because a few of them *might* be planning to drive fast on a deserted road."

A CRE member standing nearby suggested that the police didn't bother to chase the racers because they knew they couldn't catch them on the maze of roads in the LA hills. The cop looked sheepish for a moment, then laughed. "Don't kid yourself. I used to fool around up here when Oldsmobiles were the hot setup."

(In the early Fifties—Editor.) "We can catch you even without the radios." He turned to the rest of the group and spoke louder. "We've had some complaints tonight. You people go home, and you'd better keep it cool here. How'd you like us to start checking vehicle ride heights or exhaust systems and writing tickets?"

He faced me again. "If they don't bother anyone, we won't bother them, but we have to respond to complaints."

The era of coexistence between the police and CRE is probably about over. As the price of gas goes up, people are bound to complain more about the group's activities—not because of the noise and speed, but because of the waste of fuel. And this story will hasten the end, no doubt. Once the whole world knows about CRE, the police won't be able to ignore it.

The good of the public must be considered, of course. There's no way to justify the use of public roads for this sort of activity, even if the energy shortage wasn't a factor. The end of racing on Mulholland Drive seems inevitable, and logically we can only applaud.

But however reasonable it may be to make Mulholland just another suburban street, when it finally happens, a lot of people will miss the way it used to be. ■■