

A Touch of Nostalgia

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Dipping into the 11s in a street-legal 1966 Ford Mustang GT



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Feature Article from Hemmings Muscle Machines

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There are no rules that govern how, when and where an individual begins a journey into competitive drag racing. The sport's not biased when it comes to age, car or class, either. So when Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania, resident Bob Conlan decided to migrate from the stands to the staging lanes, the quarter-mile ribbon of asphalt was ready and willing to accept him and his 1966 Ford Mustang GT.

Bob had long been a fan of drag racing, particularly nostalgia competition, but his personal race history didn't really begin until roughly 10 years ago, with a different Mustang, a 1993 model that had been warmed over for competition shortly after purchase. But it wasn't long until a second Ford had entered his life.

"At the 1998 Philadelphia Auto Show, a preview for the charity auction that was to take place the following weekend caught my eye. One of the 14 cars offered was this 1966 Mustang GT, so I signed up as a bidder. Later in the week, I was stranded up in Boston due to a nasty winter storm, but I was somehow able to rent a car and make it home in time for the auction. My first new car was a '65 Mustang fastback, so I was determined to acquire this one. I became its third custodian," recalled Bob.

Restored to factory-stock configuration by the second owner (and seller), the Mustang enjoyed the pampered life of a show car for the next 10 years, although Bob admits that he did, in fact, race it once in stock condition, to "an embarrassingly slow result." However, his appreciation for nostalgia racing meant that he had plans for the Mustang beyond the show and shine days, and most of its metamorphosis from street cruiser to quarter-mile threat was performed in 2008 by Mark and Jim Pickett from Pickett's Automotive in nearby Darby.

According to Bob, "We pulled out the original engine, and in went a Ford 347-cu.in. stroker crate engine with a Holley 750 carburetor. Mechanically, we changed everything from one end to the other. That included installing an aluminum radiator, electric fan and water pump, MSD ignition system and even a new gas tank." Backing the engine is a rebuilt Ford Toploader with Hurst Competition linkage and a McLeod clutch; there's also a Ford 9-inch rear with Mosier 31-spline axles and 3.73:1 gears.

Despite his desire for improved performance, Bob actually wanted to maintain a relatively stock outward appearance. "There's very little that's different in the interior other than a new gauge package, and Pro Car seats that will accommodate NHRA lap belts. Even the wheels look stock, except that the rear wheels are from a '47 Ford truck, while the front pair is from a '52 or '53 Ford--they provide that period wide/skinny look. It basically looked like something I would have built had I done this back when I was younger."

Despite these changes, the Mustang was still street-friendly, allowing it to make an occasional enjoyable trip to a local car show. Bob would even drive it directly to a few of the closer tracks, such as Atco Raceway in Atco, New Jersey, and Cecil County Dragway in Bayview, Maryland. "Englishtown (New Jersey) is a little further out for me, so I trailer if I intend to race there. In 2009, my first season racing with the GT, I would put a 1-inch riser between the carburetor and intake, but then the hood wouldn't close. So early in 2010, I bought a Shelby-style hood so I can leave the riser in full-time. I also decided to add the dual white stripes so that the '66 matched the paint scheme on my 2007 Shelby GT500."

In the two short seasons that Bob's been racing his vintage Mustang, he's been able to turn in consistent low 12-second times. "That's not all that bad for a four-speed car without any of the other common weight-saving equipment. My best to date was an 11.88 at 119 MPH, so the car's got a lot of potential. It really is just a fun car to race. To be retired at 64 and having this much fun with cars and friends, such as the guys at Pickett's, is a good thing."

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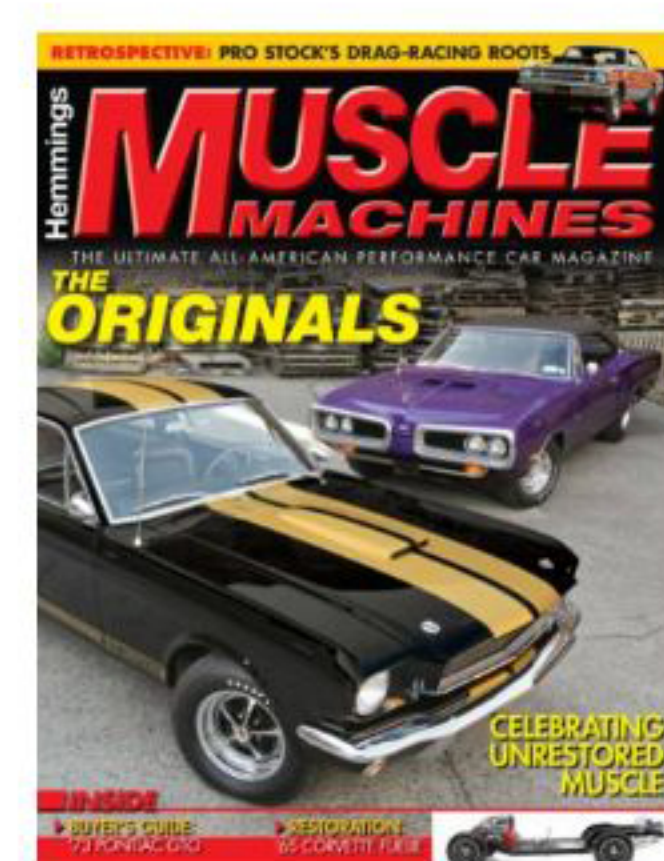
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