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Aaron Pine is mechanic "A" leader at Central City Division 1. He won the National Hot Rod Association's prestigious Wally Award last month for motorcycle drag racing.

Photos by Jimmy Stroup

Metro Mechanic Zooms to Coveted Drag Racing Award

- Aaron Pine, Central City Division 1 mechanic "A" leader, was honored in May with the National Hot Rod Association's highest honor.

By JIMMY STROUP

(June 4, 2008) Mechanic "A" Leader Aaron Pine is licensed to speed.

On a racetrack, his custom-built, high-performance drag racing motorcycle clocks 165 mph. It's so fast that Pine clinched the National Hot Rod Association's prestigious prize, the Wally Award.

"It's the equivalent to getting an Oscar for Best Actor or something," Pine, 37, says. "I've been trying to get one of those for about 10 years. Ever since I started racing that was what I wanted."

Despite his win, Pine likes to point out ironically that he doesn't even own a motorcycle license to drive on the streets of Los Angeles.

"That's too dangerous for me," Pine says.



Pine has competed in and won races all across America.

"I'm in control of my bike and I'm staying safe, but I can't be sure everyone on the road is behaving the way I do. The track is a lot safer."

Besides, motorcycle drag racing is a completely different sport than driving the streets. Pine races in the NHRA sportsman series bracket. Bikes are modified to race at breakneck speeds and compete head-to-head in pairs. Pine regularly finishes at 165 mph.

"The series I race in is designed to keep the cost down for sportsmen racers," Pine says. "It's for someone like me who can't afford to race professionally due to cost restrictions, time restrictions, and so on."

It was in this bracket that Pine recently won his Wally – a statue of NHRA founder Wally Parks — given to the winner of special division events. Parks founded the NHRA in the 1950s.

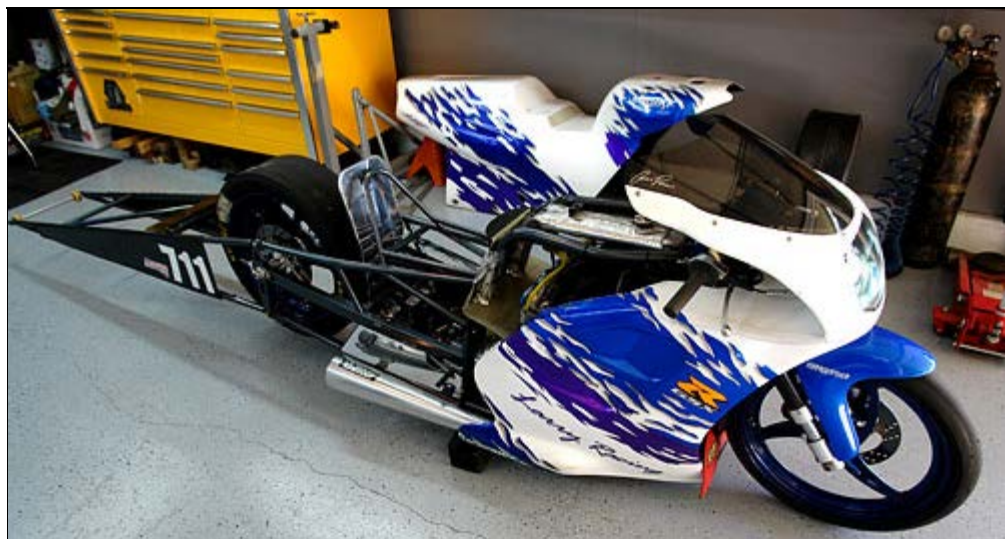
A custom-built bike

Pine's motorcycle was originally a 1986 Suzuki GSXR 750. But after some serious modifications, the street-sanctioned Suzuki is almost unrecognizable.

"I put an extended swing arm on it, I put a slick on it, then later put a wheelie bar on the back and reconstructed the engine," Pine says.

The bike doesn't even use gasoline anymore. The high speeds require a purer chemical that burns more efficiently and at higher temperatures. The chemical is a man-made compound known as VP-C14, which costs about \$12 a gallon. Since Pine's bike only holds about a quart of fuel and he only races a quarter-mile at a time, he fortunately, doesn't need to use too much fuel.

Although Pine has the skill to compete at professional levels, time and money are obstacles to a foray into the next tier of competition.



Pine's motorcycle clocks 165 mph when crossing the finish line on a quarter-mile track.

How motorcycle drag racing works

While motorcycle drag racing relies on head-to-head competition between two riders, the race is mostly against an elapsed time (ET) measurement. Racers "dial in" – or predict the time it will take them to race the quarter mile track. Whichever rider comes closest to that time is the winner. The finish line doesn't matter all that much.

"What you're really doing is racing against yourself – against what you say your time will be," Pine says. "That's the best way to race."

Pine generally "dials in" at 8.5 seconds to complete the quarter-mile track. If his opponent "dials in" at 9.0 seconds, Pine starts a half second after his opposition.

"It's designed so that if you both reacted to the Christmas Tree – what we call the starting lights – and both ran what you said you would, you'd both reach the finish line at the same exact time."

Pine has never seen that happen. Besides weather and mechanical problems, Pine says the major factor in winning or losing a race is the rider's reaction to the Christmas Tree.

"It takes four-tenths of a second from the time the lights start to when you get the green light and need to get going. If I react to the light slower than the guy I'm racing, that puts me much farther back from him – even if I started ahead of him," Pine says, laughing. "It's confusing, I know."

Pine must withstand cutthroat elimination standards at every race he attends.

"Most of the time there are four rounds – and everyone is do or die," he says.

A life-long hobby

Pine began racing cars as a teenager.

"I started with street racing, racing Volkswagens with my friends, but I stopped street racing because after a while you can get in a lot of trouble for that behavior," Pine says. "Plus, it's dangerous. So I started going to the track and racing there."

His parents originally didn't let him race motorcycles when he lived with them, but once he gained independence, Pine quickly sold his drag car and bought a motorcycle.

After he started racing on the drag circuit, Pine's father – Metro retiree Bob Pine, who was a mechanic leader at Non-Revenue Division 4 – began working on the bikes with his son.

"This is our deal, me and my dad," says Pine, who started working at Metro at age 18. "He comes to all the races with us, gets the bike ready with me, tweaks on it and makes it the best it can be. My family comes too, of course, my wife and two boys, and my mother. But it's really our deal – me and dad."

The races often offer only modest prize money, so it's a good thing Pine races for thrills. Competing professionally is expensive and requires big, corporate sponsors.

"Besides, I've seen guys who give up their marriages and houses to make a run for that level of competition, and I would never sacrifice the well-being of my wife and children for some pipe dream. I'm happy with what I've got."