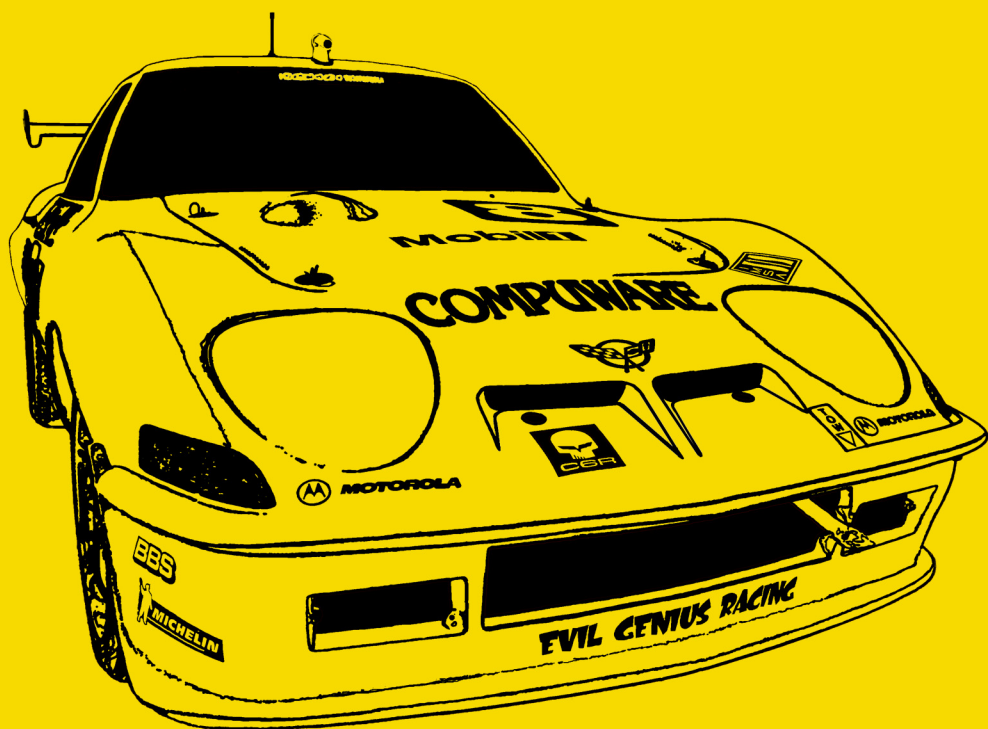


Team Tingvette

Today Lemons, Tomorrow Le Mans!



Thirty-four races on five different tracks, 18,874 miles in 6,592 laps, two events at Bonneville, one Cannonball Run, countless memories, and lifelong friends.

Mike Meier

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Introduction

Everyone should have at least one hobby that could kill them. – Neil Gaimen

I once made a list of all the reasons I should not go racing, because I was thinking about going racing. Let's see, there was my lack of racing experience, only basic wrenching skills, hardly any tools, no room to store or work on a race car, no tow vehicle or trailer and no place to keep them, getting a fire-proof suit, and keeping the neighbors happy. Obviously racing can get expensive, starting with the estimated \$3,000 needed just to get my competition license. And then the 24 Hour of Lemons came along.

In the 24 Hours of Lemons you don't need any racing experience and the competition license costs only \$50. You still had to know how to do some wrenching, but with the bar set so low for winning these races a weekend wrenching kind of guy like myself could probably get by. You still needed a racing suit, but deals could be had. And the races themselves were cheap by racing standards. A whole weekend of racing costs less than the equivalent in track days when figured on the basis of track time. How could I not do this, and, what was I getting myself into?

One spring day, shortly after being bit by the Lemons bug, Alan



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and I got together and bought a car. Two, actually. Both of them Opel GTs. The goal was to turn one of them into an ALMS Corvette Racing-themed race car, complete with the yellow/black paint scheme, a big ass spoiler and splitter, and authentic-looking decals, then race it. What could possibly go wrong?

The two cars we dragged home from the hills outside of Oroville stank. For 25 years they had been home to rats, cats, ants, and who knows what else. Neither ran and the motor on one would not turn. We had our work cut out for us and we had only nine weeks to turn one of them into a race car.

We stuffed the two foul smelling cars into my single-car carport and got to work, day and night, weekends but not holidays, and we did it. We transformed our little hantavirus-infested heap into a pretty little parody of a real race car. We made it both to the race and to the end of the race. Then we made it to the next race, and the next, and then we started winning. How could that be? Then we started blowing up. Then we stopped blowing up and by then this had become a very different kind of adventure, and a different kind of story. It was not merely about running a car and doing some racing, it was about how something like this can change the direction of your life.

Car and racing stories are not so much about cars and racing as they are about the people, and at the core of this one were five people, including myself. The first was Alan Brattesani, my partner in all this. I barely knew him, or him me, when we started this project, but over the next few months I would learn that he had worked at a gas station back when gas stations fixed cars. I'd learn that he had been auto-crossing since before his kids were born, and once they could drive they joined him on the coned courses of northern California. I'd learn that he was a recently on the mend from some nasty cancer and was still working through the final phases of that. I'd notice that some days he'd come to work not looking like he was happy to be there. Guys don't ask, you know, but we do notice things and try to make room when room is needed. I'd learn that he could afford to go out and buy a Superformance Daytona Coupe, but preferred to buy his tools at Harbor Freight. I'd finally conclude that Alan had some pretty good ups and downs and now wanted to enjoy a peaceful, pheasant retirement lifestyle and was comfortable with me taking the lead on this. After a few years running this car Alan would retire from his late-

in-life racing career, but not until after he'd had a lot of fun and had a chance to race with his son Zep.

Zep was fresh out of high school and attending college when I met him at a Davis Motorsports Club (local club, mostly college students) meeting. He was clearly a car guy with a taste for less conventional fare, such as Fish's 1962 Bel Air, as well as faster cars like the 3000GT he briefly owned. I didn't know it at the time but he had been going to auto-crosses with Alan since he was 15½, mere weeks after he got his learner's permit. He and Alan and brother Lucas had also done a fair bit of kart racing. Still, he was so young and it showed in some of his mannerisms and his tendency for unnecessary drama. On the other hand, he had experience, confidence, and seemed to have a great attitude towards group and team projects. And he had a work ethic. In my mind he still had to convince me he was someone you could hand a car over to and send out into a chaotic and hazardous arena, but we still had plenty of time before the first race, plus I knew having him on the team meant a lot to Alan.

Geoff would join the cause soon after we got the cars. At the time Geoff was the manager of Unitrans, the joint university-city bus service, and was the advisor for the student-run motorsports club. He was already restoring a Porsche 914 in his driveway and had all the fire-breathing tools we lacked, so we'd haul the car over to his house when we needed minor fabrication work done. He also knew a lot more about cars than we did so having him on board was a great help, but it wasn't until we actually got to our first race that we realized what a dynamo he was. Anytime something needed to be done he was the first to jump on it. When things got quiet in our pit he'd head off on his bike to the tower or a trackside location to spot for our driver. As soon as there was a problem on track he'd be the first to report in and get things ready to deal with it. There's no denying that his energy and optimism made a big difference in the outcomes of our races, and once he finally got into the driver's seat that same hustle helped get us our first win.

About a month into the project Bernhard Wagener joined us. He had come to one of the Davis Motorsports Club meetings to tell everyone about his plans to open a karting business in town, but when he overheard me talking about our little project he came over and sat across from me and told me emphatically that he wanted to be a part of it. Bernhard had been in Davis for a while already, trying to get his

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business going at a local kart track. Initially all the signs were encouraging but for one reason or another the final decision to let him set up shop kept getting put off. In the mean time it looked like he'd be more than happy spending his free time racing wrenching with us.

Bernhard brought a lot of valuable experience to the team. For a decade or so in the 1980's and 1990's he had campaigned a car in the Renault Cup series, a solo effort that took him all over Europe. He'd prepare the car himself then throw in his tools and sleeping bag and head off to wherever they were racing that weekend. He'd sleep on the ground next to the car, race, then pack up and return home to look after his karting business and get ready for the next race. He had raced at the Nürburgring, Monte Carlo, and other famous European tracks, and now he wanted to join the Tinyvette effort. Alan and I were a bit awed by this. He had raced, for real. He had built and maintained his own car and handled all of the logistics and costs. He had all of the experience we didn't have, but desperately needed. A few days later, at 9 in the evening, which the best Alan and I could figure was the start of Bernhard's day, he showed up saying "I'm here. Give me something to do." We immediately put him to work.

As for myself, a couple of years earlier I had "quit my boss", as they say, and in effect, walked away from a career in materials science that I loved. With time on my hands and a little money still in the bank I had been looking for a new direction in life when somehow this racing thing snuck in. I had been instructing at track days for a few years but had no plans to move into racing. It was simply too expensive. Then just when track days were beginning to lose their appeal, I got invited to handle the video for a team that had just started racing in Lemons. Of course one thing always leads to another and the following spring I took a seat as an arrive-and-drive. I was hooked. About a week after that was when I suggested the Tinyvette project to Alan.

To finish off the people-part of this chapter I'd like to tell this story. Friday, the night before our first race, we were at dinner together, bonding over food and for once, just sitting down together instead of running all over two counties for parts and crawling all over and under the car trying to put them on. By this time I was clearly the head of this project, and in a weak moment one can sort of think you get to take all the credit. But as I looked around the table I could see there was a lot more talent and experience here than I could ever hope to have. I

thought back over the past couple of months and could see the vital contributions each had made and tried to imagine the contributions they'd be making that coming weekend. Then I thought about Saturday, how once the race started any sense of control I thought I might have would evaporate. Yet, I could also see that we were already a genuine team and that whatever happened after tonight would be dealt with by us as a team. We still had some business to conduct, such as setting the driving order, and I decided then that it was time to start turning some of those decisions over to these guys. They had certainly earned that. I would start the discussion with a few suggestions, preferences, then I'd let them take it from there. Since then that has been our style. We haven't always been able to sit together like that before a race, but once we fired up the car on Saturday morning, it became the team's race, not mine.