



Watch these 'Bandits' run

Minimizer's Bandit Big Rig series pits stock heavy-duty tractors against each other on asphalt tracks.

By Greg Grisolano
digital content editor

The drivers behind the Bandit Big Rig Racing series are giving new meaning to the phrase “rolling coal.”

On Sept. 5 at the I-44 Speedway in Lebanon, Mo., 16 heavy-duty tractors tuned for asphalt racing darted and roared their way through the high banks of the 3/8-mile short course, giving the crowd of 5,000-plus spectators a night of racing like no other.

OOIDA Life Member Dale Newkirk and his wife, Trish, made the two-hour drive from their home in Butler, Mo., to watch the Bandits run.

“It was awesome,” said Newkirk, a general freight hauler and owner-operator. “I’m already thinking about building one of my own.”

“It was truly ‘rolling coal,’”

Trish Newkirk said as a cloud of black exhaust smoke from the Bandits’ stacks hung low over the track even after the first heat finished.

“Having so much horsepower and not a lot of weight, (Bandits) kind of handle and almost resemble how you would run on dirt,”

– **OOIDA Senior Member
Chris Kikelhan**

Commercial truck tractors are a staple of the racing scene in Europe, but have been absent from America’s racing diet since the Great American Truck Racing circuit held its last sanctioned race in the early 1990s. Many of the

Bandit drivers today say they grew up watching those races, hoping one day to have the opportunity to do the same. All of the current Bandits are either truck drivers by trade or work in the trucking industry. Several of the racers are also OOIDA members, including Mike “88-Mike” Morgan, Allen Boles and Senior Member Chris Kikelhan.

‘Grassroots racing’

Craig Kruckeberg always knew if big rig racing ever came back to the United States, he wanted to be a part of it. Now he and a group of intrepid drivers are hoping revive a form of motorsports racing that had its heyday in the 1980s.

Kruckeberg, the CEO of Minimizer, a Blooming Prairie, Minn.-based company specializing in aftermarket truck accessories, owns the series. Minimizer is

Photos courtesy of Robyn Kruckeberg/Minimizer



sponsoring the series for three seasons and paying out a purse of \$50,000 for every race, with \$10,000 going to the driver who takes the checkered flag. He also drives one of Minimizer's three Bandit trucks. His sons Tyler and Trevor also race in the series.

He got his first shot to be involved with big rig racing in 2015, when the short-lived ChampTruck series tried to bring the sport back to the States with road courses.

Much like how stock car racing was once about seeing who had the fastest "stock" car, the Bandit series is focused on using stock trucks and OEM-only equipment. Eligible tractors can be Class 7 or 8 cab-and-chassis models that were mass-produced and legal for U.S. or Canadian hauling. All trucks must weigh at least 11,500 pounds. Everything that goes on the truck, aside from safety features like a roll cage, has to have been available for purchase on that truck from an OEM dealer.

Kruckeberg said the average Bandit can be built for \$18,000 to \$25,000. By comparison, a "modified" stock car asphalt racer may have \$40,000

invested in the engine alone.

"Our 54 Volvo is an old FedEx truck," he said.

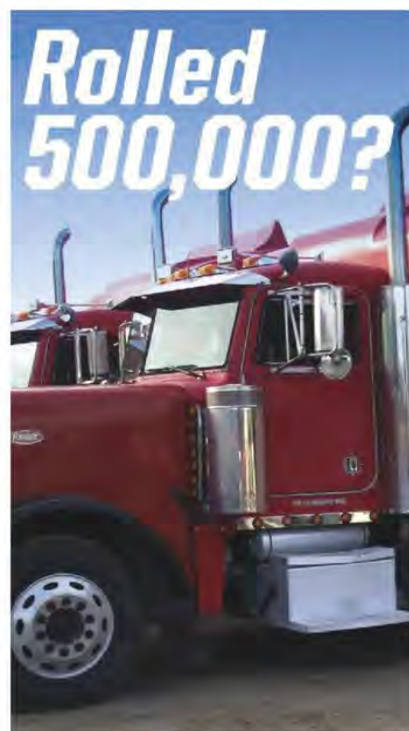
Boles, an OOIDA member from Weaverville, N.C., and the driver of the No. 3 truck for Jupiter Motor Sports, joined Bandit when the ChampTruck series folded. A coal hauler by trade, Boles says racing trucks is his "stress relief."

"You're out on the road driving these big trucks in the traffic and everything. You come to the races, and get in one of these trucks – for me it's stress relief," he said. "I get out there, and it's wonderful. I love driving a race truck, and I love driving a big truck."

Kikelhan, who drives the No. 01 Bandit, grew up racing dirt cars. He said driving a Bandit truck isn't really that different from driving a dirt car.

"Having so much horsepower and not a lot of weight, they kind of handle and almost resemble how you would run on dirt," he said. "There's no weight on the ass end of these things. When you come out of the corner and punch it, if it lets loose, you either have to get out of the throttle and get back in it again – or

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 just keep it to the floor and let it hook up by itself."

Where's it heading?

Race director Brian Madsen is a veteran of the sprint car scene, and was involved in the ChampTruck series as well. When ChampTruck ceased, Madsen said he had an idea.

"This is really cool racing but no one's here to see it," he said. "If we can't get the mountain to Mohammed, let's take Mohammed to the mountain. What if we took them oval racing?"

The transition to oval racing seems to be paying off, at least according to Madsen, Kruckeberg and the other Bandit drivers. The stands at I-44 Speedway were at capacity, and many fans said they had come specifically to see the Bandits run. And they say that's been the case at the eight other races the Bandits have held this year.

"It takes me back to my early racing days," Madsen said. When I started in the stock car world, if we were looking for replacement parts or speed parts, we went to the junkyard. And that's what most of the guys do with semis because there's not a lot available out there in the high-performance aftermarket world for these semis ... That's something I

see growing as Bandit grows, more and more options coming into play."

Keeping the trucks as close to stock as possible is something the series organizers say they value not just from a fan accessibility standpoint, but from the standpoint of making the trucks easily identifiable and relatable to the new fans.

"We all know what's happened with NASCAR and their 'car of tomorrow' and everything is looking generic except for the decals," Madsen said. "We want the trucks to go out and look like a Western Star. We want them to look like Peterbilts and Freightliners and Volvos. That's something that all these guys who come out and watch can relate ... You'd be amazed at how many wives and kids come down and go 'My daddy drives a truck like that,' and it's something they can relate to."

For Kruckeberg, the series is a way to draw interest and excitement to the trucking industry for future generations, who might not become truck drivers but may grow up to be mechanics, technicians or engineers in the field.

"I've got grandsons that I want to keep in the trucking industry. They've gotta have trucks to sell accessories to," he said. "Times have changed but there's always still a need for mechanics and drivers." LL