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Street racing takes on a deadly new form

'Cutting the gap' pits drivers weaving through rush-hour traffic. Police liken it to 'a real-life video game.'

By Sharon Bernstein, Tami Abdollah and Andrew Blankstein
Los Angeles Times Staff Writers

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In a region built around the automobile, the ritual of boys and young men racing their cars down highways and city streets was a problem long before 1950s hotrods fought for asphalt supremacy on Whittier Boulevard, Mulholland Drive and Pacific Coast Highway.

But despite decades of trying, police are still struggling to fight the dangerous practice, which has been highlighted in the last year by a string of tragic collisions.

Teenagers Pablo H. Ruiz, Javier Aguayo and Anthony O'Neil, all students at Perris High School, died while racing during a senior trip to San Diego in May. A fourth student, Jose Espinosa, died the next day.

Carlos Cisneros, 14, died in February when the car in which he was riding slammed into a Riverside light pole during what police said was an impromptu race, and three other boys were critically injured.

Two UC San Diego students died in January when the BMW they were racing down a street slammed into two trees and flipped over.

And then this week, Dora Groce and her two children -- son Robert, 8, and daughter Catherine, 4 -- died when a street racer collided with the family's car as she was pulling out of the mobile home park where they lived.

All told, according to state figures, nearly 100 people die each year in California as a result of illegal street racing.

Detectives said they are increasingly seeing a particularly dangerous form of racing, called "cutting the gap" -- impromptu speed contests in which racers weave in and out of traffic.

"It's a game of chicken -- like a real-life video game," said Det. David Millan of the Los Angeles Police Department. "They are driving souped up vehicles where their skills don't match the cars."

Trais Hand, 17, a senior at John W. North High School in Riverside, who had just received his driver's license a month earlier, found that out too late.

Hand served 106 days in juvenile hall after an impulsive midday race last October resulted in the death of Reyna De Leon.

"It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment, a heat-of-the-moment type thing, and I ended up making a bad

choice," Hand said. "I didn't intend on harming anybody."

Hand was stopped at a light in his 2001 Jetta when a friend pulled up on his right with the window down.

"He said something like, 'My car's faster than yours,' " Hand said. And then it was on.

The two cars made a right at the light and then started to race on Olivewood Avenue.

"I just lost control," he said. The car smashed into a light pole, the air bag deployed and the car slid 100 feet, hitting and killing 38-year-old De Leon, who was in a wheelchair.

Since his release from juvenile hall, Hand has attended counseling sessions and spoken out at Riverside County high schools about his experience. "It helps relieve some of the guilt," he said.

The type of race that killed De Leon is becoming increasingly common, police said.

In the past, most drag racers waited until night when traffic cleared up to stage their races, contacting each other on cellphones and Internet message boards to set dates and times for the illegal contests.

Now, Millan and others said, a growing number of daredevils are embracing the thrill of rush-hour racing, leading to broad-daylight deaths of innocent bystanders, such as those of the Groce family, and of a 53-year-old teacher who was killed earlier this year as she left a shopping mall near Sacramento.

The change is apparent in the San Fernando Valley, which has long been attractive to racers because of its wide streets and long straightaways. For years, groups regularly planned midnight races for Tuesdays and Sundays.

But as police have tried to crack down on the organized races, they are seeing a more dangerous form, with two and sometimes more racers deciding on daytime races in which fighting the congested streets is part of the thrill.

"We are seeing more incidents in which young people pull up to each other at a light, rev the engines and engage in impromptu games of chicken at high speed," Millan said.

Officials say their job has gotten harder in recent years as the technology that people need to power up their cars has become much less expensive.

"It's a whole subculture; it's everything from music to style to customization, a lot of different things have evolved," said Gary Stallone, of Frank Hawley's Drag Racing School in Pomona, which trains people for National Hot Rod Assn.-sanctioned racing. "It's almost like a counterculture, the bad boy mentality of the '50s and '60s."

It is difficult to keep records of how many illegal races there are because some go unnoticed by law enforcement, and many drivers who are caught are cited only for speeding.

From 2000 through 2006, drivers pleaded guilty to illegal speed contests in about 50,000 cases, according to the Department of Motor Vehicles. Last year, about 6,100 drivers pleaded guilty to drag racing, according to the DMV.

Authorities are trying some new tactics to stop street racers, including forcing repeat offenders to watch as their cars are crushed into scrap metal and using smog laws to go after people who have souped up their cars.

In an effort to use pollution and noise laws to catch racers, police statewide also issued about 13,000 citations last year to drivers whose souped-up cars were too loud or would not pass state smog tests, said Alan Coppage, a program manager with the state Bureau of Automotive Repair.

Sgt. Skip Showalter of the Riverside Police Department has spent the last two years working with officers from the Ontario and Irwindale police departments to train about 1,800 officers in Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties to spot illegal modifications on cars.

A modified dragster emits 100 times the pollution of a typical new car, Showalter said, and the citations issued against them can result in repair bills up to \$3,000.

"We're having a dent in the street racing problem by hitting the pocketbooks of these racers," Showalter said.

Showalter also has gone to high schools throughout Riverside County, making presentations to deter youths from street racing. He said many of these are young men ages 18 to 25 but that women have also been involved, as well as older men.

Those who engage in street racing risk a misdemeanor charge, five days in jail and car impoundment. If the race causes death or injury, penalties are much higher, and racers can be charged with second-degree murder or gross vehicular manslaughter.

"It's something that isn't talked about readily but affects so many lives," said Sohee Jun, 31, who is starting a nonprofit to help victims of drag-racing collisions.

The Arcadia woman lost her father, Soo Yup Jun, in April after drag racers in Las Vegas hit him when he was driving less than a block from home after going out to buy a newspaper that morning. "When you open up a conversation and you start to talk to people, you start to hear, 'That happened to my friend' or 'I know somebody that happened to,' " she said.

sharon.bernstein@latimes.com

tami.abdollah@latimes.com

andrew.blankstein@latimes.com