



<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/orange/la-me-peeled6jun06,1,3696828,full.story?coll=la-editions-orange>

**ORANGE PEELED A LOOK AT LIFE INSIDE THE COUNTY**

## **Tiny Cars Provide a Huge Adrenaline Rush**

**Interest in slot cars has declined. But fans at the Buena Park Raceway couldn't care less.**

By Natasha Lee  
Times Staff Writer

June 6, 2005

Behind the black-tinted windows of a Buena Park storefront, electric-powered slot cars whiz around a grooved, wooden track, crossing the finish line in the blink of an eye — and giving boys in their 40s and 50s the biggest rush of their week.

Never mind the fast-paced video games favored by their children; this cadre of aging slot-car enthusiasts clings to a hobby that, for the most part, hit the skids about three decades ago.

And so they come here, to the Buena Park Raceway, one of the few remaining commercial slot-car tracks in Southern California. Amateurs and slot-car record breakers alike turn out six days a week to tinker with their souped-up racing toys and compete for cash prizes.

"I'm going to race till I can't get around the track," said Rick Elting, 54, of Lake Forest, who started racing in 1966.

There are relative youngsters, too — like Mike Hawk, 23, of Huntington Beach, who recently discovered the track. "It's a fun adrenaline rush," he said. "It's like when you get your first car and you're racing your friend for the first time and you're like 'Ha-ha, I'm beating you.' "

Larger than a Matchbox car, a slot car zips down a grooved track, guided by its undercarriage pin and its speed governed by a hand-held controller. But it's more than just the trigger pull of an index finger that leads a racer to victory.

With honed hand-eye coordination, skilled racers tickle the speed controls just right so their aerodynamically designed cars don't fly off the track.

"You really have to concentrate. If you're tired, your reflexes might not be as good," said 35-year-old Mickey Johnston, a salesman who, in 20 years of racing, has won three national championships.

"You can look at it as a hobby or you can look at it as a sport. I do it to win."

Johnston, of Placentia, was one of a handful of racers on a recent weeknight revving up for an upcoming annual competition — testing finely tuned motors, purchasing parts and working to break records. The three-day Western States Championships, which kick off Friday at the raceway, is expected to draw more than 100 serious racers from

California, Nevada and Arizona.

The raceway is a paradise for enthusiasts who enjoy the camaraderie, the competition and good, old-fashioned fun that triggers memories of their youth.

"I remember I tried it in the '60s for the first time, and it was like I couldn't sleep; I couldn't believe how fast these cars could go," said Bob Johnson, 49, a Tuesday night regular at the raceway for nearly nine years. "Now, it's just a hobby. It's something to do — I'm married, so I can only go out once a week," the Huntington Beach resident said.

New faces check in, and familiar faces fade away, but the regulars remain a tightknit group, celebrating one another's children's school graduations and having barbecues in the raceway's parking lot.

Female racers are rare, but wives and girlfriends frequently cheer along the side of the tracks.

"I like watching the drivers' faces more than the cars," said Mickey Johnston's wife, Erin, 28, who usually goes to the big races. "Some people rock, some people make the whizzing noises. It's funny to watch."

This night, fluorescent-green and hot-pink wing cars — some of the fastest of the slots — circled along one of the raceway's 155-foot-long tracks, as co-owner Lenore Gallegos, 62, announced finish times over a public address system.

Up to eight cars can race on the twisting courses, competing in three- to five-minute heats. And depending on its style and class, a car can complete a lap in less than three seconds. Wooden workstations are close to the tracks so racers can rush over quickly should a tire peel apart or an engine fail.

Gallegos' husband, Chris, 63, works from behind the merchandise counter — renting out cars, chatting up customers and selling parts. For enthusiasts with their own equipment, 15 minutes of racing costs about the same as a gallon of gas for the real cars outside. Those who rent cars and controls pay \$4 for a quarter-hour.

The business offers three racetracks, but its most popular is the 55-foot-long, two-lane drag strip. The tracks dominate a large room illuminated by floodlights that during busy hours takes on the smell of burning rubber and smoky electric motors. Grease boards hang on walls, showing top scores from the latest races. .

Part of the fun for these enthusiasts is toiling for hours at workstations, replacing tires the size of dimes, soldering parts and painting orange, yellow and red flames on the sides of doors on the cars.

And just like those of real cars, parts can be costly. An electric motor can run from \$14 to \$45, and a complete car can exceed \$400. The average slot car is 5 to 7 inches; drag-racing cars are about 10 inches.

This hobby takes "some mechanical skill — or at least a large pocketbook," said Jim Swofford, 51, of Buena Park.

He said he became addicted to racing seven years ago, after buying starter kits for his two young sons for Christmas.

"I kept wrecking their cars, and they wouldn't let me race them anymore, so I went up to the counter and bought a car."

Within that first week, Swofford spent \$1,000 on motors, controllers and cars and would show up at the raceway three hours before it opened. Today, he holds 15 world slot-car records — and owns more than 50 cars.

Slot-car racing originated in England in the late 1940s and gained a foothold here in the 1960s, with thousands of racetracks spreading across the United States. Elvis Presley built one at Graceland. By the early 1970s, the slot-car boom was giving way to radio-controlled cars that wheeled freely around driveways and yards.

Those who remained loyal to slot cars saw them evolve with the use of new plastics, faster motors and car bodies that resemble Ferraris and cars familiar on the NASCAR circuit. Today's fans exchange information, tips and rules on the Internet.

The Gallegoses can't explain why enthusiasts cling to the hobby. "We've been asked that so many times, and we still don't have an answer," Lenore Gallegos said.

Tired of the lumberyard business, the couple opened the raceway in 1992 as a combination vintage-comic-book store and slot-car track. Soon the racetrack dominated the business, prompting the Gallegoses to move twice, settling in on Lincoln Avenue. In August, the raceway will play host to the annual United Slot Racers Assn. national championships for the third time in five years.

Customers compliment the couple for their laid-back service and not interfering in disputes among racers.

"I'd rather ring the cash register," Chris said.

---

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at [latimes.com/archives](http://latimes.com/archives).

**TMSReprints**

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)  
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

PARTNERS:  