



LIGHTNING STRIKES TWICE



By Neilson Rogers
2007

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Birthdays are cherished by the young, often deplored by adults as they watch their days of wine and roses fade away, ever so quickly, and become benchmarks for the elderly. Last year as I approached my 91st birthday, I was a widower with prostate cancer, osteoporosis, a leaky heart valve, and arthritis plus a tendency for high blood pressure. Nevertheless, I was a monument extolling the competence of the medical profession, for I felt good and was enjoying life.

With little or no responsibilities I had too much time on my hands. As a television addict I marveled at the skill of the young performing amazing feats on skateboards. At a very young age I built a skateboard by separating the severely-used front and rear wheels of a roller skate and nailing each of the two parts to the end of a board. I had not invented the skateboard, but my friends who did not have such a contraption were very jealous. At this advanced age I still enjoy walking the aisles of Wal-Mart and Sam's Club, exploring the amazing equipment available for the young to use and enjoy.

You must be warned, the merchandisers employed by Sam's are expert at making a fool of an old man. About two months before my 91st birthday they displayed a powerboard which blew my mind. While the skateboard which I had built eighty years ago was almost uncontrollable, this magnificent machine could be steered like a motorcycle, had disk brakes on its front wheel and a removable seat for the operator. Every sensible, reasonable thought warned me that I was too old for such a vehicle. Inspections on several return trips to the store occurred with continuous dreaming of its practical uses. It possessed batteries that could be recharged at any 110-volt outlet, and the operation of its motor did not pollute the atmosphere. Throwing caution to the wind, I gave myself a birthday gift – I bought the powerboard.

For more than thirty years I have lived at the Concord Village in Sherman, Texas, in a comfortable apartment. A desired address with a waiting list, its tenants are generally retired teachers, professional people, widows and old codgers like me. The powerboard came in a large, heavy, box, which the employees at Sam's were pleased to load in my van. Unloading it at the Concord was a major problem. Using a dolly I managed to get it into my kitchen. While my kitchen is ideal for its purpose, adapting

it to a place where the powerboard could be assembled made it almost inadequate.

As it was assembled I learned to respect it all the more. It had a powerful 500-watt electric motor, two 24-volt 12 amp batteries, with throttle and brake controls on its handlebars. Both its front and rear split-rim aluminum mag-wheels have oversized 10 inch pneumatic tires inflated to 60psi. This baby was designed to fly, and with it standing there in my kitchen, I named her Lightning. Following a proper ceremony she was christened with a convenient bottle of Michelob Lager.

With batteries fully charged, Lightning was carefully backed out of the kitchen and parked on my covered patio. The west wall of the kitchen is of plate glass that permits me to admire Lightning from the kitchen. Beyond the west patio door is a sidewalk leading to a roadway, which in a rectangular fashion encircles a portion of the Concord Complex.

This roadway became a somewhat famous Concord Powerboard Test Track. Lightning was tested on the Concord Track during the fall of 2006. I learned that its operating characteristics were different from a motorbike, bicycle or motorcycle, and during these weeks I gradually learned how to manage this magnificent machine.

All tests were conducted in the early morning at or before dawn. Conscious of the fact that I looked like an old fool while riding Lightning, I limited these tests to an early hour when no one was up for the day. With the arrival of winter Lightning was retired and covered on the patio, within full view of the kitchen, where I regularly checked her batteries and condition.

During the following winter of 2006 and spring/summer of 2007, although I would see and sometimes check Lightning, I never took her out on the Concord Powerboard Track. But with the arrival of September 2007, I was conscious of the fact that in a few weeks I would be 92 years old without ever permitting Lightning to open up and demonstrate what she could do. I decided to get her ready for an ultimate speed test, to be conducted on my 92nd birthday.

The Concord Race Track is somewhat hazardous for a speeding Powerboard. It begins and ends 50 yards east of a speed bump on its east track. From the starting line this track proceeds east and turns north at Dead Man's Corner, where its pavement slopes 12 degrees in the wrong direction. It then proceeds on its north track along this leaning pavement, until it makes two forty-five degree turns and enters the west track, its western wooded stretch, ending at a boarded barrier which must be avoided by a

sharp left turn. Then one enters the great southern speed stretch, concluding with a sharp ninety-degree turn placing the Powerboard on the east downhill road toward the finish line.

About 50 yards before the finish line, the board and its driver must negotiate a speed bump. If it hits this bump at a high speed, it will become airborne and out of control, which might result in serious damage to board and driver. However, there is a gap in the center of the bump, seven and three-quarters inches wide (I have measured it). The speeding Board must hit this gap dead center. Having walked and studied the Concord Race Track many times, I felt confident that I could safely direct Lightning over this challenging course.

Lightning's countdown for the Concord Grand Prix Powerboard Race began at 6:00 PM, September 30, 2007. She was carefully uncovered and backed into the kitchen. Before the beginning of her intricate inspection she was again christened for the race with Michelob Lager. The next morning she would need all the energy they would hold, so her battery charger was then engaged, topping off her batteries. Brakes, controls, transmission chain, tires and all components were carefully inspected. With her batteries charged to maximum energy and every care given for her condition and

appearance, she stood there in my simple kitchen, a masterpiece of engineering.

With all the checks satisfactorily completed, she was given the go-ahead. Final inspections would take place immediately before dawn the following morning. I could not help but think back three-quarters of a century, and marvel at the immense improvements since I had constructed my first skateboard from an old roller skate and a short one-by-four plank.

Before sunrise on October 1, 2007, with only faint visibility, Lightning was uncovered and carefully rolled out from the patio and onto the Concord Race Track. She faced due east at the starting line on its east lane, where she passed her final inspection. Properly dressed for the occasion, with my bifocal goggles firmly in place, hearing aids properly inserted, I wore a streamlined racing helmet decorated with yellow flashing streaks of lightning on each side. My attire included a sharp-looking pair of dark blue nylon racing trousers, with two thin red stripes extending from my waist to the top of my racing shoes, topped off with a tight-fitting, long-sleeve, burnt-orange racing shirt.

Wearing this shirt was my contribution toward favorable publicity for the University of Texas at Austin, in the event Lightning set an international speed record, as anticipated. Come to think of it, I couldn't recall any

favorable contribution that school gave me – it was more like a kick in the pants. I have always been a charitable person and let bygones be bygones – even though, three weeks ago, their overpaid football coach went for two points when he should have gone for one, and almost cost us a game against a Florida Junior College.

Lightning, standing at the start line, was magnificent. BladeZ Corp., a California Powerboard manufacturer, had constructed her of the latest aluminum and metal alloys with only a small plywood deck (necessary to comply with the board requirement of her class). Her design requirements called for strength, light weight and speed.

Although she was designed to be operated from a standing position, I had learned from earlier tests that I could control her best while seated. For the ten laps of the Concord Grand Prix Powerboard Race, her seat had been installed. Everything except exposed aluminum components was painted a shining dark blue with red and white stripes. With white lettering her manufacturer had proudly placed its logo and her model number: Electric BladeZ XTR SE 500.

It was with pride that I mounted Lightning engaged the ignition switch and released the kickstand. As she crossed the start line, I slammed her throttle all the way to the handlebar, causing a massive injection of

energy into that great 500-watt engine. Lightning sprang forward, and with reckless abandon she leaned into Dead Man's Curve, restrained slightly by her brakes as she sped. We leaned to her left on this first turn, dangerously; I could have touched the pavement with my left hand. But her racing tires held their course as she accelerated north, around the two forty-five degree turns and into the western wooded lane. At its end, after negotiating a sharp left turn, Lightning, at full throttle, hurtled south at maximum speed on the track's southern Speed Stretch.

With brakes applied, she turned sharply left onto the downhill run toward the finish line. Straight ahead was the speed bump, and Lightning's tires hit its gap dead center as she sped, for the second time, toward Dead Man's Curve. Five times Lightning circled the Concord Race Track, striving to increase speed with each revolution. At the end of the fifth revolution, she pulled up at the starting line for a Pit Stop.

After R&R and satisfactory inspection, she returned to the track for five more revolutions, crossing the finish line for the last time, at dazzling speed. Never before had a Powerboard negotiated the Concord Grand Prix at such a pace. Thus on October 1, 2007, Lightning established the International Powerboard speed record on the Concord Track, a record that probably will never be broken.

On this day, my 92nd birthday, I rejoiced in the glow of this exceptional accomplishment. As I relived the test I realized that there might have been times when I could have taken the curves a little faster or accelerated more on the straight-aways, and even eliminated the Pit Stop.

Wouldn't it be fun to take Lightning out on my 93rd birthday and break her own speed record? Lightning will now rest on my patio where I can daily watch her during the ensuing winter, spring and summer. Watch her and dream as I revel in the grandeur of her great speed test. For a whole year I can dream and plan for future grand accomplishments.

I have always been a good dreamer.

Photo Gallery



Racing fans inspecting Lightning before speed test



Demonstration of Lightning's massive batteries and power



Lightning racing toward finish line, approaching dangerous *SPEED BUMP*, Concord Grand Prix Speed Track.



Lightning at finish line of Concord Grand Prix Speed Track



Racing Fans Admiring Lightning after speed test



Lightning returning to patio



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