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# Those Muscle Cars On the Drag Strip Are Really Electric

## Clunker Run on Batteries Trounces Latest 'Gassers'; John Wayland's Close Call

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PORTLAND, Ore. -- On a recent Friday night at the Portland International Raceway, John Wayland scanned the dragsters, looking for an opponent for his geeky looking 1972 Datsun sedan. Finally, he challenged the owner of a souped-up 2005 Corvette, the hottest-looking car at the track, to a quarter-mile race.



See how an electric car dubbed the White Zombie is leaving conventional muscle cars in the dust.

When the starting light flashed, the Datsun, known as White Zombie, shot silently past the Corvette and kept widening the lead as the two cars faded into the distance. "Oh man, right off the [starting] line he had me," said the Corvette's owner, Robert Akers, shaking his head.

Electric cars are typically known for their fuel efficiency and environmental bona fides, not for their speed and muscle. But Mr. Wayland, 47 years old, is changing that, and has become something of a hero to a small group of hot rodders dedicated to humiliating gasoline-powered cars. The night White Zombie beat the Corvette, it also trounced two other "gassers," as Mr. Wayland calls them -- a blue BMW and a bright orange 1964 Pontiac Tempest.

The electric-car racers, who go by nicknames like "Father Time" and "Electric Louis," hope to jump-start public interest in electric vehicles. "Getting electric cars going in the U.S. has been like shoveling sand into a tsunami," says Roderick Wilde, who sometimes races here in his electric-powered Mazda.

White Zombie and the other electric cars compete in the most popular drag-racing category: the one for cars that can be driven on regular streets. Anybody with a hot car and a safety helmet can drive up and compete in this "street-legal" category. White Zombie can go from a standing start to 109 miles an hour in 11.9 seconds, making it one of the fastest street-legal cars in the nation.



John Wayland

Sometimes, given White Zombie's renown as a speed demon, other drivers avoid a face-off. The night he went to the raceway, Mr. Akers, the 35-year-old owner of the Corvette, had just gotten back from a two-year stint in Iraq working for a private security contractor. He says he knew that the Datsun had an electric motor but didn't realize what that meant. The boxy looking Datsun was driven by Tim Brehm, who is a mechanic for a local forklift distributor; Mr. Wayland, the car's owner, is a mechanic-instructor at the same company.

Mr. Wayland is a former bass player in a rock-and-roll band who says he barely made it through high school. He got interested in electric gear while running a business fixing broken amplifiers and television sets. In the 1980s, he drove gasoline-powered Datsuns in illegal drag races on the streets of Portland. "I had lots of speeding tickets," he says.

In 1985, he found the white Datsun sedan in a junkyard and bought it for \$585. He intended to use it to drive to work. But in the early '90s, with General Motors Corp. beginning to tout the electric car, Mr. Wayland decided to convert the Datsun to electric power. Today, after several modifications, White Zombie has two powerful motors normally used to operate forklifts and 36 12-volt storage batteries crammed into the back seat and trunk. In daily use, most electric cars in the U.S. are little more than souped up golf carts with fewer batteries and much less power.

In electrifying the Datsun, Mr. Wayland had as his goal building a car that could beat most of the big gasoline-powered muscle cars around Portland. "Getting beat by a little Japanese car back then reflected on your manhood," he says.

Unlike gasoline engines, which take a few seconds to build up turning power, or torque, for the rear wheels, electric motors deliver it instantly. The sharp jolt of power was a problem for Mr. Wayland in his first few races. "I hit it and it was on full power," he says. "You just held on." He has since installed a controller, a kind of giant dimmer switch that phases in the battery power more gradually.

At first, skeptics abounded. One day, Mr. Wayland found policemen measuring a long skid mark the Zombie had made the previous evening. (Before a drag race starts, drivers often do a "burnout," spinning their tires furiously on the asphalt to make their treads sticky so they have a better grip on the road.) The policemen had heard rumors of a fast electric car but dismissed them. "There is no electric car that could lay down a strip like that," he heard one declare.



John Fialka

John Wayland, standing next to his drag-racing, electric-powered Datsun.

The disbelief began to disappear in the mid- to late '90s, after Portland made drag-racing legal on a cordoned-off downtown street and later at the race track, and White Zombie prevailed over and over.

Around the country, other electric cars started beating gasoline-powered favorites, too. In 1996, a few tracks began to ban the electric cars, calling them unsafe because they went so fast and employed unfamiliar technology. In response, Mr. Wayland and others formed the National Electric Drag Racing Association, which now has about 50 members, and drew up safety rules for electric dragsters.

Those regulations satisfied the National Hot Rod Association, the world's largest promoter of drag races, which a few years later invited the electric drag racers to take part in its competitions. Now the electric

cars routinely participate in drag races in California, Maryland and other states.

Still, even with tough safety rules, the cars can pose special hazards. When installing an array of batteries in a car, Mr. Wayland lays a rubber blanket on top of it, and connects one battery to the next, one at a time, to avoid short-circuits.

But in March 1998, feeling elated after installing 28 batteries in preparation for a race, he whipped off the blanket before he was finished. He leaned down to connect the last battery to the array and dropped the brass connecting rod, which bounced from battery to battery, creating a trail of sparks and flashes. A superheated cloud of gas, called a plasma, formed and flickered over the batteries as the heat generated by 336 volts melted the brass and fused the batteries together.

"I could feel the skin burning on my face," recalls Mr. Wayland, who wasn't seriously injured. A colleague threw a wet towel over the blaze. The towel was vaporized. Fire extinguishers had no effect. Finally, a fireman wearing a hazardous-materials suit disconnected the batteries, and the cloud disappeared. "The Zombie looked like a roasted marshmallow," Mr. Wayland says. The car was quickly repaired, and Mr. Wayland has since been known as "Plasma Boy."

The accident fueled Mr. Wayland's mystique, which has spread far beyond the drag-racing set. Last year, a Washington state police department -- the Clark County Sheriff's Office -- invited him to show off White Zombie in a fast-driving course for young officers. Mr. Wayland did a massive burnout, leaving a squad car, with lights blaring and siren screaming, far behind. "Somebody, please arrest me," Mr. Wayland recalls saying. "I'm having way too much fun."

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