

THE BIG BANG THEORY

So, there I was minding my own business swilling down beer last July when my Snapon Tool sales rep, Erick Gano, who is also one of my best friends, called me on the phone.

He asked “what are you doing on Labor Day weekend?”

I replied, “Nothing that I can think of at the moment. Why?”

He said, “Good, because I entered you in a demolition derby on 9/2.” He continued, “Are you game?”

I replied, “Hell yes”!

The demolition derby would be held in Flagstaff, Arizona as part of the annual Coconino County fair. It would be held on Sunday afternoon of Labor Day weekend following the main derby and would be for blind drivers only. (By way of background, I lost my sight to bilateral glaucoma at the age of three, and was 56 at the time of these events. I live in Phoenix, Arizona.) The drivers would wear helmets connected to radios and each would be directed by a spotter in the pits. The spotters would have a radio and headset tuned to a dedicated frequency matching that of the driver’s radio. Erick would be my spotter. (Several friends wondered if he was actually trying to get me killed so that he could get his hands on my 150 grand + worth of Snapon tools to resell.) They were just kidding, I think!

The fellow in Flagstaff who has organized this event for several years called me three or four days later to fill me in on the specifics. I asked about the communication arrangements. He explained that he thought that he could borrow helmets from sighted derby participants from the earlier main events. He also claimed that some guy or other from a local radio shop was supposed to be there who knew how to connect the helmets to radios which he would also hopefully provide. I told him not to worry about my gear as I’d take care of it myself. I suggested that he just worry about the other entrants needs. I didn’t like the sound of what he was saying, and figured this might be an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage over the other drivers; his plan sounded too uncertain for me to rely upon. If I had a good performing communication package and they didn’t, that could be a real plus for me.

To determine what my helmet communication options were, I called my friend Kay Sedgwick who owns Performance Radios in Acton, California. Kay sells and services racing radios, and also modifies helmets for NASCAR drivers so that they can communicate with their pit crews. Basically she installs a miniature noise-cancelling boom mike in the helmet along with various jacks to hook up to ear pieces and to the radio as well as to a push-to-talk button which is Velcroed to the steering wheel for easy access. The radio in turn sits in a hardened aluminum and heavily padded case which is securely attached to the car’s roll cage.

Now, not wishing this caper to get overly expensive, I had decided that I wouldn't buy a NASCAR helmet because they cost several thousand dollars apiece. I figured that a motorcycle helmet would be considerably cheaper, perhaps in the neighborhood of \$250, and work just as well and therefore represent a more rational option. So I asked Kay if she knew anything about modifying motorcycle helmets to accomplish the same purpose. She indicated that she had only modified a few motorcycle helmets over the years, and that they had been all Arai models. Arai is a maker of high-end motorcycle helmets which I had never heard of. I knew of Bell and Simpson helmets, which have been around since before dirt. One compelling feature of Arai helmets is that they have easily removable snap-in internal padding which facilitates easy installation of the boom mike and jacks. Many manufacturers incorporate glued in padding which is much harder to work with.

After speaking with Kay about the situation, I called around Phoenix and located a motorcycle shop that carried the Arai line. I asked about pricing and availability, and they wanted to know what kind of motorcycle I owned, and what kind of riding I normally do. I told them I don't own one or ride.

Naturally, they asked me, "What the hell do you want an expensive motorcycle helmet for?"

I replied "You wouldn't believe me if I told you!"

So over to the motorcycle shop I went where I met a very knowledgeable salesperson named Ashley to help me with my helmet selection. When she heard my tale she exclaimed,

"AWESOME, I want to go there too!"

Ashley sold me a fancy Arai carbon fiber and Kevlar model for \$800 + tax with a clear full-face shield. Just for good measure, I also picked up a dark-smoked shield at a bargain \$60 as a backup. (When I was a kid, a decent motorcycle didn't cost \$800.)

Next, my friend Ken van Leer and I took the helmet over to Acton to have Kay modify it and to make ear molds for my custom ear pieces. The ear pieces, which were actually produced from the molds in Florida by a hearing aid outfit, along with the necessary wiring harness and connectors cost another grand or so. I then bought 2 Motorola HT-1250 UHF walkie-talkies on the Internet for a cool \$1500 + shipping. (To program Motorola radios of this type it is necessary to have a programming cable to connect the radio to a computer with and software to program it.) The frequency channels that the radio uses, along with many other parameters must be programmed. The radio cannot operate without being setup or programmed first. The cable and programming software cost about \$450.

Finally, off to Flagstaff Erick, his wife Kristi, and their dogs and kids, and I went the Friday of Labor Day weekend.

About 30 miles south of Flagstaff we hit a humongous mountain lion on I17. Did I mention that the demolition derby was sponsored by the Lions Club of Flagstaff? We were going about 70 MPH in Erick's pickup at the time. We were also towing a 40 foot long triple axle toy hauler full of beer, dirt bikes, quads, and a Jeep. After the poor

lion exited out from under the back of the toy hauler, the whole under-carriage of the truck and trailer were covered with blood, guts, and yellow fur. I suppose that I should have considered this incident to be a bad omen and simply gone home before something untoward happened. We wasted an hour waiting for DPS (state police) to come and take a report. The lion's journey under the rig broke the drain handle and valve off of the trailer's black water tank, rendering the crapper inoperable.

Five hours after departing Phoenix, mostly due to unspeakable holiday weekend traffic, we arrived in Flagstaff. The usual travel time between Phoenix and Flagstaff is about two hours. I got a really nice hotel room for the three day weekend at Little America that cost me another \$600, not including food and beer. I should add in fairness that they gave me a \$30 discount for being a member of AAA. All of our efforts were about to pay off. I figured that we were on a roll. Wrong!

On the day of the event, I was given a real beater, a 1974 Olds Cutlass. The jalopy had a dead battery and wouldn't idle because the red-hot engine had seized up multiple times during several prior heats. I was instructed to simply keep my right foot planted on the floor full time so that I wouldn't have to worry about the car stalling. Stalling would have meant the end of the game because of the dead battery.

With a flashy Snapon T-shirt on my back, my "gold plated" helmet on my head, and fire proof gloves on my hands, and the radio all hooked up and tested, off I went at full throttle with a Snapon guy (not Erick) still sitting on the beater's hood; which I didn't immediately realize. He was on the hood in the first place because he had assisted me with buckling in and hooking up the various cables.

Finally after repeated screams they got my attention over the communication link. I threw the beast into neutral to allow him to jump off before I killed him. I hit the brakes but the pedal joined the gas pedal on the floor; no brakes! He escaped with mere seconds to spare. Though I didn't know it at the time, the crowd thought that it was a real hoot to have the poor guy about to be squashed like a bug. I understand that they were sorely disappointed when he actually bailed.

Off I went again hells bells and immediately hit the first guy's car head on. Since the factory seat belt wasn't sufficient for this kind of activity, I was thrown forward and hit my chest on the steering wheel. I knocked the wind out of myself. Somehow, I got back into the action again and hit the next car head on at full throttle. Sadly I don't remember anything much about the second impact or what immediately followed.

I don't know how much time elapsed, but I woke up with the paramedics trying to pull me out of the car through the windshield. At the ER, a chest X-ray was taken. After examining the film, the ER doctor came in to tell me to prepare myself to undergo immediate aorta repair surgery. Something apparently looked like a tear on the film to him and to the on-duty radiologist. The doctor also indicated that it would be necessary to immediately perform a high resolution CT scan to get a better view of things before surgery. The problem was that I am highly allergic to iodine based contrast dyes of the type used in CT scans. When I raised the matter with him, he calmly said,

"That is too bad, but we need to do it anyway, this is serious business."

We settled on a plan of attack to prepare me for the scan with a cocktail of 6 or 7 drugs to limit any eventual allergic reaction. After administering the magic cocktail via IV, I was wheeled into the X-ray room. The ER staff, which included a nurse and several technicians, also joined the party so that they could respond quickly with the crash cart if I went into shock from the dye.

It turned out that my aorta wasn't damaged after all. I only had torn ligaments and tissues as well as cracked ribs. Not bad in the grand scheme of things I suppose.

The doctor said, "Don't ever do this again, but if you must, please let me know so that I can be there to see it."

I told him that I could have used him at the track this time around as it was. He also advised me to go to a skate board shop before my next attempt and buy a chest protector and wrist guards.

I said to him, "Don't you have to be high on drugs to go to such stores?"

He chuckled, "Any blind guy that enters a demolition derby must already be high on drugs. So what the fuck is the difference?" He definitely had a point.

It took about 4 months for my chest to get back to near normal. Originally I couldn't even roll over in bed or breathe without experiencing excruciating pain. And that was with heavy doses of pain meds. What makes guys do crazy things like this anyway? At least the total cost didn't get out of hand. Right!

Now I have perhaps \$4000 invested in a nice helmet and related communications equipment for the next time I try. Funny thing is that this whole adventure sounded much more appealing back in July than it did by mid-September!

It is my intention to enter another derby at some point in the not too distant future. However, when I eventually do, we will build the car ourselves and incorporate an appropriate racing harness that will keep me in the seat. A chest protector and wrist-guards are also musts. You can bet that the car will have a new battery from my good friends at Interstate Battery, as well as a motor that will idle and with properly operating brakes. The helmet and associated communications gear worked perfectly, so I won't have to worry about that aspect of the plan. I'm thinking that Ashley will want to participate. We have kept in contact since she sold me the helmet. She is very supportive of my interest in doing this sort of thing again. Done right, it could be a real blast!

Alan R. Downing

Written April 2008