



So, WHAT'S A GASSER?



by Tom Olsen

Regular readers of my articles have probably heard me use the term “gasser” from time-to-time. I use the term regularly, but only recently did it occur to me that many readers may not know exactly what the term gasser refers to. Unless you were an active drag racing fan somewhere in the 1955-1969 time period, you may not have ever witnessed a true gasser. Recently, an acquaintance of mine asked me “So, what’s a gasser?” I’ll attempt to explain, and in the process, show you some photos I’ve taken of some of my personal favorites.

The term “gasser” evolved from the old “Gas Coupe and Sedan” class of National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) drag racing. In the mid ‘50’s and later, the Gas Coupe and Sedan class helped differentiate modified cars that ran on gasoline from those that ran on other, more exotic fuels, such as nitro methane or alcohol. While the “Gas” classes didn’t encompass all cars running on gasoline, it did provide classifications for many highly-modified street machines.

Early gassers were envisioned as dual purpose “street and strip” hot rods. Many were driven regularly during the week, then driven to the dragstrip and raced on weekends or evenings. The cars had to have bodies produced by an automobile manufacturer, and four fenders were required. Mild customizing was allowed to the body, usually for the purpose of reducing weight. Highly modified engines were the norm, and superchargers were used increasingly over the years. Classes were established based on a cubic inch (engine) to vehicle weight ratio.

By the late 1950’s, Gas class rules were evolving rapidly. Racers in general are notorious for finding ways around rules, and as racers continued to skirt existing rules, additional rules were added in an attempt to keep a level playing field as well as to address safety concerns.

Pictured above: You can’t help but like a ‘55 Chevy gasser with the front wheels in the air as it launches from the starting line. The “O-Cal Gasser” is racing at the 2012 Hot Rod Reunion in Bowling Green, KY.

More extensive body modifications, interior modifications, brakes, and other legal street equipment were all addressed in the rulebooks. Engine performance modifications were still wide open, and more vehicles were supercharged than ever before. (Superchargers moved a car up one class from where it would normally be based on its cubic inch to weight ratio.)

As gassers entered the 1960's, the class developed even further. Superchargers were so prevalent that all supercharged gassers now had their own classes. Rear wheel wells could now be radiused to clear the larger slicks required for additional traction. Engines were being moved rearward and upward within the frame in order to gain additional traction; that was soon addressed in the rules. Body modifications were soon limited by NHRA as were overall wheelbase minimums. (Wheelbase minimums went back and forth several times over the years affecting popular cars such as the Anglia and some other foreign models.) Extensive use of fiberglass body parts, to include complete one-piece front ends, was now the norm. Complete fiberglass bodies were allowable later in the '60's. Headers with no additional exhaust system, no front bumpers, and other "street legal" items were now long gone; competitive gassers had become fully "drag strip only" vehicles!

In my opinion, the "glory days" of gassers was the period of about 1965 through 1969. Gassers by then had reached a very high standard of build quality and were exceptionally competitive. Competition amongst speed equipment producers, primarily camshaft manufacturers, was so intense that the term "gasser wars" evolved (this referring to the ongoing advertising battles amongst the top manufacturers and their sponsored teams). During the "gasser wars" period, dragstrips all across the country would book many of the top gasser teams for a day, or night, of gasser



The "Northern Hauler" D/Gas '56 Chevy sedan delivery in the Englishtown staging lanes. 55-57 Chevys were very popular as gassers, but sedan deliveries were rather rare in the class.

This beautiful black '33 Willys BB/G car had a blown and injected small block Chevy for power.



This A/Gas Anglia at Sioux City Dragways ran in the 10 second range at 130mph on an injected small block Chevy.



Russo and Santo's 4-door Willys D/Gasser at Englishtown, NJ, in 1969. This car was always competitive and still is on the nostalgia racing circuit today.



“Boiling the hides” for the fans at Beech Bend Raceway is an AA/ Gas Anglia (an English Ford). Smoky burnouts like this heat the slicks for maximum traction on the start.

match races; packing the house in the process. Even casual dragstrip attendees will recall that gassers were quick, colorful, loud, and their wheelstands and often erratic handling resulted in wild, crowd-pleasing action. I loved watching gassers battle it out more than anything else on the dragstrips in those days!

There were many top gasser teams across the country by the mid-‘60’s; the northeast and west coast being the dominant areas. Other pockets around the country also produced high numbers of gasser standouts; “Ohio George” Montgomery being one of the most famous examples. The list of impressive gasser teams is huge, but some of my personal favorites from the day include “Big John” Mazmanian, the Stone, Woods, and Cook team, K.S. Pitman, the S & S Parts team, Russo and Santo, and Jack Merkel Automotive.

Unfortunately, the heyday of the gasser was coming to an end. As the 1970’s progressed, classes were changing drastically in NHRA drag racing. The popularity of 55-57 Chevys, Willys, Anglias, and the like was beginning to take a back seat to Camaros, Mustangs, Cudas, and other recent muscle cars. In many cases, the older body styles didn’t have the aerodynamics of newer cars on the racing scene. The one or two person small gasser teams were finding it increasingly difficult to compete against the major factory involvement that was dominating many classes. Additionally, in the ongoing effort to find more speed and quicker times, car bodies were being lengthened, wheelbases were altered, Factory



Henry J’s were somewhat unusual and made neat, competitive gassers. This 1952 model, the “Wild Weasel” was seen at the 2010 Hot Rod Reunion.



“Ohio George” Montgomery was one of the most dominant gasser drivers of the 1960’s. This is the “Malco Gasser” Mustang that he won national events with in ‘67-’68.



The team of Stone, Woods, and Cooke were notorious in the “gasser wars” of the mid 1960’s. They fielded several Willys gassers over the years and commonly had two cars racing the gasser circuit at the same time.

Experimental classes, and later, the Funnycar classes evolved and became crowd favorites. Gassers, as we once knew them, haven't existed in regular NHRA racing for many years.

However, for those of us that enjoyed watching gassers race back in the '60's, or for folks that would like the opportunity to do so, there is still hope! There are several nostalgia gasser organizations out there that are dedicated to preserving this bit of drag racing history. (Geezer Gassers, Nostalgia Gassers Racing Assn, East Coast Gassers, to name a few.) There are also several events across the country where nostalgia gassers compete; many of which are the actual cars as raced 50+ years ago! I attend the NHRA Hot Rod Reunion in Bowling Green, KY, every other summer, largely to see the gassers race. NHRA hosts a similar event in California each year, and many of the gasser associations conduct their own "gasser only" shows throughout the season. If loud, beautiful, wheelstanding, tire burning, hot rods from the '50's and '60's engaged in fierce competition sounds like your kind of entertainment, I encourage you to get online, locate a nostalgia gasser racing event, and check it out. I think you'll love it. I know I sure do!

Tom Olsen was born and raised in Sioux Falls. He graduated from Washington High School in 1965. Tom's car hobby was interrupted for three years of service in the U.S. Army (1967-'70) including a year of duty in Vietnam. After his military service, Tom worked at Olsen Marine and Sporting Goods prior to joining the Sioux Falls Police Department in 1979. After 25+ years of service, he retired as Detective Division Commander for the SFPD in 2004. Tom and his wife, Joyce, have two sons and three grandchildren and continue to live in Sioux Falls.