



By Jeff Storey

## Jeffrey Pagano

At a recent meeting of Crowell & Moring partners, Jeffrey Pagano, a member of the firm's labor and employment group, sat next to Keith Harrison, a long-time colleague from the Washington office with whom he shared an interest in street racing. Harrison was a veteran of "Drag Week," a grueling event sponsored by Hot Rod Magazine, in which drivers travel 250 to 300 miles between several Midwest tracks, pausing to race at each.

Harrison previously had taken along family members. This year, he invited his fellow Crowell & Moring partner. Pagano did most of the driving between tracks, while Harrison took the wheel for the racing.

Pagano said that he was honored to join Harrison in his quest, which took him back to a period of his life he thought he had left behind. The participation of Harrison and Pagano caught the interest of many in the firm who followed their progress in daily bulletins.

Pagano, 63, already is looking forward to next year's Drag Week.

"As I observed and confirmed during Drag Week, passion is the only reason to engage in any activity, whether practicing law, drag racing or otherwise," Pagano said. "Indeed, practicing law and racing are similar, as both activities require courage, preparation and focus within a competitive environment."



**Q.** What appealed to you about drag week?

**A.** Drag Week immediately appealed to me. First, it was focused upon auto racing, and second, because the essence of Drag Week is mechanical survival, both on the track and on the street for a five-day period. In short, like trial work, Drag Week is about "put up or shut up." Drag Week has no jury

or judge to decide the outcome. Rather, timing lights and distance travelled distinguish the winners. Indeed, surviving five days of racing and driving the race vehicle on country roads in the Midwest, with no mechanical support for more than over 1,000 miles, was a challenge I could not pass up. That Keith Harrison, a partner who has been central in my professional life, invited me only heightened my desire to return

to a focus in my life, which existed 45 years ago. That Crowell took an active internal interest in our unusual non-legal exploits reaffirmed my view that Crowell's focus upon diversity in all facets of life, coupled with the themes that lawyers should not take themselves too seriously and that creating value was important, was confirmed once again.

**Q: Were you a drag racer in your youth?**

**A:** I grew up in Asbury Park, N.J. There were very few opportunities to distinguish yourself in Asbury Park during the '50s-'60s beyond school grades and sports, or through achieving higher education. At the time higher education was not in the cards. I focused on individual sports, such as surfing, wrestling, cross country and bowling as a youth, but saw auto repair and racing early on as my career opportunity. At the time, my dad, who was a former successful Shore Area High School athletics coach and professional baseball player, was managing a car dealership in Asbury Park. I gravitated to the mechanics area of the shop, not the "white collar" area. The mechanics took an interest in me, teaching me how to build engines, how to focus on reliability and how to be fast, but safe.

Working in gas stations as the first step in my career gave me the opportunity in my off-hours to build a car. I raced cars, '57 and '65 Chevrolets, on the Asbury Avenue quarter-mile against out-of-town racers who gravitated to Asbury Park on the weekends just to pick up

races, arriving from Newark, Freehold and Wall Township. Recognizing that street racing was going to be a problem with law enforcement in the long term, I entered my vehicles in National Hot Rod Association-sponsored drag racing events at Raceway Park in Englishtown, N.J. I began to win quarter-mile drag races in my class, even winning the NHRA Summer Nationals for my class in 1968.

**Q: What was the drag racing scene like?**

**A:** I learned in Drag Week this year that drag racing had not changed very much from my youth. Even the vehicles were the same, which was and is a good thing. Drag racing is about power, ingenuity and preparation, while always being willing to help out a fellow racer. The drag racing scene remains focused on the machine. As a consequence, it is a solitary quest by owners of vehicles until help is needed, allowing the racing community to demonstrate the best attribute of racing which is, in my view, generosity.

**Q: What kinds of people are drawn to drag racing?**

**A:** Generous people are drawn to drag racing, as assistance may be necessary at any time. The participants in drag racing are individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Drag racing is not a team sport. Typically the person who built the car will drive it as well, which limits the scope of the participants to those who have access to garages and service stations coupled with

an interest in mixing mechanics and speed. At the track, repairs and parts are a community responsibility, with each racer typically sharing time and parts without a second thought. From this baseline, the winners and losers are determined by results.

**Q: Did you continue drag racing or other motor sports as an adult?**

**A:** I transitioned from drag racing and mechanics as my career in 1968. During 1968, as part of the civil rights movement, disturbances, or what some would call "riots," took place in the N.J. Shore area. At the time, I was working in a gas station located in a densely populated area in downtown Long Branch, N.J. The disturbance participants arrived at the gas station on a Saturday evening when I was working alone. The leaders informed me that they intended to burn the station down and demanded that I leave the premises.

I told the leaders that burning a gas station to the ground could have unanticipated consequences to the local population and that if the station was to be burned down I would be killed as well, as I was not leaving. I then walked back to the bay where my race car was placed, sat in a chair, watched the crowd and waited. It was then, that I understood the wide breadth of life beyond the narrow world I had chosen. Needless to say, after a couple of hours the crowd dispersed, I left for the evening and the gas station still stands to this day. After that evening my life changed. I withdrew from racing and pursued higher education, by returning to high school,

then convincing skeptical colleges that I could excel, which ultimately led to law school.

After law school graduation, I became interested in formula racing, although I did not participate directly, other than purchasing European sport cars and driving from time to time at Lime Rock, Conn.

By the early 90's I was married and had two sons, at which point racing and cars were completely behind me. That is, until my two sons demonstrated an interest in racing at ages 12 and 9, respectively. From 2005 to the present my sons have competed at the national level in Rotax Series kart racing throughout the United States, which continues to allow us a common interest and a common quest for excellence.

At this point, I am the "financier and mechanic" of our "team," as my sons are very quick and mechanically astute. And, because of the experience at Drag Week, I recently purchased a Pro Street race vehicle to be used in the 2014 Drag Week, which is essentially a "return to the future" for me, thanks to Keith, which has provided serious grins from my two sons.

**Q: Is drag racing a popular sport in the New York metropolitan area?**

**A:** Drag racing will always be popular in every small community, because all that is necessary are two vehicles, two drivers and a straight ¼-mile road empty of traffic. As to organized drag racing, the Long Island tracks have all disappeared due to real estate valuations, requiring New York drag racers to travel to Raceway

Park in Englishtown, N.J. Drag racing essentially kept me safe from other influences, allowing me a future, and it could have a similar effect on today's youth. Drag Week proved that the sport is unchanged, particularly in the Midwest, where the tracks are community affairs. During Drag Week, Keith and I traveled from tracks located in Bowling Green, K.Y., to Indianapolis, to St. Louis, to Memphis and then back to Bowling Green on back roads through small communities. Observing the communities watch the race vehicles as they passed by and render assistance, which we needed on two occasions, demonstrated to me that drag racing remains an important aspect of the small-town experience.

**Q: How did "drag racing" get its name?**

**A:** In the United States, "drag racing" got its name from racing along the "main drag" in small towns. In Asbury Park, the "main drag" was Kingsley Avenue and Ocean Avenue, adjacent to the Boardwalk, primarily during the summer, so there were plenty of spectators.

**Q: What happens during a typical drag race?**

**A:** First, the drivers "light up" the rear tires to create more grip from the tires to launch the vehicle. Then, the car rolls to the lights or flagger for the dead stop beginning of the race. The lights change color, red to green, or the flagger drops the flag and the race begins with the driver "launching" the vehicle. The

driver then operates the vehicle in a straight line as fast as he/she can for the next ¼ mile. The time that it takes to travel that distance is recorded. Depending upon the type of vehicle or the power of the vehicle, start times may be managed by 1/10-ths of a second to even out the competition for cars of different types and classes.

**Q: What happens during Drag Week?**

**A:** Drag Week is a voyage among like-minded people. The participants have for a goal America's fastest street car that is also sufficiently reliable to operate over 1,000 miles in five days. It is about "bragging rights," no more no less, so the competition is pure in my view. There are no teams, and each vehicle, which is properly licensed and state inspected, must carry all that is necessary to race, operate the car on the street and fix the vehicle if necessary at any time. Most time is spent in the pits at each race track preparing the vehicle for the race, then preparing the race car for the street. The cars are provided with routing instructions by Drag Week officials for the street travel and specific points must be recorded by a proven method, so that each vehicle travels on the same roads and is subject to the same abuse.

After racing each day, the race cars are driven to the next track, between 250 and 350 miles. The vehicles and drivers arrive at various hotel clusters each evening, and the drivers then spend time "relaxing" or preparing the vehicle for the next day in the hotel parking lots. Typically, members of the

local communities will converge on the parking lots, which allows for an informal car show consisting of the fastest street vehicles in America.

**Q: What kind of car did you drive?**

**A:** We drove Keith's '55 Chevrolet Belair with a straight axle front-end, 500 cubic-inch Chevrolet big-block engine, with 3.73 gear ratio in the rear and a turbo-hydromatic 4-speed transmission.

**Q: What mishaps did you have to confront?**

**A:** The mishaps were serious. After the first day of racing, we noticed the rear-end structural frame mounts were bending due to the force of Keith's new engine, coupled with the grip at the track. Parts were bent, broken and unusable. Other drivers came to our aid at the Bowling Green track to help us survive that first day, which at that point was doubtful. After basic repairs, we made it to Indianapolis, but played it safe at the track by not pressing the vehicle hard in the race event. Spectators for Drag Week then gave us a ride to a local speed shop, where we secured some parts to fix the situation. After the repair, we left for St. Louis, but half way there while filling up with fuel, we noticed the body of the vehicle separating from the rear end, which meant that we immediately needed a welder as continued driving would be a complete disaster. Local people found us an exhaust service which employed welders, who were over-

joyed to help us, refusing any form of compensation in return. They just wanted to contribute to the Drag Week experience. This type of fix was within the rules.

**Q: Was the competition a grueling experience?**

**A:** If anything was grueling, it was the heat in the pits and the time spent driving a race vehicle 250 to 350 miles each day. Remember, we were operating a race car—no air conditioning, sitting in uncomfortable race seats, barely being able to speak over the roar of the engine and experiencing a “ride” that was far from smooth. Yet, I haven't had a better ride to reset life's priorities since my experience at the Long Branch gas station in 1968.

**Q: Was it fun?**

**A:** Yes, but the routes traveled, the small towns observed, and the generosity among competitors and spectators alike allowed a better appreciation and understanding of the United States. To me, vacations are not about “fun.” Rather, a vacation is an opportunity to embrace a quest utilizing the best attributes of practicing law to effectuate the quest. In this context, I had more “fun” than I expected, realizing that what I left behind 45 years ago was still immensely enjoyable today.

**Q: How did you fare in the competition?**

**A:** We were in the “gasser” class, pre-1967 vehicle in a “gasser style” popular in the '60s characterized

by straight axle front ends and period correct drive-train and wheels. We were able to drop the time from 12.39 to 11.33 by the last day of racing, meaning that the vehicle was enhanced as a consequence of our efforts during Drag Week. Because we played it safe in Indianapolis by running the ¼ mile in over 22 seconds, our average time among the tracks increased to where we could not catch the class leaders, so we ended up in fourth place in the gasser class. [Seven or eight gassers qualified at the outset of the race.]

**Q: Is there anything about drag racing that can be compared to what a litigator does?**

**A:** Yes, but it was more about the partnership between Keith and I at Crowell, as well as understanding that Drag Week is similar to creating value through preparation and expecting the unexpected, similar to going to trial. Focus, effort and dealing with the unexpected, while being at your best among a team, is necessary to achieve success.

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