

The Baytown Sun

Neighborhood beset by street racing

By Kari Griffin
Baytown Sun

Published June 8, 2008

The sounds of revving engines, screeching tires and blaring music have Chaparral Village residents feeling like they're living near a racetrack.

"We have gotten multiple complaints of vehicle racing in that area," Lt. Eric Freed said.

The ruckus starts up around midnight or 1 a.m. on weekends. And though many residents and officers have tried, no one has caught up to these speed racers.

The Baytown Police department has increased patrol in the area and officers have staked the streets out from unmarked vehicles, but they still haven't found these guys.

"We haven't been able to make contact," Freed said.

And with the start of summer, the drivers have expanded their usual racing hours to include weeknights.

"This week, school's out and they did it on Monday," Capt. David Alford said.

Alford said officers have "tried and tried" to put a stop to it, but to no avail.

"I wish I could make them go away," Alford said. "We'll keep trying."

The first of street racing sighting in Chaparral Village was in September 2007, and it's currently the only neighborhood police are receiving complaints from.

Alford said a long time ago, officers heard of similar activities going on in various local subdivisions.

Typically, Garth Road and North Main Street have been two of Baytown's more popular spots for racing. But the heavily populated roads divided by stoplights are hardly the ideal spot for wannabe racers putting pedal to the metal.

The recently repaved main drag of Chaparral Village seems to provide fewer obstacles – if you don't heed the stop signs on every other block and can manage to avoid striking the occasional car parked in the street.

At this point, authorities are not sure if racers are choosing the destination because of the

long street stretch of pavement leading into the subdivision or because some of the racers live in the neighborhood.

“It’s unknown why they’re picking that particular neighborhood to do it in,” Freed said.

Witness accounts and residents’ knowledge of what’s happening differs – partly because of where they live or when they’re out driving around the neighborhood. But Alford has no doubt that something is happening in the early morning hours to cause residents distress.

“There are racers out there,” Alford said. “They have a contest of speed.”

The Baytown Police Department captain said residents are annoyed, but they’re also afraid. Witnesses, (who Alford believes are credible), have reported seeing anywhere from a dozen to 50 cars partaking in this illegal activity and the drivers, (whose age groups range from teenagers to adults), are taunting the residents who come outside, throwing trash and beer bottles in their yards and cursing at neighbors who leave the safety of their homes for a better view of the people behind the noise and mayhem.

One woman even had a brick thrown at her, Alford said. And though Alford does not believe the object was ever intended to hit the resident, it still could have, he said.

Police have employed several tactics in their efforts to put an end to the racing, but they have been unsuccessful for various reasons – one of which is the races seem to happen at random. And even though police know Friday and Saturday nights are most common, the activity is sporadic.

“There may be two or three hours where nothing’s going on,” Alford said.

At times, Chaparral Drive will be quiet for hours. And the racers don’t usually hang around after driving through the area.

“It’s just hard to catch because it’s a speeding vehicle,” Alford said. “You see a speeding vehicle go by and it’s a mile away before you finish dialing.”

Counter-surveillance set up by lookouts has also made it more difficult for police to catch the drivers in the act.

“They’re making sure the coast is clear and they’re lining up,” Alford said.

Even communicating via text messages instead of the radio has not worked for the officers. And with nine districts, each being patrolled by one officer, (in addition to “rovers” who help out where it’s needed), police can’t be at one area around the clock.

Citizens who do witness the street racing are encouraged to call the police immediately, and try to jot down a vehicle’s make and model, license plate number and a description of the driver if they can. But this isn’t always easy.

Still, frustrated with shenanigans of racers, some of the folks who call Chaparral Village

home are going one step further in hopes of taking back their neighborhood.

Residents are hatching plots to identify these drivers invading their space by using video surveillance and any other legal means necessary.

Racing is a Class B misdemeanor, and convicted drivers automatically lose their license for one year.

“It’s a third degree felony if somebody gets hurt – not even seriously injured, just hurt,” Alford said.

A serious injury or death caused by racing raised the charge to a second-degree felony punishable by a maximum of 20 years in prison.

“If you get caught racing you’re in trouble,” Alford said.

Street racing has been traced back to the 1930s and has increased in popularity with movies where drivers race for money and respect.

Authorities believe the drivers they are dealing with race for recreation, not cash, and that they do race side by side sometimes. But whether or not the vehicles flying down Chaparral Drive are racing in the traditional sense or breezing through stop signs at up to 70 miles per hour individually does not matter so much as the potential danger these drivers are creating.

“The faster a car goes, the less it takes to lose control,” Alford said.

Freed added that even if drivers can control their vehicle, it’s impossible for them to control other circumstances, like a person in the road or a car that doesn’t see the racer’s vehicle because the lights were turned off, (as residents have reported).

“When a car goes out of control, it’s out of control,” Alford said. “There’s a good chance it’s not going to stay on the street. It’s going to end up in someone’s bedroom.”

Alford said where street racing is involved, the chance for tragedy is great.

This is something Jinhee Jun knows all too well.

On April 20, 2007, Jun’s father, Soo Yup Jun, was on heading to his home in Las Vegas after running an errand.

Jun, 57, was a block away from his house when a 21-year-old man racing down the road at 70 miles per hour ran through a stop sign and Jun, causing him to lose control of his vehicle.

Not long before his death, Jun, (who was retired), had been ordained as a Buddhist monk.

“He had plans to help the community,” Jun said.

Jun's father never got to follow through with those plans, and his death left his family heartbroken.

To say losing her father in such a senseless accident was devastating would be an understatement, Jun said.

She and her family faced the driver in court and watched him receive the maximum penalty. But it was hurtful to see his lack of remorse, Jun said.

The young driver may not realize it, but his actions ruined several lives, including his own.

"Everyone is affected," Jun said.

Following the tragedy, Sohee Jun came to her sister Jinhee with an idea. And from that idea the sisters co-founded Victims Against Street Racing, (VASR - of which Sohee is the president and Jinhee is the vice president), to lend support to victims of street racing and prevent future deaths through education.

Life isn't a movie. These racers want to be like Vin Diesel, but their actions can kill, Jun said.

"They're young," Jun said of many racers. "They just want to have fun and show off their car."

Jun said we've all been there, but these racers think they're invincible.

Not only can they hurt themselves, they can injure and kill innocent fathers trying to get home to their families or children riding with their parents, Jun said.

"We've been trying to educate the community by telling our story," Jun said.

Teenagers in the process of getting their license hear about what happens when people drive drunk, and one day, Jun hopes they'll learn that street racing can be just as dangerous.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, (NHTSA), street racing played a part in 315 fatal crashes between 1998 and 2001 and the popularity of street racing is growing – as shown by the hundreds of citations racers have received.

Jun said those who witness street racing might not know how to stop it, but she encourages them to continue to contact local law enforcement.

The VASR organization is located in California, one of the states where street racing has become a serious problem resulting in stricter laws and tougher penalties for those convicted. Jun said these types of organizations addressing street racing are becoming more common because of the need for them. There are also organizations that encourage racing in a safe environment – the racetrack.

The Houston Raceway Park offer Friday Safe Street Nights from 6 p.m. until midnight where drivers can race their cars for \$20, spectators can watch for \$10 and children 12 and under can get in for free. For more information visit www.houstonraceway.com.

For more information on the negative side of street racing on public roads and neighborhood streets, visit www.vasr.org.

Copyright © 2008 The Baytown Sun