ACRID ODORS of burnt rubber, exhaust fumes and hot castor oil are pervading the piney-woods ozone near Hammond these summer week ends.

The mixture may offend the nostrils of some citizens, but it is sweeter than Paris perfume to the youths whose activity is its cause. They are drag racers, boys and young men who slave and save for months to gain a burst of speed that lasts but a few seconds.

During one of the drag-race week ends held monthly at the strip near Hammond, hundreds of cars stand in the pit area, waiting to be dragged to glory. Among them gleams a blue roadster protected by a canopy.

"Please don't touch the car," growls a pit man standing beside it. "We don't want anyone to touch it unless it's absolutely necessary."

This roadster, a machine of beauty glistening with chrome, will run no errands, make no pleasure drives. It was built for just one purpose: to travel a quarter of a mile on a straight run in the least possible time from a dead stop.

"TODAY'S the first time we're running it," the pit man says, "At the time trials this morning, we didn't get a good miles-per-hour, but we had an ET of 11:20. Once we got the right tires, we should get into the 10s."

(ET is "elapsed time," the time it takes a dragster to run the quarter-mile course. It is checked electronically; from it, average speed can be calculated. If a car runs the course in 10 seconds, for instance, its ET would be 10, its average speed 90 m. p. h.)

But the speed that most interests dragsters is that attained at the finish line. It may hit 130, 130, 140 m. p. h.—sometimes even more.

C. J. Kearney, 2559 Abundance, owner of the blue roadster, says he, Daniel LeBoeuf, 1323 Coliseum, and Cotton Olinde, 1500 Clout, spent eight months of evening and week-end work putting the car together. The parts, he says, ran him more than $300, which is not an unusual investment for a drag hobbyist.

Andy Zanca, for instance, sank five grand into his 1954 modified sports car in a three-year period, this in addition to thousands of hours of spare-time labor.

"To own and operate a car like this," he says, "a person has to be a mechanic or have at least some of the skills of a mechanic. I couldn't afford to pay anyone for all the work I have to do on my car. Few, if any, dragsters could."

But, despite all the money and time, Zanca says he's satisfied. He holds the national record for his class of competition, he proudly explains.

Zanca, who lives at 1602 Moisan, Kenner, runs his job only at drag races, a practice followed by the vast majority of his fellow racers.

"I guess I could use it on the streets, but I would have to modify the engine and plug the straight exhausts. I'd have to add another gas tank, too. The one on it now holds only a gallon and a half."

(The tank need be no larger for drag racing, and it's safer—less gas to feed flames in case of fire. Its lighter weight also helps speed.)

Sonny Ranson, 1024 Eylsian Fields, has seen $4000 go into his car in two years. The $4000 includes the cost of a new motor, soon to be installed by Ranson and the auto's other drivers—Johnny Kennair, 1130 Frenchmen, and Jake Dauth, 3017 St. Roch.

An extravagance? Ranson doesn't think so. "Some people spend a lot more than that on boats," says he.

Ranson and his friends compete in drag races at Hammond, Crowley, Biloxi and Mobile and sometimes take their car as far as Houston.