

ALL ON THE LINE

The oldest, purest form of racing is open to anyone with a bike and the nerve to let it rip down the strip.

> By **Alisa Clickenger**

There's a lot of people around, but your focus is solely on the task at hand. Time slows down, yet simultaneously speeds up. Even fractional seconds count. A burnout heats up the tires, to improve traction at the start. You move into position, awareness heightened, expectant eyes on the "Christmas tree." The light turns green. Your adrenaline instantly kicks up another impossible notch as you drop the clutch. Welcome to the sport of drag racing.

Motorcycle drag racing is typically done over a straight eighth or quarter mile. Passes begin with a standing start, given an electronic "go" by a multicolored series of vertical lights, lovingly called the Christmas tree. Reaction time, elapsed time, and speed measurements are taken for each run.

Two contestants run at a time, both racing each other and trying to beat their own fastest time. Typically, racing is measured through elimination rounds. The winners of each pass compete against new rivals.

According to 2018 PMRA Ultra Street Champion Elyse McKinnon, it's easy to get started in drag racing. Anyone can go to a local track and run their motorcycle on street-legal nights. Typical full-coverage riding gear, including a Snell-approved helmet, is often all that's needed for the rider.

For bike prep, you may only need a tethered kill switch and a chain guard. Safety wiring or removal of mirrors and signals are generally not required.

Since there is extraordinarily little preparation needed, it's also relatively inexpensive to start racing. A nominal entry fee and a few gallons of fuel will



Reigning PMRA Ultra Street Champion Elyse McKinnon has raced for six years, supported by her husband, Chris, and major sponsors: Team Mancuso Powersports and Engle Motors.

get you on the track. What gets expensive are aftermarket parts to increase speed, which is the main point of the sport. But that can come later.

A street-legal race night typically costs less than \$50 to enter. From there, expenses escalate primarily based on how much you want to spend on your bike and gear. Costs will go up when racing in more competitive classes, particularly if there's prize money involved. After trying drag, if you want to continue racing, you can pace any performance modifications to your bike and budget. Additional safety gear will be needed at certain higher speed thresholds.

The best way to get started is to attend a local event and start asking questions.

Racers are very friendly and always willing to give some advice. They'll point out what class or classes you can compete in and help with any track-specific details.

"Talk to people who are experienced in the sport," McKinnon said. "Go out to the track and watch an event. Ask people there to talk you through an entire pass, from pointing out exactly where the beams will detect your tires at the starting line, to showing you the shutdown area and where to turn off the track after your pass."

McKinnon always had a need for speed, no matter the vehicle she was driving. It intensified when she started riding motorcycles.

"I had friends that were into various

kinds of racing and I went to a few events to check it out," the champion said. "When I tried drag racing I fell in love and was hooked! I thought it was pretty awesome to have the opportunity to go as fast as I could and get to race my friends in a legal environment."

McKinnon has raced for six years and is supported by Team Mancuso Powersports SW in Houston and Engle Motors in Kansas City, which make sure the bikes are ready to run. Friends and competitors at the track lend her a hand when last-minute

issues come up. There are always people along the way who are willing to help.

McKinnon Motorsports' Team Principal is her husband, Chris. He's always working behind the scenes to keep the program running. From planning bike modifications and setups to lining up the schedule and making sure she has all the parts and gear needed for each race weekend. Chris has a wry sense of humor, and most of the time introduces himself as the truck driver. McKinnon also has a coach, professional drag racer Ryan Schnitz, who has helped her fine-tune her skill over the years.

Ryan Schnitz and Cecil Towner at HTP Performance became the first Pro Street Motorcycle racers to run a 6-second pass, an astounding 6.90 seconds at 203 mph with a Nitrous Injected Suzuki Hayabusa street bike. A 20-year veteran of drag racing, Schnitz was introduced by his father, who was also a drag racer.

"The occasional event win is the most rewarding, especially if it was accomplished while overcoming some challenges," Schnitz said. "Achieving personal bests and seeing improvements, whether it's consistency or quicker elapsed times, always make for a great day at the track, as well."



Ryan Schnitz made his mark in Pro Street Motorcycle class with a 6.90 second pass, blazing down the quarter-mile track at 203 mph aboard a Suzuki Hayabusa.

Drag racing has helped McKinnon know her bike better, including what different rpm levels sound like. She has a targeted rpm range for the launch, while keeping a close eye on temperatures, and listening and feeling for any slight differences in sound and handling, to avoid catastrophe.

The pits at large events can be busy. Riding up to the staging lanes and back from a pass requires great awareness of the surroundings. Other vehicles, racers, and fans can jump out from behind trailers and stands. Both racers credit maneuvering in the tight spaces of the pit area for helping them become better slow speed riders.

With massively extended swingarms, drag racers must have a plan for both turning and lining up. Schnitz likens it to trying to ride a motorcycle down your street during a block party. "You learn to think four steps ahead, like any good motorcyclist should," he said.

As to the penultimate success in drag racing, the answer varies depending on who you ask. The NHRA is the largest sanctioning body, so winning a Wally trophy at an NHRA event is the goal for many racers. There are also events that are more prestigious, such as Nationals (televised) over Regionals. Other racers

may be chasing a record speed or elapsed time. Others race to gamble and win money.

A lot of riders race a series, attempting to gain points throughout the season and be crowned champion of that class at the end of the year.

"There is no better feeling than winning a finals race, especially when your competitor puts down a killer pass right next to you," McKinnon said. "Winning a finals race means you've been winning all day to make it to that point, so that is definitely a great day! A close second is achieving a new personal best time

or speed, meaning I've gone faster or quicker than I ever had before on that bike."

Both McKinnon and Schnitz are now racing at a level that requires outside money. Sponsors are a key part of their programs.

"A lot of people who are looking for sponsorship only think about what the sponsor can do for them," McKinnon said. "It's important to think about what you have to offer the sponsor in return, so that the relationship is beneficial to everyone. You obviously need to be successful to gain sponsor interest, but there are other important components, like being a good representative of the sport and being knowledgeable about the company's products."

McKinnon's team is currently working to rebuild a thrashed motor. She's looking forward to getting that bike back up and running. She'd love to win another Championship and always wants to be quicker on the next pass.

Schnitz's goal is to win a Pro Street Championship and set the elapsed time record (the time between when the bike leaves the start and crosses the finish) for the class. They are both having fun, a quarter mile at a time. **MCN**