

BY DOUG STOKES

Sport compact cars are today's hot rods. Young people embrace these little pocket rockets such as the Honda Civic and the Ford Focus as platforms for performance enhancements and other modifications. Just as with the hot rodders of the 50s, the new rodders have adopted small, compact, gas-saving cars as the basis for fast, agile street machines with close-to-racetrack-ready motors and highly tuned chassis.

Aftermarket performance companies find these new drivers to be an almost inexhaustible market for every high-performance add-on they can dream up from turbochargers to suspension kits and from ersatz roll cages to carbon fiber hoods, doors, dashes and trunk lids. Racing engine builders found a whole new breed of go-fast customers at their shops, young men and women with small-displacement, four-cylinder, twin overhead cam motors who wanted more power and were willing to pay for it.

At almost the same time these young drivers were ready to race, organized racing off the street was drying up. Sanctioned drag strips and road courses were closing down because of increased land values



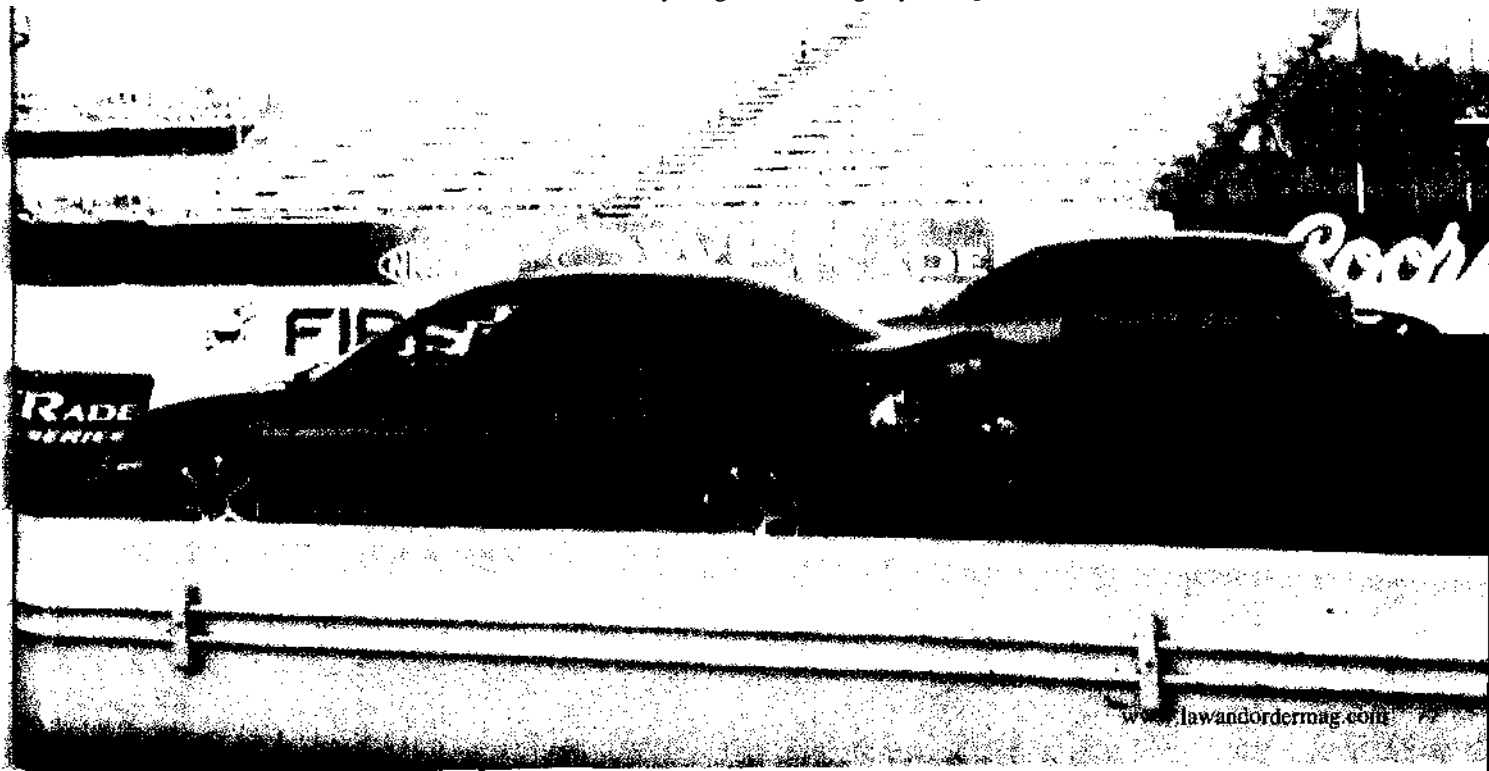
Racers Against Street Racing

and complaints from track neighbors. Places that were once out of town were now being encroached upon by civilization. There were fewer places to race.

In addition, this generation of Fast 'n Furious hot rodders just wasn't that attracted to the image of the professional drag racer. Cool little Hondas, Acuras, Toyotas, Nissans, Mitsubishi's, no matter how modified their motors or souped-up their suspensions, weren't anything like the gritty,

down and dirty image of organized drag racing. Young street racers had few places to go and weren't much interested in the places that were available. So, they took to the streets.

However, street racing is dangerous, disorganized and illegal. Drivers and spectators at illegal drag racing gatherings run the risk of not only getting traffic tickets and receiving heavy fines, but of having their cars impounded on the spot. At the minimum, that meant a



ride to the police station and a call to parents.

None of those factors matter, of course, until there's an accident or a dispute about who won, or arrests and confiscated cars. What matters is fun, excitement, fans and friends watching the race.

To try to find a solution to this problem, the American Honda Corp. in Torrance, CA, invited other automotive manufacturers, law enforcement officials, race track owners, racers, aftermarket suppliers, the media and anyone else who had an interest in the subject of drag racing to a conference in January 2001. At this meeting Honda introduced the idea of an organization that would encourage young racers to go to the track. The result of this conference was the organization Racers Against Street Racing (RASR).

RASR is a coalition of auto manufacturers, aftermarket parts companies, professional drag racers, sanctioning bodies and automotive magazines devoted to promoting safe and legal

alternatives to illegal street racing on a national level. Its message is simple: If you want to race, go to a racetrack.

The Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA), a 5,000-member, trade organization for the aftermarket industry, took RASR's operation under its wing. The SEMA involvement offers another avenue to reach the racers: through the retailers who sell the parts.

Part of the Solution

Getting young drivers off the streets and into organized drag racing competition is becoming a country-wide phenomenon. In the Phoenix area, DragRacing.com's Roger Falcione, the president and CEO of MotorWeb, saw an urgent need and used his organization's extensive contacts in motorsports to develop Sport Compact Only Nights (SCO), a program that provides enthusiasts with a safe place to race.

The SCO Nights, held on Thursdays at National Hot Rod Association (NHRA)-sanctioned Firebird International Raceway, provide an organized


outlet for competition. SCO Nights opened its second season at Firebird with more than 200 racers and more than 2,000 spectators taking part. In the first season of SCO Nights some participants came from as far away as Flagstaff, Prescott, Tucson and even New Mexico.

The Maricopa County, AZ, Sheriff's Department has shown its support by racing four modified police cars against local racers. The RACE-A-COP program is run by Deputy Sheriff Rick Bricklin, who is a member of the Arizona chapter of Beat the Heat.

Drag Racing's Original Home

The Irwindale Dragstrip, 20 miles east of downtown Los Angeles, is another example of how this program works. Located within the larger Irwindale Speedway, this 1/8-mile strip is sanctioned by the NHRA and holds regular racing events every Thursday night and on one Sunday afternoon per month. The dragstrip has full NHRA Christmas tree staging and

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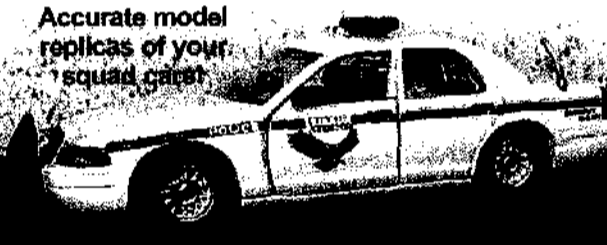
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Like the Arizona program, police agencies are involved in Irwindale's drag racing program. In 2002 the speedway, in partnership with the Irwindale Police Department, announced a program called Speeding Tickets. This program involves 24 participating police agencies in the San Gabriel Valley (which surrounds the Speedway site). The agencies are supplied with Speeding Tickets books that entitle the recipient to a day or evening of drag racing at Irwindale's dragstrip.

The police agencies are committed to making the program work. The participating agency can issue these Speeding Tickets to drivers who are stopped for traffic violations. The dragstrip also encourages agencies to give the tickets during their everyday contact with young drivers. Some agencies will make the tickets

available at their offices for anyone who stops by and asks for one.

When the pass is used, Irwindale officials notify the issuing agency. When the ticket-holder signs in at the track, he is also asked to sign a pledge against illegal street racing. Copies of both forms are sent to the agency that issued the ticket so it can keep tabs on the efficacy of the program.

The Next Step

The Los Angeles City Attorney's office came to the Irwindale Dragstrip to see how it was done. Deputy City Attorney Anthony Paul Diaz spent an evening talking to drivers, watching them go through tech inspection, watching them race and even having a hot dog with a few of them in the pits.

After subsequent visits to the track Diaz called the drag strip office and indicated that a system would soon be in place for city of Los Angeles judges—who oversee illegal street racing-type traffic cases—to require the offenders to go to Irwindale and participate in a Drag Racing 101

session as a condition of their probation.

Offenders will receive a note from the court, which they will turn in when they get to Irwindale. At the drag strip they'll learn the basics of drag racing from one of the track officials who's an expert drag racer and can make as many runs as they can get in line for during the course of the event. At the end of the session, the new street-legal drag racers will receive a certificate indicating they have successfully attended and completed Drag Racing 101.

It's the city's intent to allow illegal racers to experience some of the positive components of legal drag racing, the fun, camaraderie and the excitement of true motorsports competition.

Doug Stokes has been a performance automotive communications professional for over 30 years. His current position is Director of Communications for Irwindale Speedway and Dragstrip in southern California.

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