

DRIVER: Brian Olatunji

MOST MEMORABLE DRIVE: "Getting behind the wheel of a NHRA Top Alcohol Funny car in 2004 and going 230 miles per hour. The sheer speed is unimaginable."

SPEED RACER

NATIVE DETROITER LIVES OUT PASSION AS PROFESSIONAL DRAG RACER

To say that Brian Olatunji lives for speed is an understatement.

When a lot of people are crowding around TVs on the weekend watching ball games, you'll find Olatunji on the track in his 1100 horsepower 1978 Chevrolet Malibu race car topping speeds of 175 mph.

It explains his motto: "live fast, drive hard."

"If I could, I would race every day," says the native Detroit. It's a passion Olatunji picked up from hanging around the now defunct Detroit Dragway in Brownstown Township and the Motor City Dragway located in New Baltimore that his grandparents managed.

"My grandfather was the first African American manager of a major NHRA drag strip," says Olatunji, who grew up on Detroit's east-side near Mack Ave. and Conner St. "I decided to take the road less traveled: racing."

His passion for racing is fueled by his competitive nature. "I love trying to control something that really is out of control," he says. "There's something about having that car on the edge and then not going over the edge." Before turning professional two years ago, Olatunji attended Kettering University (previously General Motors Institute) located in Flint, and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering in 2005. "I knew I could not go to school for racing, so I went for mechanical engineering," he explains.

He's been racing for 14 years. "I started racing before I had a license," he explains. "My folks knew the people that ran Milan Dragway. I had a car when I was 15 years old and I would sneak it out on the racetrack."

Olatunji, whose major sponsors are Pepsi, Lucas Oil, and the U.S. Army, has been racing professionally for two years. The Metro Detroit dealership, Rodgers Chevrolet, is also one of Olatunji's sponsors.


Olatunji's everyday vehicles are a black 2008 Cadillac CTS Sedan and black '89 GMC pick-up truck. "All of my cars are jet black. Even the primary color of my race car is black," Olatunji explains. "I like the way black cars look — it's bolder, looks more presidential."

His first car was a 1989 Chevy Beretta. "I wanted a Beretta for a long time, since my childhood," he said. "When I found one, it happened to be a stick, and I had never driven a stick. But I taught myself how to drive the car." When not racing, Olatunji spends a lot of time mentoring youth in hopes of helping them achieve their dreams.

He serves as chairman of his personal charity, the Leadfoot Foundation, the nonprofit arm of his marketing company, which is focused on empowering underprivileged youth by providing support in the form of educational programs and mentoring.

Olatunji is also the youngest Board Member ever in the 100 Black Men of Greater Detroit and an ambassador to the Urban Youth Racing School. "I try to show youth that the world is bigger than they think it is," he says. "If I can do what I'm doing growing up as a kid in the inner city of Detroit, so can they."

Olatunji's dream vehicle? A silver 1956 Mercedes-Benz Gullwing with a red interior. "At the time it was their fastest production car," he says. "It's also a car you can take from Wall Street to Main Street." Olatunji's primary goal, however, is to capture titles in NHRA Top Fuel, NHRA Funny Car, NASCAR, IndyCar and Road Course racing.

Then again, what else would you expect from somebody who has spent almost every weekend of his life at a racetrack.  — Marcus Amick

brianolatunji.com

photo: AJ Mueller