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The “Flashpoint” streamliner waits at the start line of the 8-mile “long course” set up on the Bonneville Salt Flats for Speed Week 2016. The car reached a top speed of 294.5 mph during its run

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Back on the salt

After two years of cancellations, land speed racers are elated to get back on the Bonneville Salt Flats ♦

When Speed Week was canceled due to wet conditions on the Bonneville Salt Flats the past two years, racer Craig Murray felt a loss.

“It was withdrawal cold turkey,” the New Mexico man said. “It was the most horrible year of my life.”

Murray started coming to the salt flats in 2002. Although his background is in road racing, he only races at Bonneville now. He drives a twin engine Indian Scout motorcycle built and owned by Jim Mosher, who is also from New Mexico.

“It’s fantastic,” he said. “The first three gears, you got to make sure you get up to speed. The fourth and fifth gears, you’re just praying you can pull ‘em.”

A limited amount of solid salt caused the Southern California Timing Association to set up three courses this year. Normally, the SCTA grooms four courses — a rookie course, two short courses and a long course, Murray said.

“It’s nice when they have four because it spreads out the races and there are shorter lines,” he said.

The rookie course is 2 miles, each short course is 5 miles and the long course is 8 miles.

Although there was enough solid salt crust to groom three courses, there isn’t a lot of extra salt, Murray said.

“For the past couple days, even right now, you have to turn really early after the final pass because it’s really soft [ahead],” he said. “It could be really dangerous in the soft salt.”

Dangerously thin salt, and pooling rainwater, were the reasons why the SCTA and other racing organizations canceled their events for the past two years at Bonneville.

“We couldn’t get enough miles of course,” SCTA President Bill Lattin told the Transcript Bulletin in July 2015. “We got too much water this year and the salt is also in rough condition.”

But recent triple-digit temperatures and dry conditions have improved the surface of the salt flats, and Save the Salt Coalition public information officer Louise Noeth hopes the salt crust will continue to thicken.

“It’s a dynamic healing process, but I think we can honestly say, ‘Stand by folks, the healing is ongoing,’” she said in early August, after Mike Cook held his Test & Tune event for the first time in two years.

This year has already been a productive one for Murray, who set two new Bonneville records this week in different classes.

In the 1350 APSVF class on Sunday, he drove 170 mph in his first run and 168 mph in the second. His average speed, 169 mph, was more than enough to beat the old record of 151 mph.

When a driver goes to break a record, they must make two qualified runs. They can make the first pass as many times as it takes to beat the old record, but the second pass can only be done once. The average of the two speeds becomes the new record, Murray said.

On Tuesday in the 1350 AVF class, Murray averaged 157 mph, beating the previous 148 mph record. He and Mosher own four records for a 1350 motorcycle now.

He was still at the track on Tuesday afternoon, watching his fellow racers test the limit of their vehicles.

“Now I don’t have to worry about driving — I’m just a spectator,” Murray said. “We might leave tomorrow, [but] there have been lots of years where we’ve stayed the whole week trying to break records.”

After 12 years of racing on the salt flats, he knows a lot of people.

“It’s always a really fun reunion every year,” Murray said. “Land speed racing is our religion and Bonneville is our temple.”

After a two-year hiatus, the return of Speed Week has drawn special attention to Wendover. Tooele County Commission Chairman Wade Bitner gave a welcome speech on Aug. 13 and thousands of people have reportedly passed through the gate to the races, said Wendover Mayor Mike Crawford. The crowd of tourists at the salt flats typically tips revenue from the casinos in West Wendover, Nevada, to businesses in Wendover, Utah, he added.

“It’s an exciting week,” he said. “The gambling revenue probably goes down, but other revenues go up. My auto parts store, for example, sees a spike, but the downside is the regular customers can’t get in during race week. [But] I’m also a racing enthusiast so I like them; I don’t mind too much.”

City officials will host an appreciation dinner for Bonneville volunteers in local motels tonight, and Crawford is looking forward to talking with them about how the races are going.

“I’ve noticed there were quite a few new records — it’s a good record year,” he said. “But I’ll hear the real skinny of everything tonight.”

Speed Week ends this Friday. The racing starts at 7 a.m. and ends at 7 p.m., with an entry fee of \$20 per day or \$50 per week for spectators. To get to the race course, drive west on Interstate 80 to Exit 4 and follow the access road.

The next major racing events scheduled on the salt flats are the Bonneville Motorcycle Speed Trials Aug. 27-Sept. 1, World of Speed on Sept. 10-13, Mike Cook’s Bonneville Shootout on Sept. 15-20 and the SCTA’s World Finals on Sept. 27-30. The federal Bureau of Land Management manages all permits for racing on the salt flats.

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