

A Driving Passion



So what do ordinary guys, who like cars, do as they approach retirement? They start a project. In Ross Dudley's case he acquired his lifelong dream car - a 1968 Plymouth Road Runner. All he wanted was a car to restore at his

leisure. Starting a few years before his actual retirement he plugged away at it, the most professional way. He even fabricated a rollover chassis jig that allowed him to rotate the body, as he worked on the sections, three hundred and sixty degrees.

Finally, after a year, he had it the way he wanted it, complete with stock engine - the engine was Mopar's proven 383-cid V-8, but with heads, manifolds, camshaft, valve springs, and crankcase windage tray from the big, bad 440 Magnum. With its four-barrel carb and unsilenced air cleaner, the new mill produced 335 bhp. Showing the renovation in local shows was satisfaction for the effort. But fate intervened. Ross suffered from a heart problem that required surgery. Thinking that one heart attack may not be the last one he decided to go for broke.

Realising that his Road Runner was a helluva street-modified vehicle he decided to beef up the engine, trans and rear gears then go racing. "I wanted to do it while I was still capable" he told me. So after a complete engine rebuild, which took another year of hand building (he did it all), which included boring out a 400 cubic inch block and stroking it to 451 cubic inches and installing a race balanced rotating assembly, aluminium cylinder heads, solid lifter cam with roller rockers and other add-ons which makes a "mill" that puts out 550 hp..

So what to do with this rig? Find the right kind of racing. He finally decided to participate in "Drag Week". This event is sponsored by Hot Rod Magazine. The best way to describe this event is to use the text on the mag's website - "Drag Week puts competitors' vehicles to the test at five drag strips on five consecutive days in five different states, and the lowest average e.t. wins. The kicker is that all vehicles must drive from track to track with no trailers or support vehicles allowed, so over-the-road dependability will be just as important as brute acceleration. And unlike Pump Gas Drags and heads-up drag racing classes, there are very few rules and you can do whatever you want to the car at any time, so long as it doesn't involve a trailer or a support vehicle. Everything you need, including tools, parts, and spares, must be carried from track to track in the vehicle or in a trailer pulled by the vehicle.

Simply put you drive a car in a somewhat circular route and drag-race it five times in five days and drive the 250 to 350 miles from track to track -. Ross liked the sound of that - see the country and get to drive 1500 miles and race his project. As the ad blurb goes - "one week without sleep equals Drag Week".



Recruiting his friend, Wayne Thurston, to crew and accompany him, (they split the travel costs) he first entered three years ago. Last year they started at the drag track in Bowling Green Kentucky drove to Steele Alabama travelled to Montgomery Alabama, moved on to Memphis Tennessee and then back to Bowling Green. Competing in the 'Daily Driver' class he saves costs by not having to equip the car with rollover safety equipment. Cars faster than 11.5 sec must have bars. The only rules in this class is that you can't go faster than 10.8 seconds and you have to meet NHRA safety rules. The top 32 qualifiers in this class race off on the last afternoon in a bracket race.

"Last year was a good one, I qualified fourth quickest in my class for the week but 'red-lighted' in the final. I blew my chance to win by four thousandths of a second. But I loved it!"

Staying in Holiday Inn Expresses they repair the car in the parking lot, one of his tales entails a trip to the local Walmart to buy solder and an torch to repair a hole in the radiator but this is nothing compared to a complete engine rebuild in the hotel parking lot by a contender during the first year. The drag strips open at 10am and close at 2pm, and in that time they can run as many times as they can line up at the 'christmas tree'. Arriving at the track they first change tires: road tires are Goodyear Eagles and drag tires are Mickey Thompson drag radials, Ross usually gets in about four runs, before handing in his best time. Closing the tool boxes, packing the car, changing tires they are then on the road for the next track. As Hot Rod mag monitors the route, so that cheaters cannot load their cars on a trailer and stay fresh for the next run the trip to the next track is a good four to five hour drive. A big part of the week's event is to be able to drive miles to a track then race the ass off the car, instead of participating in a show'n'shine. For the entry fee of \$250 you get to race five times and meet cool guys and their cars on the way.



For Ross and Wayne racing is the side effect of travelling with a bunch of guys, from all types of backgrounds. "We have millionaires running side by side with guys who have saved all year to do this event. We are all equal in our love of the event and the camaraderie, the people part is a really big thing!"