

Oldies & Oddities

FROM THE ATTIC TO THE ARCHIVES

The Bonneville Jet Wars

GENERAL ELECTRIC'S J47 AND J79 and Westinghouse's J46 turbojets were designed for America's high-flying cold war fighters and bombers. But during five weeks in the mid-1960s, they came down to Earth—taking the land-speed record from Britain and bringing it back to the United States.

The stage was Utah's otherworldly Bonneville Salt Flats. The stars were two middle-aged Midwestern brothers who refused to talk to each other, and a slick young southern California hot-rodder

that included a Lockheed engineer. The next year, Breedlove screamed across the flats at 407 mph, claiming the land-speed record. (All speeds are the average of two runs in opposite directions along the measured mile.)

In 1964, Breedlove returned to Bonneville, this time facing competition. Walt and Art Arfons worked out of adjacent junk-strewn lots in Akron, Ohio, separated by decades of estrangement. Independently, the brothers built two cars, each designed

His *Green Monster* was powered by a General Electric J79, the engine of the Lockheed F-104 Starfighter. Art got it for \$600 and rebuilt it himself after GE refused him a service manual.

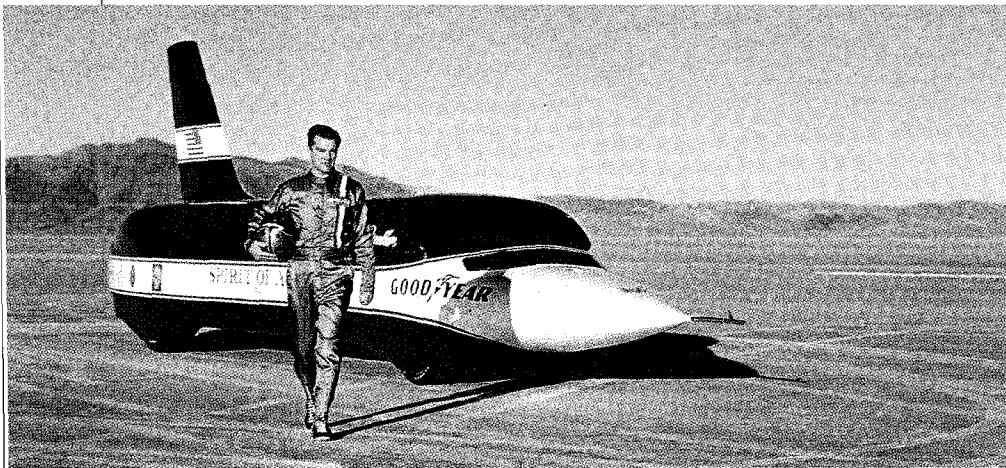
One week after Art snatched the record from his brother, Breedlove took it away from Art. Trying to go even faster, Breedlove veered out of control at 500 mph, flew over a dike, and nosed into the water. Miraculously, he avoided drowning or being pulverized. Afterward, he joked, "And now for my next act, I'm going to set myself on fire." Still, Art Arfons got the last laugh: After tweaking his engine, he returned to the salt and made a 536-mph run, demoting Breedlove to number two.

In 1965, Breedlove was back, this time with a J79 in a new *Spirit of America*, dubbed *Sonic I*. Walt Arfons was back too, his *Wingfoot Express* now fitted with 25 jet-assisted-takeoff rockets. Although they propelled Arfons' car to more than 400 mph, they couldn't sustain that speed long enough for Arfons to challenge the record. But Breedlove clicked off a run of 555 mph to become the fastest man on wheels.

A week later, Art Arfons strapped himself back in *Green Monster*. During his second pass, a tire shred, but he emerged from the cockpit of his dented and smoking car with another record: 576 mph. A few days later, Breedlove went 600.601 mph, and he was immortalized in the Beach Boys song "Spirit of America" as "a daring young man [who] played a dangerous game."

Cars have gone faster: In 1997, a British team broke the sound barrier with a speed of 763 mph, powered by two Rolls-Royce Spey turbofans, which powered F-4M Phantom IIs. But land-speed racing has never been hotter than when cold war turbines were the coolest things at Bonneville.

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who'd talk to anybody. By the time it was over, the three had raised the top speed by nearly 200 mph.

The jet-powered land-speed wars erupted in 1962, when three streamlined cars built around J47s—the engines used in North American F-86 Sabres—appeared on the flats. Physician Nathan Ostich, builder of the first jet car, took *Flying Caduceus* to 331 mph. Glenn Leasher got close to 400 mph but crashed fatally.

The third J47 driver, Los Angeles drag racer Craig Breedlove, picked up his engine for \$500 and installed it in a low-slung, needle-nose chassis he called *Spirit of America*. He lined up Shell and Goodyear as sponsors and hired a team

Craig Breedlove's turbojet-powered racer reached 600 mph in November 1965.

around a different jet engine.

Walt opted for a Westinghouse J46, used in the Vought F7U Cutlass. Although the Navy fighter was a dud, its engine measured up to Breedlove's J47, and surplus versions were available for next to nothing. When his *Wingfoot Express* crashed during testing, Walt had a heart attack. Designer Tom Green, who'd never driven over 130 mph, was drafted as driver. On October 2, he reached 413 mph to claim the record.

Three days later, the newly crowned speed kings learned that their record had just been broken—by Art Arfons.