

The El Cajon Boulevard Riot

The drag street riot on El Cajon Boulevard is symptomatic of the disrespect for authority so pronounced in some areas of our society. Those who riot or endanger the public safety to enforce their demands on government and law-abiding citizens cannot be tolerated . . . San Diego must not be intimidated.

--Editorial, San Diego Union, August 23, 1960.

It began as a mass demonstration on El Cajon Blvd. near Cherokee Ave. Young car racing enthusiasts gathered to protest the lack of a legal drag strip in San Diego. When the protest turned into street racing, the police moved in with tear gas and batons. Over one hundred people were arrested in the bedlam that followed, known thereafter as the "El Cajon Boulevard Riot."

Drag strip racing had been growing in popularity for many years. By 1959, there were an estimated two hundred drag strips in the United States. In San Diego, racers used "the country's oldest official drag-race course"—a retired airstrip on Paradise Mesa east of National City. Construction of a new housing development closed the Paradise track in 1959.

With no official drag strips available, San Diego hot rodders used an old Navy airfield near the Miramar Naval Air Station, called "Hourglass Field." Automobile races sponsored by the California Sports Car Club were held on a 1.8 mile track. Unsponsored drag racing also took place while the Navy turned a blind eye. But when a racing accident hurt four people on August 6, 1960, the Navy closed the field.

Local car clubs lobbied city and county officials for an official site for drag racing. San Diego's Police Chief A. E. Jansen was unsympathetic, claiming, "drag strips actually stimulate highway recklessness among those viewing such contests." But one car club member cautioned, "if we don't get the strip, cars will be dragging in the streets." The warning would prove prophetic.

In mid-August mimeographed flyers began appearing in movie drive-ins, coffee shops, and car clubs announcing a "mass protest meeting" on El Cajon Blvd., set for 1 a.m. on Sunday, August 21. A local disc jockey, Dick Boynton of KDEO, spread the news to radio listeners. Soon after midnight on Sunday morning, hundreds of teenagers and young adults began gathering along the boulevard.

About 1 a.m. some members of crowd blocked off the street and began racing. Between 35th and 40th streets "cars, of all models and shapes, raced two abreast," reported the *Union*. "Thousands of spectators lined the sidewalk and center island, leaving almost no room for the cars to pass."

More than 65 policemen moved in about 2 a.m. and ordered the demonstrators to disperse. Throwing tear gas grenades at the feet of the spectators,



Police officer holds club as he and second officer subdue five persons involved in riot on El Cajon boulevard. Police arrested 80 adults, 55 juveniles as 2,000 demonstrated for more than three hours.

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they waded into the crowd with their riot sticks. “Almost everyone was running toward their cars,” recalled a witness. “Other people were on the ground, unable to run because of the tear gas.”

About 100 demonstrators stood their ground at a service station lot and “threw a barrage of soft drink bottles and rocks at the police.” Three young men found their way into the Coca Cola bottling plant at 38th Street. They broke open cases of Coke and began heaving glass bottles over a fence at the police.

It took three hours to quell the “mob,” estimated to be three thousand people according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Two policemen were hurt; others had their uniforms torn. A few officers lost their guns in the melee.

Eighty adult demonstrators and 36 juveniles were arrested. The adult suspects were loaded into vehicles and driven to the city jail at 801 West Market Street where they were booked, photographed, fingerprinted, and placed in cells. The juvenile suspects were referred to the County Probation Department.

For the ID technicians in the Police Records Bureau it was quite a night. In the early hours of Monday morning, the two techs on duty were suddenly swamped with fingerprint cards that had to be checked for warrants or prior arrests through huge index name files, then classified using the FBI approved system and, finally, searched individually in numerous drawers crammed with thousands of fingerprint cards from previous years.

Monday night brought new unrest and more fingerprint cards for the harried ID techs. Cruising in caravans in San Diego and the city of El Cajon, drag racers taunted police with games of “motorized tag.” Another 100 people were arrested. Some were charged with disorderly conduct, others with weapons charges. Over 30 juveniles were picked up for curfew violation.

On Wednesday, the 24th, the police arrested a printer named Herbert Sturdyvin, age 20, on suspicion of conspiracy in the printing and distribution of the mimeographed flyers police blamed for the mass demonstration on Sunday. Sturdyvin was released without bail and never charged. The following weekend San Diego police braced for new disorders rumored to be stirred from sympathizers coming from Los Angeles. The demonstrations failed to materialize.

In the wake of the riot, new demands were heard in the community for an authorized drag strip. The San Diego City Council promised to appoint a committee to “study the possibilities.” The president of the National Hot Rod Association pledged help from his organization in getting an official strip but insisted that local enthusiasts would have to “reform” their conduct.

Municipal court judges dismissed most of the cases of the rioting teenagers in the following weeks. Charges of police brutality enlivened some of the court hearings. Radio DJ Dick Boynton testified that people had been struck in the head by tear gas grenades and young teenagers were clubbed by policemen. The department vigorously denied the charges.

Eventually the campaign for a drag strip was rewarded. The San Diego Raceway opened in Ramona in 1963 and operated for several years until it became a runway for the Ramona Airport. Carlsbad Raceway opened in 1964 and hosted drag racing until the track closed in 2004.

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