The email was simple enough, and short. A fatality had occured at the 2011 Silver State Classic Challenge. Later, after a media blackout was lifted, we learned 53-year-old driver Rick DeKneef of California and his 41-year-old navigator, Merle Hill of Ely, Nevada were killed when their race prepared 1994 Camaro left the road after suffering a tire failure.

1992 was the last time the course claimed a fatality. For the racers, friends and family, it's never an easy thing to take. Even so, the best families and friends pick themselves up to remember those who passed. Team Pantera Racing remembers them as well.



Merle on left with back to camera, Rick on right with back to camera
TPR president Dennis (Mad Dog) Antenucci holding hood

Rick and Merle were no strangers to Open Road Racing. They were well known in the ORR community. For 2011, they planned on competing in the Unlimited Division with a 1994 Camaro, fully race prepared. Unlimited literally means no speed limit. It's generally been considered Highway 318 can barely sustain a 200 MPH limit with the right car. For many years, folks have been chasing the last speed record slightly in excess of 200. We don't know for certain if Rick and Merle were going for the record, but when you enter Unlimited, it's always in the back of your mind. That's why you prepare the car for just about anything.

Silver State Classic takes safety of the drivers and cars very seriously. In Unlimited, the rules are very strict, with requirements for fire-protected full race suits and underwear, roll cages, fire supression systems, harnesses, arm restraints, HANS, and more. The final item that in all cases is the most important, are the tires. Nearly every off-road excursion in the Nevada Open Road or Silver State Classic Challenge has been due to a tire failure. This is why their Tire Tech people take tires so seriously.

Though tire failures can never be predicted, tire tech at Silver State has stringent rules all cars must meet. It is with great confidence we know the tires on this Camaro were in good shape; they never would have passed otherwise. Unfortunately, as unpredicted things tend to do, it was a tire failure that caused the Camaro to leave the highway at a speed estimated to be 200 MPH.

Reports from the family indicate Merle and Rick died from traumatic impact injuries from the car tumbling through the desert, and not from the resulting fire. Being not easy to hear about death in any form, some comfort was taken they didn't die in the fire. That evening, at the Banquet and award ceremonies, there was a moment of silence held for the friends who started, but never finished.

TPR president Dennis Antenucci had these words to say:

...I can't help but think they were doing what they loved and they knew the risks... pushing the safety envelope to the very edge. ...both these guys will be missed. I spent half of Thursday and Friday with Rick in the parking lot his Camaro and my Pantera side by side.....yea the hard part is seeing someone go you will miss and know he will be missed more by his family.

TPR Veteran John Bentley later added:

You do your homework, you prepare your car, install all the safety equipment you can afford, and work up in the speed classes until you've had enough. But at the end of the day, we all know something can happen and we end up upside-down in the dessert. There is no way to eliminate risk. In time we will deal with this loss and get back in the drivers seat.

Family and friends will both miss these two veterans of Open Road Racing, and those friends will keep coming back. Daunted for only a little while, as the grief sinks in, passes and the memories turn to all the good times, Rick and Merle's fellow racers know they'd want them to go on. The memorial was held today at Kerman High School in Kerman, California.

Rick, Merle,
We'll all miss you terribly. And to show our support, Team Pantera Racing plans to come back in 2012, bringing memories of you with us.

Rick is survived by his wife Kelly, son Ridge (who has raced with his dad many times) and daughter Kasey.

Merle is survived by his mother Bunny Hill, and his children Tyler and MacKenzie.

To make contributrions to the family, please contact Gail Waldman by going to the Silver State Classic internet site

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ABC television has a story from the family members that is worth watching. View it here:

http://abclocal.go.com/kfsn/story?section=news/local&id=8361832