

Wide World of Grit

by Jon Vara

If there's any justice in the world, belt-sander racing will someday be as popular as NASCAR or IROC racing. This is a sport that has everything: enthusiastic fans, serious horsepower, blazing speed, and corporate sponsors.

But above all, there's competition, and not just among the speeding sanders themselves. Like stock-car racing, the belt-sander circuit is divided between two alphabetically named governing bodies.

The International Belt Sander Drag Racing Association, or IBDA, is the older and more established of the two. "We've been racing since 1989," says Lorne Nielson, association founder and owner of Nielson Lumber in Point Roberts, Wash. In 1996, the group began recruiting members elsewhere, and now sanctions events at lumberyards and home centers in 18 states and the Canadian province of British Columbia. The association's third annual world championship was held last month in Stevenson, B.C.

Then there's the National Belt Sander Racing Association (NBSRA), founded in 1994 by Steve Humphrey, a vinyl siding installer from Steptoe, Wash. Unlike IBDA, which focuses primarily on racing, NBSRA also goes in for exhibition events, including head-on collisions, weight-sled pulls — something like fairground tractor pulling, but with belt sanders — and a crowd-pleasing spectacle that has a pair of sanders fitted with customized manifolds streaming clouds of red and blue carpenter's chalk from their exhaust ports as they speed down the track. (Wisely, no doubt, the NBSRA rules specifically forbid "dangerous pyrotechnics.")

Last August, NBSRA held its first annual race and exhibition meet in

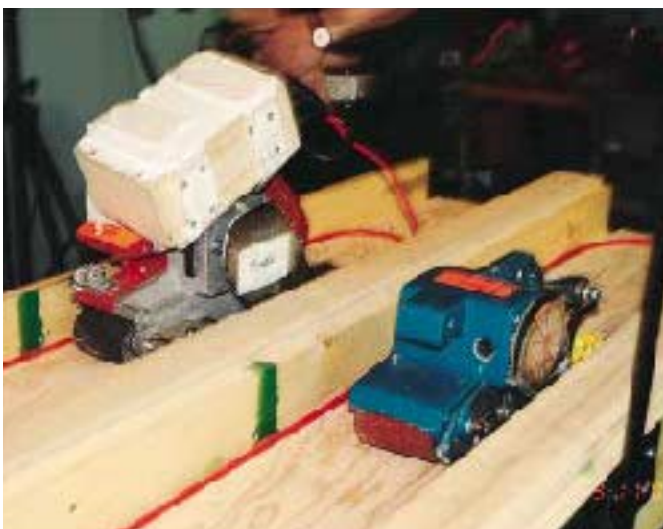


NBSRA racers await the green light.

Under association rules, competitors start their own motors; at IBDA-sanctioned races, sanders are simultaneously switched on by a race official.



Decorated sanders on display between heats at an IBDA event.



Sanders take your mark, get set

Most racing sanders, like those shown here, are outfitted with side-mounted roller bearings, which reduce friction against the lane dividers. The box mounted on the machine at left contains additional electrical capacitors for an added burst of power — the racing sander equivalent of a nitrous oxide injection system.

Pit crews at work. A popular modification, seen here, is to replace the original belt-sander motor with the motor from an angle grinder. Gearing changes can boost the belt speed from a stock 700 feet per minute (fpm) to 4,700 fpm or more.



Hamster power. Talk about spinning your wheels



Parade floats are acceptable, but creativity has its limits. After some competitors took to riding actual customized sanders, IBDA added a rule forbidding the practice.



Sturgis, S.D., in conjunction with the Black Hills Motorcycle Classic, said by organizers to be the largest motorcycle gathering in the world. In addition to races, one highlight was an exhibition in which a belt sander ran down a 100-foot track, off a ramp, and successfully jumped seven parked Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Members hope to eventually clear 15 Harleys.

Despite their differences, the two organizations are united by a common love of all that makes the sport so special: the chattering whine of a high amperage motor; the smell of scorched plywood; the roar of the crowd. The two founders even speak well of one another. Steve Humphrey mentions a recent telephone conversation with Lorne Nielson. "It was real cordial," he says. Nielson agrees, saying, "We would welcome any competition from their racers." Can a merger — or at least an inter-association championship — be far away?

