

It's another brilliant day in the sun, racing fans, and say Aloha, because we're here in Hawaii and the temperature outside is hot, hot, hot! We're nearly at 91 degrees Fahrenheit and the asphalt is absolutely cooking! But nothing in the forecast is as hot as what's laid out for the viewers at home! Today we're taking you to the Big Island of Hawaii at the absolutely resplendent resort track of Midas at Makolea!

And there's no better place to be than at Midas! They've got the largest casino in all the islands, and when you're not down at the tables testing your luck with the dealer, they have three of the finest 5 Star restaurants you can choose from! And of course, who can take a trip to Hawaii without going down to the beaches to experience all that beautiful sun, sand, and surf! Kick back, relax, and enjoy being a king for a change right here at Midas at Makolea!

Please visit the Accelerated Racing Association's discount offerings before today's race comes to a close! Midas at Makolea has partnered with the ARA to offer as much as 30% off on all reservations made during today's race while supplies last!

Visit www.AcceleratedRacing.ara/SponsorshipDiscounts/ to learn more!

To those just tuning in that aren't familiar with the track at Midas, don't let your television fool you!

This track might look small compared to the majority of the Association's asphalt offerings, but the ARA pooled together the brain power of their finest engineers to create the perfect track to make even the most steady handed of racers lose their cool! Midas at Makolea is a mile and a half of nonstop deadly twists and turns with not a single straightaway in sight, and today's race is scheduled for a full twenty laps!

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, that's twenty laps of teeth clenching, knuckle whitening, sweat spilling laps of danger where everything is your enemy from the concrete walls to your fellow man! If our drivers today aren't scraping their paint off on the walls then they're swapping colors with each other, as this track is designed to force everyone into an intense free for all where there simply isn't enough room for everyone to be hugging those tight turns!

So, today's race is sure set to stun, and we've got a roster of eighteen of the Association's finest down there getting ready to steal the stage!

The ARA is happy to welcome back driver Yuni Savora! The young ex-model and adult performer took an extended maternity leave last year, but not even motherhood could keep this bombshell from busting up the track with her bike, the Full Frontal, manufactured by Sollan Verti!

And joining her we have two other incredible veterans with us today!

Duke Odina is here driving the Massive Attack, a heavily modified chassis manufactured by Chang Zhong! Everyone here at Midas is eager to see if he can pull off a big win after his terrible performance in the Professional Circuit this year. Duke has been a popular, well-known face of the Association for nearly eight years, and it'd be a shame watching someone with such a lengthy career fizzle out at the finish line!

And, last but not least, we have none other than Lundi Quotte, driving the incredible Gemini Vale, manufactured by Lunar Technical, LLC! This is one woman that can't help but set the betting market alight today as her performance this season has been a real sight to behold! She's one of the fan favorites for next year's Caelum Run, but the year isn't over yet and there's still more races to come!

Welcome to Midas, everyone!

Down on the asphalt of Midas of Makolea, standing in the sunlight of the Big Island, were eighteen drivers. Each wore a jumpsuit, helmets tucked under their arms, and waiting for the signal from the loudspeakers. Next to each driver was their bike, large and powerful two-wheeled machines. Each metal monster on display could reach top speeds in the hundreds of miles per hour, and every bike was painted and polished to match its driver's jumpsuit.

One driver in particular was more important than the rest, a lone 26-year-old woman. The brown hare, her ears high and alert, stood silently as she waited for the race to start, her hand extended towards her bike to touch it gently.

Lundi Quotte ran her fingertips along the exterior of the Gemini Vale. Standing nearly as tall as her shoulders, the bike next to her was in its prime. Its polished exterior had just come out of a spit shine and deep cleaning, the purple and magenta paintjob sparkling under Earth's sunlight. The gold trim around the edges popping especially bright. As she stood under the sun, she felt the heat and humidity. It was high noon, and the sky was clear. Sunlight beat down on everyone as the asphalt beneath their feet seemed to sizzle under their boots.

"Five minutes till race start." The voice over the loudspeaker called.

"Bout time." One of her rivals said out loud from behind her.

Lundi ignored him, she was too focused on her own little world, the space that included only her and her bike. Her fingers continued to tiptoe across the hull of the Vale, gently like she was tickling a newborn baby. This was her bike, and she was its driver. She drew in a deep breath and let it out just as slow. This was her first-time racing at Midas, and her first time ever being in Hawaii.

It was the smallest track for the Professional Circuit, nestled in the center of a massive tourist hotspot. This part of the coastline used to be a nature preserve, off limits to any major construction, but somewhere along the line the ARA got permission to build a resort here, and with it came this little novelty track.

With how short this track was, every bike parked on the asphalt right now could drive this track from start to finish in a few seconds if you stretched it out straight. Everyone's top speeds were just too fast. This felt more like a track you'd reserve exclusively for the Juvie Circuit, since those bikes were hardly capable of competing with even the slowest Pro Circuit bikes.

But despite knowing that every bike here could run the track in seconds, Lundi knew it was too twisty and curly for that kind of lap time. It just wasn't realistic. She would have to throttle back her speed and

feather her brake nonstop to maintain a steady, controlled, low-speed peak in order to hug the corners and keep herself clear of other bikes. She'd never raced this track before, but she'd done training runs on other tracks in the lead up to this one to shore up her skill on hugging a wall like glue. She could probably complete a lap in 40 seconds, she figured, but that's if she was driving solo. She was going up against seventeen other people that were all going to be trying the same thing.

She drew in another breath and let it out slow. This would be a short, but intense race.

"Drivers, you may now enter your bikes!" The loudspeaker called out, and Lundi lifted her helmet and pulled it over her head, making sure her ears were carefully tucked inside without getting pinched.

Loud, excited cheering was booming out from the tiered grandstands that overlooked the gathered drivers. Several thousand people were here on vacation and watching the race live from their front row seats while drones flew noisily overhead to film everything.

All eighteen drivers standing on the track reached for the buttons on their bikes that would pop their cockpits. Lundi found hers and listened as the Gemini Vale popped open with a hiss, the magenta compartment lifting skyward before rotating up on a hinge like the lid of a soup can. The cockpit of the Vale was compact, just like her. Her bike was a small and lightweight machine.

She lifted one leg and started climbing into her bike.

Once the first leg was in, the second soon joined it, and she began to wiggle her body backwards, belly down, into the body of the Gemini Vale until the walls of the cabin were rubbing up against her elbows and shoulders. It was a claustrophobic space that held you tight like an ill fitted glove once you squeezed yourself in, but Lundi wasn't claustrophobic. The tight embrace of the Vale was comforting like one of her grandmother's hugs.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest, wiggled her legs into position so that her feet were touching her foot pedals behind her, then with one hand she tapped the button below her chin that would close the lid.

The Gemini Vale's cabin rotated back on top of her, then slid down to seal her inside. For a brief moment she was bathed in darkness until the lights came online, a series of small screens and running lights glowed in the darkness ahead of her. The cockpit interior, now tightly sealed around her, contained all of her vital controls.

The dash cameras all activated, their dim glow turning bright white before the video feeds all kicked in at once to give her multiple views around her. The center monitor showed her exactly what was in front of her in high resolution, with two smaller screens on either side that gave her a panoramic view of what was happening both to her left and her right side, as well as one behind. It was an unusual angle to watch, but after having raced with them hundreds of times, Lundi looked at the world through those camera feeds as easily as she did with her own two eyes.

Lundi pressed another series of buttons, then pressed the ignition. Her engine roared to life, no longer powered solely by its battery. The rumble of the engine was muffled, but clear as day through the vibration of the chassis under her stomach. She reached in front of her, grabbing the gold-plated tip of a

small auxiliary cable. Pulling it out of the dash, she plugged it in directly to the underside of her helmet, giving her a direct hardwire connection to the Vale's built-in radio.

The speakers built into her helmet woke up with a crackling noise before falling silent. Apart from the dull rumble of the Vale she couldn't hear anything else outside of her bike. During the race, she'd be able to hear the thunderous roar of the track, but her helmet and cockpit were both shielded enough to dampen any unnecessary noise from the outside world.

"Test." She said aloud, testing the microphone in her helmet.

"Hearing you loud and clear, Lundi. Good luck out there!" Her Chief Strategist replied over the radio.

"Thanks." She replied back. She didn't rely on her radio too often during her races, as there wasn't much for any crew to do once the race started. It was mostly for emergency purposes should she or someone else crash.

And all around her the other bikes were revving their engines. She drew in another deep breath, then let it out slow, thumbing the mute button on the dash to silence her microphone. She didn't need to subject her crew to the ASMR of her racing noises.

She knew there wasn't much time left before it started. Very soon.

She was in the middle of the pack with nine bikes ahead of her and eight behind her, and the bikes in front were all going to have an unfair head start on her. Her Chief Strategist had given her the rundown on everyone she was competing against today, and there were some strong contenders with half the track boasting better acceleration than her own.

The Vale was a good bike, but it was best suited to straightaways where she could exploit her top speed to the fullest. She wasn't going to have that luxury here today, and she'd be throttling back to rely on the Vale's other assets. Her Chief Technician had her tires swapped out for this race, ones with a different tread that could bite down on the road better and had a lower melting point than what she was accustomed to driving with. They'd heat up faster and grip the asphalt better.

"All drivers! On your mark!" The voice shouted over both the loudspeaker and through the speakers in her helmet. She put both hands on the handles on her bike, squeezing them and feeling the hard textured rubber under her fingers and deep inside her palms.

"Get set!" Louder still. The red lights flanking the finish line were burning bright hot like a warning.

"GO!" A gunshot echoed in the distance, though she couldn't hear it through the walls of the Gemini Vale.

The red lights in front of her flicked from red to green, and she floored it. All eighteen bikes on the track tore forward, Lundi feathering her brake as she maneuvered to the inside of the track where she planned to hug the inside wall of the course.

As she was doing that, every other driver was doing the same as everyone tried to cram themselves to the left side as they rapidly flew through the first turn of the Midas at Makolea. Sparks were flying from

bikes both in front of her and behind her as drivers were colliding with each other, physically jockeying for the best position in the narrow track.

Lundi collided with a bike on her right side, his rear end bumping into her front, forcing her to feather her brake to lag back several inches so the two bikes were no longer at risk of touching. She darted her eyes to her left side camera and saw how dangerously close she was to the concrete wall that wrapped around the track.

Her hands were gripping the handles like steel clamps, her eyes forward again, waiting for her chance to break rank and take the lead.

She tried gunning it the moment a narrow opening presented itself, a white and gold bike having leapt away from the inside wall to floor it. The Vale picked up speed, Lundi watching with alert eyes as the bike ahead of her forced his way in between two other bikes, sparks flying through the air as their machines clashed.

Another bike appeared beside her, a loud bang, and then she was almost losing control of the Vale as the track turned sharply with every bike in the pack colliding against each other as everyone was trying to micromanage their brakes and accelerators on a track that was far too small for bikes so fast.

For the first time in a long time, Lundi felt fear.

Twenty laps later, fourteen drivers crossed the finish line with four others having dropped out of the race by crash out. As Lundi let the Gemini Vale coast forward slowly, following the instructions of the men with orange flags, she was gripping her handles tighter than she'd ever had before.

Midas at Makolea had fooled her.

She thought she'd come prepared for it, with her handful of practice runs on other tracks and her brand-new tires, but she'd been overconfident. She'd been overwhelmed. When she was instructed to park inside her designated bay, she activated the parking brake with her left foot pedal. She needed to turn off the Gemini Vale now, but her hands didn't want to let go of the handles. She had to make herself let go of them, and with a shaky hand she started pressing the buttons on the dash ahead of her to shut off the ignition before popping the seal on the Vale.

As she started crawling her body out of the tight confines of her bike, she was being swarmed by her pit crew who helped her out safely before turning their attention to her bike's condition. She stood up on two feet feeling like she'd not been upright in days, the cramped space of her bike, and the intensity of the race, distorting reality for her. It felt like she was standing on legs made of wet clay, soft and sluggish.

"You did great, Lundi! That was a damn dangerous track, but you pulled off a great performance!" Ty, her Chief Technician was telling her between claps on her shoulders, but his voice sounded muffled to her ears. She reached up to remove the helmet and the world around her began to sound normal again

with the sound of dozens upon dozens of people swarming man and machine alike as the garage was filled with post-race frenzy.

Her Chief took her helmet away from her, clapping her again on the shoulder. She discovered her lips were dry, and for the first time realized how much she was panting. She licked her lips, nodding to him, as she tried to calm her breathing down. Her heart was still pounding in her chest like she was still on the track.

She turned back to face the Vale and saw the damage. Nasty dents and scratch marks ran all along the side of her bike, looking like the claw marks from some kind of snarling beast. And this was just the left side of her bike. The other side had it worse. Halfway through the race and she was dragging the Vale along the wall just like the rest of the drivers. The rest of the damage was from other bikes that were fighting with her for space. There was so much paint smeared on her bike that she could tell which bikes it all came from.

It was insane that this was a legal track for the Pro Circuit!

Midas at Makolea had no straight shots that let her take advantage of the Gemini Vale's speed. She'd struggled the entire race, feeling timid for the first time in years as she failed time and time again to grab an opening to climb further up in position. Every inch of that track was like driving along the steel of a corkscrew, and that wasn't something the Vale was kitted out for, even with the new tires!

She was in 9th place at the start of the race and after twenty laps she only just barely clawed her way to 4th place, and that was only because four other drivers crashed out. Lundi's skill had only managed to pull her ahead by one placement. Inside, she felt like a failure. She'd never finished a race before where she only moved up one position from where she started. She hadn't earned that 4th place finish!

"Ms. Quotte!" A voice was calling out to her excitedly from somewhere else in the garage.

She looked, saw what it was, and sighed. She wasn't in the right headspace to deal with them, but now the news teams were swarming the garage like a pack of paparazzi, and a whole crew of them were heading in her direction with the intent to interview her.

As she watched the crew rapidly approach with their hands full of camera equipment she drew in another deep breath and let it out slowly. She tried flexing her hands to calm them down but was forced to cross her arms to hide them in her armpits so no one could see how much they were still trembling.

"Ms. Quotte, what a race! Can you tell us what it was like out there!" The reporter asked, sounding breathless as he stuck out his microphone for her to speak as the camerawoman next to him aimed her lens straight at her face. She smiled, but on the inside, she felt shaken, messed up from top to bottom. She was furious at herself for underestimating a track and failing to do better.

"Gotta say, Midas had me surprised. It's a hell of a track!" She replied, her own voice still sounding breathless, but she did her best to hide it behind a fake show of confidence.

"I don't see how you could have done better, Lundi. Look here." Rod, her Chief Strategist was pacing in front of an illuminated display that was being projected by a laptop onto the opposite wall. She and half her team were sitting in the small conference room that they'd rented out at the hotel they were staying at for Midas at Makolea race.

This was the race debriefing, something they always did to do a rundown on what went right and what went wrong and doing it all while the race was still fresh in everyone's minds. This didn't just include Lundi's driving performance, but also the performance of her Chief Strategist and her Chief Technician. They all had their own roles to play in the success or failure of a race.

Rod, her Strategist, had been hired to do one thing, review and micromanage her race footage and performance, as well as monitor the footage coming from other drivers from any track she was going to find herself driving on. He was like a football coach and researcher all in one, telling her what plays to make when she stepped out onto the field, and advising her on what weapons to expect her enemies to wield.

The mouse was now tracing his hand along the wall to a western part of the Midas track, before he stopped his hand and tapped at a specific part of the track.

"Rick, roll the footage to timestamp 04:09:22, it'll be in the fifth lap." He said, and Rick, one of the Junior Technicians working under Ty, started clicking with his mouse to navigate through windows to change from the map display to the video recording. Moments later, video was playing out on the wall.

"Ok, stop, rewind thirty seconds." Rod said, and Rick did as he was told.

Lundi sat with her face locked in a permanent scowl, arms crossed over the table with her chin resting on her arms. She both felt and looked like a pile of shit, ears laid low down her back.

"Play it." He said, staring intently at the wall.

The footage began to play, the feed coming from one of the dozens of remote-controlled drones that filmed every race. The video showed a part of the race that Lundi remembered well. What was happening on screen was Tina Tracer losing control of her bike, leading her to nosedive into the concrete wall before spinning out of control and taking out Mercury Star. Two of the four crashes for this race happened at the same time, and right in front of Lundi.

The footage then showed her on the screen, making a tight right turn, steering away from the inside wall to dodge Tina's wreck, but also threading the needle to avoid colliding with Mercury's own wreckage as it skidded to a halt in the middle of the track.

"Lundi, that was an incredible maneuver, especially with the Vale! You were so close to them that I was honestly ready to throw in the towel when I saw that happen! Anyone else in your shoes with the Vale's performance and they'd have turned that into a three-car pile-up!" He told her, looking back at her with determination.

Everyone on her crew knew she was self-flagellating herself over today's race, and doing their best to peptalk her, but it wasn't working.

“Rod, let’s just wind it down. We can only go over so many minute-long laps before our eyeballs pop out.” Tony, Lundi’s Chief Medical Technician spoke up, drawing everyone’s attention to the stoat.

“We’re not even at the halfway point! We’ve got a lot more to cover, we can’t quit now!” Rod replied, flabbergasted at the sudden suggestion that they might break tradition and not do a full debriefing of a race.

“This has been, by far, the most stressful race Lundi’s been in this year. I think we should step away from the table for now and come back at it tomorrow after she’s gotten some sleep. That’s my medical opinion, if Lundi agrees.” Tony said, looking to her for guidance.

Now everyone was looking at her. She pulled her hands over to her face and began rubbing at herself until she slapped them to the table.

“Let’s do this tomorrow.” She agreed, feeling sick of herself, and wanting to crawl under a rock.

Rod shrugged, looking like he might protest, but then gave up on it shortly after to agree that it would be best to try again after everyone had rested up.

Even as the meeting wound down, she wanted to kick herself all the way back to her room, but one tradition that couldn’t be broken was and has always been to have a team dinner after a race, and so that’s what they did even if she wanted to spend her night alone and sulking. As much as she wanted to crawl under a rock, she had enough good sense to know that it wouldn’t help her or anyone else out if she did.

Something her Grams always told her was to smile even if you weren’t happy, because then you’d just be making everyone else sad when they saw how you really felt. Keep smiling, she’d say even when Lundi knew she didn’t mean it. Just gotta keep smilin’. She’d been screwing up at that today, and as they made their plans to go out and eat, she tried to smile more.

But she sure as hell wasn’t having dinner at the Midas with so many other drivers there. She wanted to get away from the resort, the track, all of it. Lundi had her Chief Tech call a shuttle and an ARA chauffeur swung by the hotel entrance and picked her and her entire team up in a limo. Lundi wasn’t the biggest name in the ARA, but she raced well enough to earn herself that Gold rank, which came with perks like travel assistance packages and access to some local amenities.

She sat in the middle of the group while her Chief Medical Technician argued with her Chief Technician over what restaurant to go to. After five minutes the team voted, and the Ayes had it. They were having Hawaiian BBQ tonight despite Lundi being one of the Nays. Two of them actually since it was team tradition to count her vote twice. She still lost, and now she had to stomach whatever the islanders here thought was BBQ instead of the real thing.

“Must you be in that race next week, baby? The news said this morning someone died there yesterday. It’s dangerous.” Grams told her while they both sat down at the dinner table.

Lundi was back in Tallassee, visiting her grandmother in between races. She had just left Fort Worth, TX, having gotten home late the night before with enough time to spare to hug and kiss her Grams before crashing to bed in her old bedroom.

It wasn't often this year that she found herself stomping around her old turf. Used to be that she lived and breathed everything that was U S of A, but now that she was finally racing in the big leagues, she had the numbers to get herself off of Earth and onto tracks in other parts of the solar system. After spending more than a month off Earth she was grateful to be back, and in the US, to do several races.

She'd been to Fort Worth before, but not to race. Her family was from south Texas, then she moved up towards Dallas briefly in her early teens before she went to live with Grams in Florida. Fort Worth used to have an air force base, but after the government abandoned it for the new one closer to the Gulf, the ARA bought the land and converted it all into a racetrack.

Now, Lundi just needed to make her way next to Luna. It would be her fifth time racing on the moon since she'd started racing in the Professional Circuit.

"It'll be fine. I've raced on that track before; I know what I'm getting into." She replied, dismissing her grandmother's concerns over a plate of home cooking. Corn bread, peas, lots of gravy, the kind of stuff you can't get anywhere else but home. Not many people knew how to cook like Grams did anymore.

"News said his name was Wally Costner, and he was only 21." She kept going and Lundi started to get angry with her again. Why did she always have to do this?

"I'm not gonna die!" She said loudly, looking up from her plate and staring her grandmother down.

Grams fell silent, the old hare looking back down at her plate to pick at her food. After that, the dinner table was real quiet for a while until Grams stood up and put her plate in the kitchen sink, pushing the scraps into the disposal.

As the disposal ran, loud and angry, Lundi realized her own appetite wasn't really with her anymore. She made herself eat anyway, making sure to clean her plate like she'd been taught even if she wasn't hungry enough to eat it. Eat even if you don't want any, smile even if you don't have any shine in your soul. All the different little ways Grams had of telling her things were rubbing off on her.

There wasn't anything about the next race that had Lundi worried. She'd been on that track twice already and she knew what it was all about. Her bike was actually suited to it like a fitted glove. The gravity was lower, but that only messed with her head the first time she raced it.

Now she had enough experience in lower gravity racing that it didn't bother her any, especially since half the track was doing those half-pipe things like in a skate park. It made turns so easy that a bike's forward momentum would carry into its wheels when you were banking left and right to make those turns, holding it solid on the track to pick up speed. Soon as you finished the turn inside the pipe and came out the other end the Gemini Vale would fly out like a bullet, top speed achieved.

"When do you have to leave again?" Grams asked after she finished running the disposal.

"Day after tomorrow, in the morning." She answered.

“Why so soon? You haven’t been around to visit much in a while.” She replied.

Lundi didn’t say anything right away, running the side of her fork across the plate to pick up what was left of the crumbs of cornbread and gravy.

“It’s just how it’s been lately. I have a lot of races to do, but the season is almost over. I can take some time off then.” Lundi replied, thinking now of how hard she’d worked to make it to the 7th Circuit. When she was done, she stood up to bring her plate over to the sink.

Together they started cleaning what little dishes they’d dirtied up during dinner, and then the stove top right after. Grams didn’t bring up her races anymore, which suited her fine. She wished she never talked about her races anymore, since all she ever did was complain. Lundi just wished she had more faith in her, as much as she had in herself. Wished she could watch her race and cheer for her like everyone else did.

“I was going to make you a cherry pie, but I don’t guess you’ll get to eat the whole thing if you’re leaving so soon.” Grams said once they started putting everything away.

There was a loud buzzing noise growing louder and louder, angry and obnoxious, and suddenly Lundi was lying down on her side in an unfamiliar bed, staring at the red numbers on an alarm clock as it buzzed to wake her. She reached out and pressed the button to shut it off, the alarm falling silent at her touch.

Lundi rolled over onto her back and stared at the ceiling, the taste of Gram’s cherry pie fading back into her memory. She drew in a deep, shaky breath, pulling her hands up to her face to hide her eyes from the empty room as she listened to the memory of her grandmother’s voice. As her eyes started to burn behind her hands, she struggled to contain the painful emotion of her loss, Lundi’s lips trembling. She’d been having a lot of dreams about her lately, and she wished they’d stop.