

HEMMINGS

# MUSCLE machines

APRIL 2022 ■ No.224



## CORVETTE LEGACY

KEEPING THE FAITH  
WITH A **FATHER/SON**  
RACING DUO

**STROKED CHEVY 348**  
**436-INCH W ENGINE**

**SUPER CAR REUNION!**  
**1/4-MILE ACTION**

**SPEEDWAY SHAPE**  
**'68 CYCLONE 390**

\$4.99 US/\$7.99 CAN





**MODIFIED**



**SPOTLIGHT:**  
Corvettes



**FAMILY**

# **CIRCLE**

FATHER AND SON BUILD RACING MEMORIES IN THIS PAIR OF POTENT PURE STOCK CORVETTES

BY MATTHEW LITWIN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW LITWIN AND BARRY KLUCZYK





## **T**HE ROAR OF HEAVY-BREATHING V-8 ENGINES

and screaming tires searching for traction broke central Michigan's rural silence like a fast-moving summer thunderstorm. Billowing clouds of tire smoke cast temporary shadows, carried east by prevailing winds. For a moment, the cacophony settled before the V-8s awoke again with an unbridled fury of speed. Mere seconds of peace returned, only to have the cycle repeat. And repeat. And repeat yet again.

So much for a quiet Friday morning on the farm fields surrounding a quarter-mile stretch of pavement known as Mid-Michigan Motorplex. Then again, it was hardly a surprise to locals, who have become used to the annual September gathering of the Pure Stock Muscle Car Drags faithful at the storied Stanton facility. It's been happening for nearly three decades. And while the basic formula of the two-day, bragging-rights-only event doesn't change, each year offers an array of memorable moments for competitors.





**ABOVE:** Donny's 1966 convertible is equipped with a factory removable hardtop and sidepipes, though the latter are 2.50-inch aftermarket units fabricated to enhance the L79 engine's breathing.

**OPPOSITE:** The 327-cu.in. engine is a replacement, purpose-built to see track action. Interior is factory stock, though the four-speed is a race-ready aftermarket transmission.

Like the moment Mike Brass, in his 1970 Chevy Corvette LT-1, emerged from a clouded burnout box and lined up against a 1966 Chevy Corvette L79 driven by his father, veteran racer Donny Brass. The brief pause at the Christmas tree effectively closed one chapter of their life together, while simultaneously launching another. The lights came down and off they raced, officially making them fellow competitors. This sort of parent/offspring matchup is far from unique at the Pure Stocks; in fact, they've become a welcome part of the fabric of these events. For the Brass family, this facet of their history commenced in 1968, part of which we recounted in this magazine in 2013 (Weekend Warrior; HMM #115).

"My father Mike thought long and hard about what kind of car he was going to buy; one consideration was a 1967 Pontiac GTO convertible. Instead, he bought this '66 Corvette convertible that became our family car. My sister Suzie and I were both little enough to fit in the cubby behind the seats. That's how we got around as a family until 1970, when we outgrew the car," Donny reminisces.

Fortunately, despite the siblings outgrowing the car, Donny's parents kept the Corvette. Even then, Mike understood the significance of the convertible's factory-installed drivetrain, a 350-hp version of the 327-cu.in. V-8 (also known by its build code, L79) mated to a four-speed manual. Meanwhile, a succession of more spacious vehicles rotated through the family's driveway for daily duty. Suffice it to say, Donny developed a deep respect for the Corvette, with the understanding that, in time, it would eventually be passed down to him. That time came too soon.

"Dad passed when I was 15, and two years later mom gave me the keys and taught me how to drive a manual. I had a lot of respect for it, remembering all that my dad had instilled in me,

so the Corvette was always maintained. Only one year was it my daily driver, and that was when I was 20."

Donny continues, "One day, I ran across a story about the Pure Stock Drags. What stood out to me was that there were a lot of guys racing cars that were worth a lot more than the Corvette, and still having fun doing it. I met Rob Clary, and because of conversations with him and others, I finally decided to give it a try in 2004."

In spite of his willingness to race the prized 'Vette, Donny did take some precautions. "Before I raced the car, I pulled the original drivetrain, stowed it at home, and built a year/model-correct L79 within the Pure Stock rules. Backing it was a close-ratio four-speed and a 4.56:1 rear gearset. My first pass was a 15.60, which seemed slow for the car. Fellow racer Tim Clary [of no relation to Rob] noticed that an incorrect parts-store carburetor baseplate gasket was keeping the secondaries closed. After swapping it out, I ran a 14.26-second ET," Donny says.

Like any racer, Donny kept honing his skills at the track, all while tuning the L79 to maximize performance. By the 2013 season, and with 293 horses at the rear wheels, Donny had recorded





a then-best of 13.04 at 105.03 mph at Mid-Michigan and 12.92 at 105.50 at US 131 Motorsports Park's F.A.S.T. (Factory Appearing Stock Tires) event, as the rules for F.A.S.T.'s Factory Stock category permitted a few simple changes to lower ETs. But also like any racer, that wasn't good enough for Donny.

"In 2014, it was pretty much a stock engine with an 11:1 compression ratio. It was a good build, but it definitely wasn't taking full advantage of the

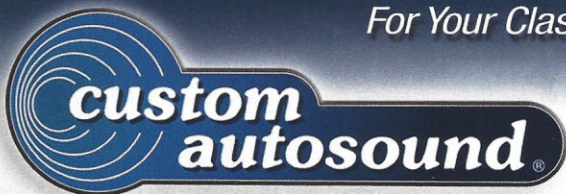
Pure Stock rules. So, in 2015 we built a whole new L79 with 12.5:1 compression," Donny says. The bump in compression is allowed in the Pure Stock rules, but he didn't stop there. "After picking up over a point and a half [in compression], we went with a .450/.450 [inches of lift] camshaft design that fit the compression, then went through everything we could to get it to run better," he explains.

"Next, I tweaked the exhaust. Stock side pipes have an inside diameter of



*OEM fit Radios, Speakers, Kick Panels & More!  
For Your Classic, Custom or StreetRod*

*Since  
1977*



*"Cause you can't Cruise without Tunes"*

**Features all the Modern Technology  
and Sound Quality!**

**Including:**

CD options, USB, BlueTooth connectivity, Aux Ins, Hi Volt  
RCA preouts, Multi Color Digital Display & More!



*Over 500 Applications!*



For A Dealer Near You Call: **800-888-8637** or **customautosoundmfg.com**





**ABOVE:** The 1970 coupe Mike races was a recent acquisition that came with a base 350-cu.in. V-8, but now sports an LT-1. Roof panels are removable, and a factory-stock appearance is maintained.

**OPPOSITE:** A ready-built LT-1 was offered to the Brass family, which set into motion a change of build strategy during 2021. Like his father's car, Mike's 'Vette retains a factory interior.

about 1.75 inches. I installed a new set from Classic Chambered Exhaust that have an inside diameter of 2.50 inches—right at the Pure Stock rule limit—so it breathes a lot better. I'm still running a 4.56 rear gear, but even after the changes I wasn't entirely happy. I don't think I have enough engine to pull a 4.88 gearset, and after talking it over with Owen Simpson (another Pure Stocker), he suggested I swap out my close-ratio manual for a wide-ratio; he runs one in his Yenko Deuce Nova and convinced me to give it a try. I had Auto Gear build me an M23W. It's basically a Muncie 'Rock Crusher' gear cut, but in a wide-ratio format."

The last round of upgrades soon proved worth the effort. "I couldn't believe the difference," Donny says.

"I've not had it on the dyno in a while—I think it's making 338 hp at the rear wheels—but the 'Vette's since run a best of 12.34 at 109.45 under the F.A.S.T. rules. At the Pure Stocks it's done a 12.60 at 110.76. The car is phenomenally efficient; I can drive the car extremely well and so can my son, Mike. There's very little motion wasted, and now that I'm running five or six races annually versus only a couple, I've perfected my launches and power shifting," Donny explains.

As to son Mike's half of the tale, it started at age eight, when Donny began bringing him to the Pure Stock Muscle Car Drags. Right away, young Mike was hooked.

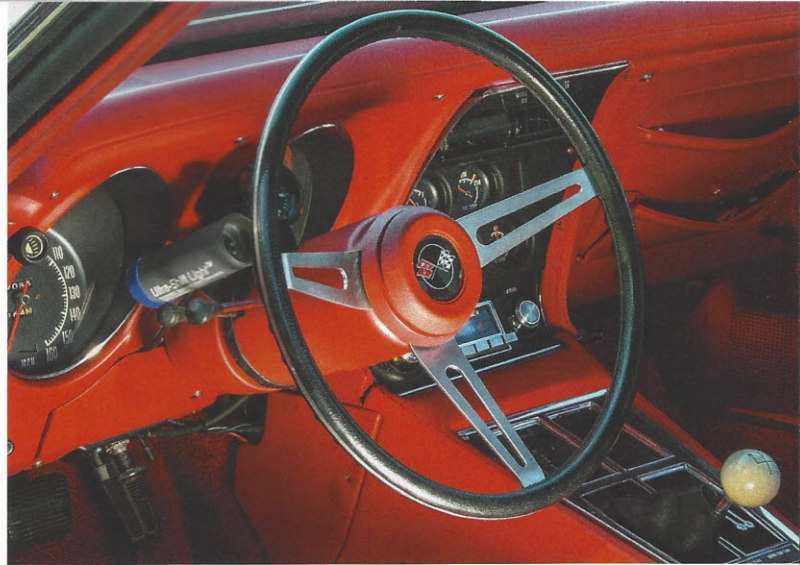
He explains, "From the moment my dad took me to my first race I was a in love. We had always worked on the '66 together prior to that and as soon as I was big enough to hold a wrench I knew I for sure I wanted to get into [cars and racing]. I just didn't know what kind of car at that time. In the meantime, I learned how to drive a stick when I got my driver's permit at age 14. Dad took me up to my high school and let me drive the 'Vette around the parking lot a little bit, and eventually around the paddock at

the races, too, where I could practice launches in a quiet corner."

Mike, named after his grandfather, eventually earned his driver's license and was given his grandmother's car: a 4,000-mile, mint-condition 2004 Chevy Cavalier equipped with... an automatic. It was hardly a "fun" car for a budding racer, so his next set of wheels was a supercharged 2006 Chevy Cobalt SS, with a five-speed manual, though its condition was less than ideal. Rather than race it, Mike instead started honing his quarter-mile skills behind the wheel of Donny's turbocharged 2010 Cobalt. Pure Stock and F.A.S.T. racing were still on the agenda, however.

"There was that stigma that Corvettes were super expensive, and a little bit harder to come by, that's why it took me as long as it did to finally get one. In March 2021, friend and Pure Stock racer Paul Vitale called us to say that we had first right of refusal on his dad's 1970 Corvette that they were selling. It was a basic show-pony, a 350-powered coupe that had a four-speed manual and a 3.70 Posi rear gear, and if I had taken it out in that condition, I would have been knocking out 15 second passes all day long," Mike says.

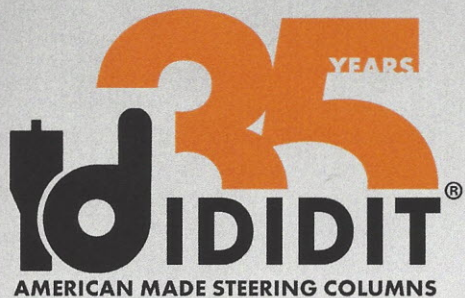
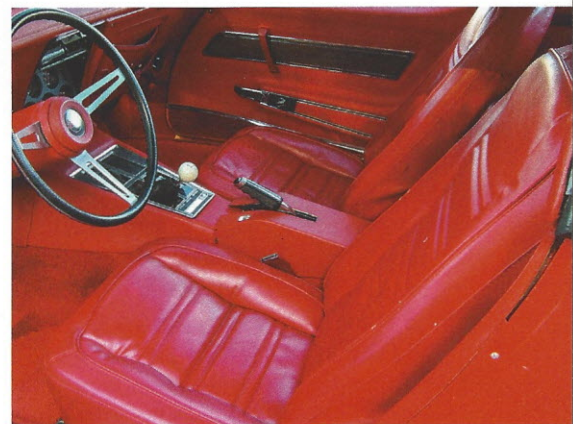




"We bought it with the intention of racing it the way it was, except for just going through everything thoroughly. I had made the promise to my fiancé, Elise, that I wasn't going to get too crazy with it and that was a blatant lie. At that point, the car was kind of hidden at my parent's house — because my dad has a lot more tools than I do — and the first time she came over to see the car, it was already up on jack stands with the entire drivetrain ripped out of it. I think she knew at

that moment I was full of it, which meant I had to explain the LT-1 engine in the corner."

According to Mike, another racer, Ty Taccone, had called to say that he was selling what was a spare LT-1 engine that had been intended for his Camaro. "He cut us a smokin' deal on it, and that's when everything lit up as far as the '70 becoming a full-blown race car. It turned out to be a drop-in-and-go engine, but after talking to a few people we changed the position of



## CELEBRATING 35 YEARS

as your go-to source for American Made, Top Quality Steering Columns and Accessories

### 1965-1969 MUSTANG TILT FLOOR SHIFT



#### COMES WITH:

- American Made Quality
- Lifetime Warranty
- Engineered for Superior Fit and Finish
- Universal, Retrofit, and Custom applications
- Accessories and Install Kits available
- Unrivalled Customer Service and Technical Support
- 8-Position Tilt
- Ford Splined Top Shaft
- Ford Turn Signal Switch
- Ford Style Knobs & Levers
- Model Specific Floor Mount
- Ford Wiring Connectors
- 3/4" -36 Lower Shaft
- Other Accessories Available

#### FLOOR MOUNT



IDIDIT LLC., 610 S. Maumee Street, Tecumseh, MI | 517-424-0577 | ididit.com



the camshaft before installing the V-8 in the car.

"We thought the 'Vette came with a Muncie four-speed, but when we pulled the drivetrain we realized it had a Borg-Warner Super T-10. Rather than try to find a whole new unit, we bought a clutch assembly designed to manage the LT-1's output. Dad and I found a 4.56 Positraction differential, so we swapped that in. Outside of the engine and differential, and a couple minor mechanical components, we just went through everything and made sure it was safe," Mike says.

So, how well did the upgrade work for the newest member of the Pure Stock community?

"My first race with that car was the National Muscle Car Association Power Festival at US 131 Motorsports Park in August 2021. We had some issues with traction—obviously with a brand-new setup we were more worried about power than anything else—and I think it went mid-13s that weekend. Overall, we were pretty happy about the speed; it hit about 108 mph in 102-degree weather that weekend and, coupled with 2.1- and 2.2-second 60-foot times, I was ecstatic. Then we went to the Pure Stocks in September," Mike says, which brings us back to the start of this family story.

"On Friday, during the first run off the trailer, it went a 12.89, I think at 107, but that day started to get a



little hotter and hotter and the cars slowed down quite a bit. Then, on the last pass, I broke the trans, so I didn't get to run my shootout against Jeff Wilkins. Dad's car was hurting, too—his clutch wasn't holding up. Hey, that's racing."

Although winter has curtailed competition for the time being, it hasn't dampened the Brass' racing plans for 2022. With the new transmission installed in Mike's '70, and a clutch assembly in Donny's '66, the father

and son duo have their sights set on several events.

"I'm getting married at the end of October, and I told Elise I'd be slowing down the racing a little bit this year; we'll see though, since I'm not really good about sticking to promises with this car. I plan on being at the Pure Stocks this year for sure and will try to hit as many as the F.A.S.T. races as I can. This has been a dream of mine; to race together was our end goal. Now it's just getting my car ready to try and take down the '66 this year," Mike says.

What does Donny think of that plan? "I've been wanting to race with my son. I want him to have those memories. I want those memories, too, and it turned out pretty good. I got a great deal on the '70 and that car is going to run. I think it's the 15th-quickest small-block already, right out of the gate. We have a lot to learn on it, but it has the potential to be quicker than the '66," says the obviously proud dad, adding, "And I'm okay with that." ■



Friday's open-style qualifying at the Pure Stock Drags means competitors can stage against friends or family at will. With no limitations on passes, seeing Donny and Mike sprint down the strip was a regular occurrence.