

A Storied Rivalry Put Drag Racing on the Map



National Dragster/N.H.R.A.

THEY MADE HISTORY Don Prudhomme, left, this month at his shop in Vista, Calif., and Tom McEwen, right, with one of his funny cars at a museum in Santa Ana, Calif. Their rivalry popularized a sport that had a greasy reputation.



Toy car: Sandy Huffaker for The New York Times; others; National Dragster/N.H.R.A.

GLORY DAYS The rivals, top right, in 1972 (with Prudhomme at left) and, bottom, racing in 1975. Hot Wheels produced models of their Plymouth Duster and Barracuda in 1970.



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By [DAVE CALDWELL](#)

ONE day in 1964, Ed Donovan, a drag-racing pioneer who was known as the Mole, came up with a nickname for Tom McEwen, his lead-footed driver. There was not much money in drag racing then — winners were often given a \$100 savings bond, plus free parts and oil — but every hotshot had a nickname.

One of McEwen's top funny-car rivals was Don Prudhomme, a lanky driver from Southern California who was so cobra-quick off the starting line that he was known as the Snake. So Donovan tagged McEwen the Mongoose, a mammal that seizes and kills venomous snakes. Their match races became genuine showdowns.

"This wasn't rasslin' or anything fake like that, and that's what made it so popular," Prudhomme said in a recent telephone interview from his office in Vista, Calif. "We just wanted to beat each other."

Because the rivalry grew between the two drivers — McEwen in his Plymouth Duster, Prudhomme in his Plymouth Barracuda — the sport changed. In 1970, McEwen talked Mattel into producing 1:64 scale Snake and Mongoose cars as part of its Hot Wheels die-cast toy line — and into becoming drag racing's first sponsor outside the automobile industry.

Today, the [National Hot Rod Association](#) is a multimillion-dollar organization. Drivers like Don Garlits, also known as Big Daddy, and Shirley Muldowney, or Cha-Cha, also pushed the sport into prominence, but the Snake-Mongoose rivalry acted as its spark plug.

"The Snake and Mongoose — Prudhomme and McEwen — fed off each other, they really did. They were just a match made in heaven," said Tom Madigan, a former drag racer who wrote a book about the rivalry, "Snake vs. Mongoose: How a Rivalry Changed Drag Racing Forever."

Children collected the toy cars and, of course, raced them against each other. Once, McEwen recalled, two brothers showed up at an autograph session, one with a Snake tattoo, the other a Mongoose tattoo. The first asked Prudhomme to autograph his arm; the second asked McEwen to autograph his arm. Then they went to a tattoo parlor to have the autographs made permanent.

But, for the most part, the rivalry sanitized and popularized a sport that had a greasy reputation. As Madigan said, "A lot of these guys weren't public speakers — they'd throw in every profanity known to mankind in an interview."

McEwen, 72, retired as a driver in 1992, and Prudhomme, 68, retired in 1994 to start his own race team, but each says he is asked about the rivalry almost every day. Prudhomme said the rivalry might be the only topic he never gets tired of talking about. It changed their lives.

“At the time, all we were thinking about was having some extra money,” McEwen said from his home in Orange County, Calif. “We never had money given to us before. You didn’t have any idea that it would blossom into what it did.”

Forty years ago, drag racers barnstormed from one town to another, hawking tickets by doing interviews with local radio stations and newspapers. The Snake and the Mongoose tended to draw most of the fans to the drag strip, if not all of them. Children drew pictures and made models.

One of them was Ron Capps, a native of Carlsbad, Calif., who would pursue a career in the sport. In 1997, Prudhomme hired Capps to race a funny car for him. Capps said it was like having [Joe Montana](#) walk on the field and teach a youngster how to throw a football.

Capps, 44, said in a recent telephone interview that he was often surprised when he visited a town where he thought there were no drag-racing fans. He said: “I told them what kind of racing it was. Then I told them who I drove for. And when I would say Don ‘the Snake’ Prudhomme, you would get people that were C.E.O.’s at companies, they would say, ‘Oh, my gosh, like the Don the Snake Prudhomme — and the Mongoose?’

“It was such a cult following back then because they went match racing in these little towns, and everybody as a kid seemed to have got a glimpse of it, whether their mom and dad took them or whatever.”

McEwen became the front man for the rivalry, but the quieter Prudhomme won more of the races and four N.H.R.A. funny car championships (although McEwen said he won the “best race ever” between the two, at the United States Nationals in 1978, just four days after the death of his son, Jamie). In 2001, Prudhomme was No. 3 on a list of the 50 top N.H.R.A. drivers of all time, behind Garlits and John Force; McEwen was No. 16.

Mattel withdrew as a sponsor in 1973, but the two drivers had drawn so much exposure they were able to form their own company, Wildlife Racing, that attracted other corporate sponsors like Coca-Cola. Soon, other teams had non-auto logos splashed on their cars.

“The licensing, the merchandise, the racing, it just seemed like it all happened at the same time,” said Tony Pedregon, a 44-year-old N.H.R.A. funny car driver. “I don’t know that there were too many kids that are my age that didn’t have the Snake and the Mongoose Hot Wheels set.”

In 1974, McEwen said, Skip Hess came to Prudhomme and asked him if he could use Mongoose for his new line of performance bicycles. Prudhomme and McEwen struck a deal with Hess, a drag racer turned businessman whose company became a billion-dollar business.

McEwen now raises quarter horses — all of which, he said, have Mongoose in their names — and Prudhomme still runs his drag-racing team, with Spencer Massey, a promising 27-year-old in his first full N.H.R.A. season, driving his Top Fuel dragster.

“I didn’t think drag racing would last that long, let alone the stuff with the Mongoose and Snake coming about,” Prudhomme said. “At the beginning, we were just day by day. We were just a couple of guys barnstorming up and down the area. People wanted to see those two cars. It was the early days, when things are a lot more innocent than they are today.”

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