



RACER'S DIARY *By Brian Hustling*

FIREBIRD RACEWAY DOUBLE NATIONAL March 11-12, 2006

Friday, March 10

It was the best of times and it was the worst of times. We knew the storm was coming but the predictions for Phoenix were for thunderstorms in the evening with a high percentage of rain in the day time. For the past 143 days, Phoenix has been dry. One more day of dry would be a new record for the city.

As we left Orange County, we tried to stay ahead of the storm front. In San Bernardino, it let loose and the rain fell, and then came the hail. We watched the temperature drop dramatically. Luckily, we managed to beat the storm front to Phoenix.

Saturday, March 11

Practice for Race No. 1, 9:30 AM

The rains came during Friday night in Phoenix and it was pouring heavily in the morning. Lynn, Dan and I went to the track early to get rain tires mounted. It was still coming down heavy. The officials called a one hour delay due to weather.

The road racing course at Firebird Raceway utilizes the ½ mile drag strip/shutdown area and the return road. It is a 1-1/2 mile course and dead flat. Firebird was designed as a drag strip and drag racers don't race in the rain. Consequently, the track does not drain properly. In several places, the infield sections of the track drain across the track. There were many standing puddles on course with no place to drain. The workers tried to use street cleaners and sweepers to clear the puddles, but the rain was too heavy.

At the beginning of the drag strip, there are some large painted areas which are extremely slick in the wet. There are so many toxic chemicals (traction compounds, grease, and oil) on the surface that absolutely requires a gentle right foot on the gas. The drag strip is bordered by two concrete walls. There will be many cars hitting the walls this weekend.



With rain tires mounted and the car on full defrost, I entered the course to see how bad it was. Some of the puddles around the course were 3-4" deep with a big puddle at the end of the straightaway. We were splashing water twice the height of the car. I drove around in third gear trying to find traction. I could only safely get to 65mph on the straight before having to ease off for the big puddles. It was extremely difficult to see the cars ahead because of the 'rooster tails' created as they splashed in the puddles. I managed to do about 3-4 laps before I came in. It was too dangerous and someone was going to get hurt. Its days like these; when you wish you had a brown driving suit.

Qualifying for Race No. 1, 11:30 AM

The rain has slowed a bit and some of the puddles have got a little smaller. I'm racing against Bill Hagerty and Jim Place both of whom are in Mini-Coopers. These Minis have amazing electronics. They have stability control, traction control and ABS braking. This is a huge advantage in the wet. They can mash the gas, but the traction system doesn't engage the power until there is ample amount of traction available to the tires. My Honda has an advanced SOTP (Seat Of The Pants) system. I lift my right foot when I think I'm going to fly off the course.



*Lot's of tread to channel water through the tire.
Saturday's rain tires: Hoosier Dirt Stockers.*

Qualifying (Continued)

I'm able to get up to 90mph on the straight before hitting the puddles. I have to gently touch the brakes before the puddle to try and slow the car. On the wet surface at those speeds the front brakes were locking up the tires creating a very heavy jolt to the car. Then I would get off the brakes and try to power through the puddles. On the back section of the track, the car would hydroplane sideways. Fortunately, this became predicable and I was able to catch the car in time for the next turn.

Race No. 1, 3:00 PM

The rain is coming down heavier again in the afternoon. The stewards and officials have decided to start the races in single file. (We usually start two by two; like how the animals entered the Ark during the Great Flood.) The race length has been reduced to 10 laps. This is extremely wise.

When I showed up to grid, I noticed that I had qualified third in class behind the other two Minis. However, all the Showroom Stock cars had qualified faster than the more modified Production Cars. Front wheel drive has its advantage.

After a couple of pace laps, we get the green flag and charge to the big puddle at the end of the straight. There is so much splashing going on that it's impossible to see anything. Luckily, everyone has made it through in one piece. Hagerty has taken off and Jim's Mini is just ahead in the distance. Jim is faster but not by much. For most of the race, I'm trying to just survive; hydroplaning in turns and catching it before the next turn. Touching the brakes at the end of the straight keeps locking the wheels and producing the big jolt lap after lap.

In the middle of the race, one of the Spec Racer Fords has slid off track and hit the tire wall. There's a lot of damage and the pace car comes back on track to slow us down and pack us up a bit tighter together. I'm closer to Jim and I can see Bill a few cars up. Because of the yellow flags, I'm about to lap some of the Production cars and a Spec Racer. The green flag is waved for the last time as we all head for the big puddle again.

I'm on the tail of the Spec Racer with his 'rooster tail' splashing my car. I have good rain tires, so I try an inside pass in the middle of the big puddle and pass him in Turn #1. In the next few turns, I pass three more cars by using the puddles to my advantage.

Jim's Mini is still in front of me. Going onto the drag strip/ straightaway for the last time I see yellow flags waving. Another Spec Racer has hit the wall and there are fiberglass pieces all over the track. Jim's Mini is stopped and perpendicular to the track. It appears that Jim has either hit the Spec Racer or spun trying to avoid him. I gently pass Jim to move into second position. Jim gets his car fired in the pit lane and tries to race me to the checkered flag. Jim's got stability and traction control, I've got SOTP. I get to the checkered flag by half a car's length to claim second place over Jim.

After the race, the cars are brought into impound. It's raining and it's cold. Most of the racer's are released except for Jim's Mini and my Evil Beast. The Steward of the Meet tells me another version of the last lap incidence. On Jim's last lap, he comes up to the scene of the crashed Spec Racer and sees the yellow flags.



*Lots of surface area for dry traction.
Sunday's dry tires: Kumho Ecsta V710.*

Race No. 1 (Continued)

He also sees someone appear to wave him into the pit lane to avoid the accident and the debris. The entry to pit lane is marked with cones and very difficult to orient visually especially during the race and the rain. Jim enters the pit lane and gets confused and tries to re-enter the track. This is when I come around and see him pointed perpendicular. Jim thought that I would also be waved into pit lane. It turns out that the person that waved Jim was not a course worker but a crew person that shouldn't have given him any directions.

Jim sees that I didn't go into the pits and that I am now in front of him; so he decides to race me to the checkered flag. Unfortunately for Jim, I have just a slight advantage and I take the position.

Understanding that Jim's misfortune was not of his doing and he was taking the safest course of action, I tried to relinquish second place to Jim. The stewards do not allow racers to arbitrarily trade positions. The finishing order stands. I offer to file a protest to give Jim the second place he deserves. It's pointed out to me that I have nothing to protest. The finishing order stands. I spoke to Jim later.

Sunday, March 12

Practice for Race No. 2, 9:00 AM

We woke up to dry conditions. The day is absolutely beautiful. The mountains in the distance have snow on the peaks. There's a few puddles but much more manageable. It's time to put on dry tires. With all rain, the track's surface will be very green. We're the fourth session of the morning, so the earlier sessions will help put down rubber and splash some of the remaining puddles away.



The 'Tower Turn' leading onto the front straight.

Practice is goes well as I try to get up to speed.

For these weekend double National races, we're racing on the course with the Spec Racers. These are low open cockpit cars that are faster than our cars in the turns and only slightly faster than us on the straight. Because we sit low in our cars and the rear trunk lids are relatively high, it's impossible to see the Spec Racers in the rear view mirrors when they get real close around us.



Cars in Pre-Grid (Left to Right): A Production Car, me, Jim's Mini and Richard's new Honda.

Sunday, Race No. 2 Qualifying, 11:30AM

The track is a little better from the morning session but there are still puddles at the end of the front straight. The driest part of the drag strip is straight down the middle. Towards the end of the straight you zig to the left to avoid a puddle and zag to the right to avoid the bigger one. I'm able to hit 116 mph at the end of the straight. After a few laps into the session yellow flags come out as another car has wrecked. I chose to come into the pit lane and wait for the green flag. My best time so far is 1 min 15 seconds. A few other cars have joined me in the pits.

We get the green flag again and I head out. Before I reach the start of the drag strip (which is called the Tower Turn), I decide to try a different line to get a launch on the straightaway. This line will only work for one lap; it is not the ideal line for doing lap after lap. It does work and I'm able to go a ½ second faster. I'm not able to back it up so I go to impound.

Impound does not go well. We get weighed and the car is slightly overweight; which is good. However, the tech officials want to see how my 'check engine' light works on the dashboard. I think they're looking for bogus engine computers. That's fine because I still have the original computer. I turn on the key and the 'engine' light stays on for 2-3 seconds and then goes off. I turn on the engine to show that the 'engine' light remains off and I don't have any trouble codes.

Qualifying (Continued)

The officials tell me that all 'check engine' lights are supposed to remain on until the engine is started. Mine shuts off after a few seconds. They obviously think I have a bogus unit and ask to see my factory service manual.

Dan retrieves the manual but we can't find a description on how the 'engine' light is supposed to work normally. The service manual is used to learn how to repair or replace parts, not to describe how the car runs normally. We're in deep trouble. We have no proof that this is the way the car is supposed to behave.



Richard Crites' new Honda Civic Si.

Richard Crites has brought a brand new 2006 Honda Civic Si to run in Showroom Stock B. It is the newer version of my beast. A Honda is a Honda, right? Richard turns on his car and the 'engine' light remains on until the engine starts; this is different than my car. I'm in deep trouble. I found another Honda Civic car in the paddock. It's a couple of years newer than my car. A Honda is a Honda, right? This car has the 'engine' light remain on until the engine starts. I'm in deeper trouble. How can I prove that my computer is legal?

Laura Olson mentions that her friend Doug is at the track, and that he is a Honda mechanic. He comes to impound to review my manual and can't find the 'check engine' light operation. However, he does know that for my model year; this is the normal operation. He was kind enough to speak with the tech officials and convince them that everything is operating normally. The officials decide to let me race in the afternoon.

Race No. 2, 3:30PM

In getting to pre-grid for the race, I notice that I have out qualified Jim's Mini for second position in class. Behind us, is Richard's new Honda Civic. This is his first race with the car as it was just completed the previous Thursday.

As we enter the track, a course worker indicates that I will be starting in a two by two formation with me on the outside line with a Production Toyota car on the inside. (This Production car should be much faster).

We get the green flag. Jim's Mini is able to out launch me. Richard's Honda has more power and passes me too. The Production car also takes off. I focus on staying on Jim's tail. Hagerty is ahead playing with Laura's SSB Miata and some of the other Production cars.

Jim's Mini is faster on the front straight and he's able to out accelerate me. However, on the back twisty sections, I'm able to close the gap. I seem to have the advantage at the back chicane and at the Tower Turn that leads to the front straight. I try to hang onto the Mini the best I can. I try an inside pass but Jim closes the door. During another lap, I try an inside pass onto the front straight and pull it off. However, Jim is able to re-pass on the straight.

As the faster Spec Racers try to pass us, Jim and I continue to battle. Going into the Tower Turn there are two Spec Racers trying to pass us in the middle of the turn. I can't see either of the cars and I accidentally pinch one of them towards the inside wall. He avoids the wall, but gives me a hand gesture suggesting that I'm number one. (Funny, most people use their index finger.)

On the back section, I found a slight advantage and pull alongside the Mini. I keep my foot in it and I am able to make the pass.

On another lap at the same Tower Turn, two other Spec Racers try the same maneuver as before; trying to pass in the middle of the turn. Jim and I continued to battle. One of the Spec Racers tries an outside pass on me. I can't see him and almost put him into the wall, but he narrowly sneaks by.

Jim re-passes again

With one lap to go, I pass Jim on the back section. I'm able to keep him behind me at the checkered flag. I finish in second place behind Bill.



Jim's Mini leads me through the Tower Turn.



The #65 Evil Beast passes the Mini on the inside!

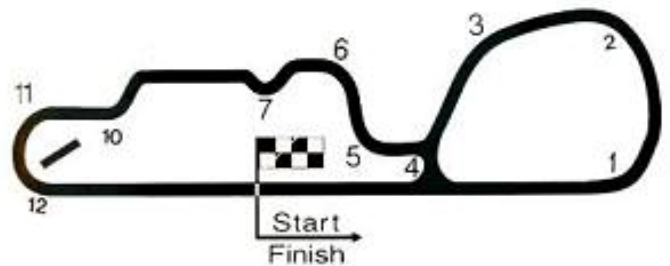


My Honda, Jim's Mini and two Spec Racers

SPECIAL THANKS

Special Thanks to:

- My wife, Lynn for her patience in adverse conditions.
- Dan, for flying out to Phoenix to join us.
- Laura, for saving a paddock space and for finding Doug.
- Doug, for convincing the Tech Officials of the legality of my car.
- Dan's rental van for the extra room and seat warmers.
- Ned and Velma Morehouse for coming to cheer everyone on.
- Lynne's awesome batch of cookies. A chocolate outer cookie with a peanut butter core – delicious.
- Jim Place for a clean race.



Firebird Raceway. Turn #12 is the 'Tower Turn'.



Dan in total awe of my driving abilities.

**NEXT RACE
THUNDERHILL RACEWAY
DOUBLE NATIONAL
MARCH 18 & 19**