

Why I Race A Historic NASCAR Stock Car



Mike Cesario prepares for a Ride of Your Life charity ride.

-story by Mike Cesario

-photos by Steve Komplot

The first time I was exposed to the historic NASCAR Stock Cars was at the 2005 HMSA Portland Historic Races. It was a gray humid day and the crowd in the stands had been refreshed with the traditional Portland treat of strawberries and cream, while on the track a parade of eclectic, mostly small bore, vintage exotics and sports cars buzzed by. It was a good show but as far as the fans were concerned only a preliminary for the madness that was about to erupt.

One could immediately sense the energy and noise level amping up as the Stock Cars were announced. As they rumbled over from the paddock even the most experienced pit workers seemed to linger over the cars as they took their spots on the pre-grid.

At the 3 minutes to go mark, the engines of 25 Stock Cars exploded into action and immediately the fans were out of their seats and on their feet. The pace lap was a quick and violent, visual and symmetrical dance of swerves, acceleration & deceleration coupled with the sensory over-kill smells of rubber, petrol and oil mixed with a strong dose of jungle-like visceral screams and roars. Imagine a mechanical production version of the Bolshoi ballet hammered home with music by Def Leopard performed by muscle-bound

dancers right out of the WWF and you get the picture. The crowd went crazy and the race hadn't even started. I knew right then I had to have one of those cars.

I'd driven a series of race cars through the years going back to my days on the east coast in the 70's piloting the #40 Mac's Datsun 240Z as a national and regional licensed SCCA racer, driving the wheels off the car at tracks like Lime Rock, the Glen, Thompson Speedway, Bryar Motorsports Park and Mid Ohio. I was competitive and had fun but my main claim to fame was as the Kamikaze driver who knocked Bob Tullius, in his V12 Jag, out of the 1975 4th of July Nationals at Lime Rock allowing Bob Sharp through in his Datsun to win this huge race. There is absolutely no truth, by the way, to the ugly rumor that I was about to be lapped at the time of the incident. Bob Sharp remains a friend and when I last spoke with Bob Tullius several years ago, he was very gracious and had almost forgiven me for spinning at the bottom of the down hill and collecting him as he tried to swerve by the kid in the blue and yellow 240Z.

At the time of the 2005 Portland Historics I was splitting my seat time between a Superformance Mark 3 Cobra with a 418 Windsor Stroker under the bonnet, an E Production Rebello-engined 240Z and a friends ex-Trans Am series 510. Track wise speaking, life was not so bad but I was about to enter a new level of excitement and responsibility with the Stock Cars.

I began my search for the right ride and after several months of looking on both coasts made a lucky find and bought the 1992 ex-Alan Kulwicki/Hooters Thunderbird chassis #007. My English wife, Ellie, was not too happy with my choice (unfounded fears about what the crew uniforms would look like) but with a fully documented history supplied by Alan's crew chief, Paul Andrews, and a smoking deal, Ellie came around and the car has since become her favorite.

Entering the world of historic NASCAR Stock Cars meant exposure to things like history sign boards, lavish motor homes, tractor

trailer haulers, new and bigger tool sets, 700+ horsepower engines, Detroit lockers, Jerico transmissions, brakes that responded to pressure as if they were giving an indication bid in a game of whist and tires that look big and wide but for the size and weight of the car were anything but.

The initial track experience was intimidating as I learned the ins and outs of muscling this beast around the track. Forget about all those years of heeling and toeing, smooth in smooth out, finesse and feel and keeping the revs up in the turns. Welcome to a brave new world of large loud pedals, no clutch shifts, slamming it into a turn, pitching the car sideways, unlocking the locker by staying off the gas, get the car sorted and straightened out and then put your foot in it all the way and hang on. Then do it all over again at the next turn. Talk about adrenaline. Do that for a half hour with other similarly equipped 3600 pound cars around you, and no matter where you finish, I defy anyone to come back without a smile on their face. As well as a bit of relief that you had lived to fight another day.

Take all that and then throw in the pride you felt from the fans when they found out that your car was the real deal and not some show car. That it was the chassis in which Alan got three of his poles and his only two wins in his 1992 NASCAR championship winning season and everything makes sense.

Things happen with Stock Cars that don't happen with other cars. Fans young and old, male or female all relate to these glorified taxi cabs. They don't care who's driving the car now - that's the Intimidator's # 3 Goodwrench Chevrolet, Kid from California's #24 Dupont Special, The King's #43 STP Special and Awesome Bill from Dawsonville's #9 Coors Thunderbird out there on the track and that is mostly what matters for fans of these rolling pieces of NASCAR history.

You haven't seen happy until you put some young fan behind the steering wheel of your Stock Car. That child's mom and dad knows their son or daughter is always going to remember this day at the track and for us racers, we've made a new fan! As an extra add on benefit for the parents, it's their chance to pay homage to Alan Kulwicki who remains one of NASCAR's most fondly remembered drivers and champions.

With the Kulwicki T-bird, for the under 30 crowd who never knew Alan, it's all about the Hooters connection. You can't believe how



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many pictures have been taken of my car with women who have amply demonstrated that they know that the Hooters connection has nothing to do with the sound some bird makes. Girls love to take off their clothes around this car and prostrate themselves across the hood. When's the last time that happened to you Ginetta, Lola or Alfa drivers out there?

On a more sober note, older fans get emotional when they see the car as they take a trip down memory lane and remember the joy of Alan's championship and the tragedy brought on by his death in a plane crash on April 1, 1993. These fans love to share their own personal memories with me and I have a wall at the ranch dedicated to showcasing all the Kulwicki memorabilia I have received over the years. It is a very special feeling to be the caretaker and custodian for this car.

I've focused on the Kulwicki/Hooters Thunderbird because it possesses a very special history, look and livery but every one of the cars in HSCRS has its own story and supporters. It doesn't matter how successful the original driver was, people still relate in some way to every car out there.

There are two areas where being a HSCRS member/driver sets us slightly apart from the other racers out there. One is our Ride of Your Life program (ROYL) which has raised over \$400,000 for a variety of charities over the past 10 years. The ROYL gives winning bidders an E ticket ride at speed in the passenger seat of one of our historic Stock Cars and this program has benefited foundations as diverse as the 11-99 Foundation, The Canary Fund, SPCA of Monterey County, The Cerebral Palsy Foundation of the North Bay and the Sonoma County Boost Camp.

The other area we really shine is paddock presentation and hospitality. Although we sometimes are accused of being elitist motor home racers, these are big cars and require a large amount of equipment, parts and crew support. We are proud of our cars, and as a group, like to

show them off. We position and organize them, with their sign boards, so they are on display encouraging the fans and competitors alike to get up close, learn their history and enjoy these race cars.

If your idea of a good race weekend is isolating yourself in your trailer between track sessions or at night – don't buy a Stock Car. With all the drivers, crews, family and friends who join in to make the weekend happen and who are pitted together you need to be a people person who likes being around similarly minded individuals.

On race weekends we set up a central hospitality area and usually kick things off with a Friday night barbecue with racers from other groups throughout the paddock feeling the love and joining the party. An assortment of people pitch in to do breakfast and lunch on Saturday and then everyone comes together later for a reception and dinner. Supper in the HSCRS hospitality area means a pairing of restaurant quality food, estate grown wines from around the world and a strong measure of social interaction and intelligent conversation. That night there'll be a queue at the race simulator and more than a little bench racing going on. Sunday morning means breakfast is served as we get organized and ready for the race day activities.

The social aspect of our group is very important as everyone participates including the support crew and families. Ultimately it also helps make for an environment conducive to gentlemanly activity and respect and quarter given both on and off the track.

Through the years we've decided to focus on the 1995 and older Stock Cars, which in some cases has weeded out the drivers whose priority was to win rather than showcase the cars. As our group has evolved, the social scene at the track makes it difficult for a me-first person to be comfortable in our group. It's hard to look someone in the face at an evening reception after you been bannaized by them at the apex of some turn.

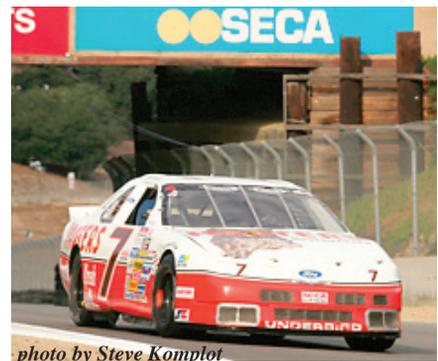


photo by Steve Komplot

On-track action at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca.

Our idea of a perfect weekend is one with no body contact, no drama, no hurt feelings and everyone going home with a smile on their face. It is our continued quest to ensure that all of our drivers have the vintage spirit and happily it seems to be having the desired effect more so now than ever.

And that I guess is the final note for me to make. The HSCRS group is a family of proud, competitive drivers who have the good fortune to drive some pretty cool racing Stock Cars. These cars may be a bit pedestrian for some of you out there but they are loved by both the fans and their driver/owners. We think we put more people in the stands when we show up and then we get those same fans up and out of their seats when we roll out on the track. We do what we do best and try and give something back with our ride of your life (ROYL) program and then we go out and put on a show that puts smiles on everyone's faces.

I venture to say that it would be hard to get more bang for the buck than you get driving a historic NASCAR Stock Car and would encourage anyone who'd like more information on how to get involved to e-mail HSCRS president, George Fraser at georgefraser3@yahoo.com or contact the HSCRS national headquarters at 408-428-0428.

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