

HOW DUTCH DARRIN BEAT THE CHEVY CORVETTE

Story by Larry Edsall
Photos by Randall Bohl



The Chevrolet Corvette certainly is America's most popular fiberglass-bodied sports car, but it wasn't the first. The Kaiser Darrin beat it to the street by one month.

For one model year only—1954—Kaiser built 435 fiberglass-bodied Darrin sports cars in its warehouse turned assembly plant in Jackson, Mich. The car was designed by and named for Howard "Dutch" Darrin, a famed automobile stylist who had conceived of the car's most unique feature—pocket doors that slid forward into the front fenders—nearly two decades earlier.

The Darrin also featured a three-position convertible top that could be opened, closed or erected landau style over the rear section of the passenger compartment.

Lee Abrahams of Tucson has owned two of those 435 Darrins, and he and his brother, Gary, brought one of them to the Goodguys Rod & Custom Association's inaugural Spring Nationals show at the WestWorld show grounds in mid-March.

The Spring Nationals was the Goodguys second visit to Scottsdale within just four months. For the last dozen years, the world's largest hot rod and custom car club has concluded its 20-some event, coast-to-coast car show season with the Southwest Nationals at WestWorld. The event has been so popular—with some 3000 classic cars, their owners and admirers turning out—that it only made good sense to start the year here as well.

The inaugural Spring Nationals included two special features: an autocross to prove that hot rods and classic cars are meant for go as well as for show, and the unveiling of a brand new and one-of-a-kind vintage-looking Ford Mustang that someone will win when the Goodguys return in November for the 13th Southwest Nationals (see sidebar, following page).

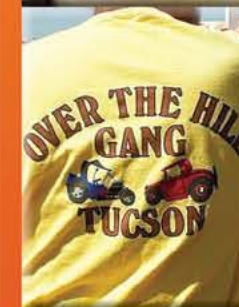


The Abrahams' bright red Kaiser Darrin has been in the family since 1965. Their brothers' sister drove it for several years while she attended San Diego State University. Afterward, the brothers thought about restoring the car, but with growing young families, they opted to put the Darrin in storage and spend their money instead on a boat so all family members could share in an activity.

Families grown, the brothers took the Darrin out of storage 8 ½ years ago and began not just to restore the car but to give it a hot-rodded powertrain transplant



ENTHUSIASTS SHOW THEIR COLORS, ON COTTON AND STEEL



BOSS SNAKE GOODGUYS GIVEAWAY CAR



In the 1960s, Ford Motor Co. commissioned a pair of what were known as the "QuarterHorse" Mustangs. Built by Kar Kraft, Ford's skunkworks race shop, the cars were conceived as a possible replacement for the Boss 429 and the Shelby Mustangs.

Now there's a third such car, though this one is called the Boss Snake and while you can't buy it, you can win it.

The Boss Snake was commissioned not by Ford but by the Goodguys Rod & Custom Association, the world's largest hot rod and custom car club. The Boss Snake was unveiled at the Spring Nationals held March 12-14 at WestWorld and will be displayed at each Goodguys gathering this year. Spectators at the various events can register to win the car at a drawing to be held when the 2010 season ends back in Scottsdale in November at the club's 13th Southwest Nationals.

The original QuarterHorse Mustangs both still exist and are owned by classic car collectors. Both were based on 1970 Boss 429 Mustangs, but with the front clip from Carroll Shelby's version of the car, though without the hood scoop Shelby added. The original cars also had dashboards taken from the Mercury Cougar.

The first car was painted Grabber Blue. Its engine was switched out for a 429 SC motor and was sent to Hollywood where it starred with Burt Reynolds in the television series Dan August.

The second car was Candy apple Red and also was powered by the SCJ engine.

The new car was built by the RPM hot rod shop in Warrendale, Pa. The Goodguys sent the shop a brand new but 1969 Mustang fastback-style sheetmetal body by Dynacorn. The package also includes a Jon Kaase-built, 520-cubic-inch, 770-horsepower Boss V8. Other components include Ride Tech suspension with Chris Alston components, one-off Intro wheels, Baer six-piston brakes with 14-inch rotors, Classic Instruments gauges, a custom exhaust that RPM built with Stainless Works and Flowmaster parts, a Tremec Magnum six-speed gearbox, and an RPM custom interior.

Suppliers for the project include Kicker, Ring Brothers, Flaming River, Ricks Stainless Tanks, Holley, Drivelines Inc., Chassisworks, PRC, Painless wiring, PPG, Optima batteries, BFGoodrich, Peak Antifreeze, Herculiner, Meguiars and Vintage Air.

According to RPM's website, "We had to remove the stock firewall and move it back and raise the transmission tunnel to fit the massive engine in there.

"In the rear, we removed the stock wheel tubs and fabricated our own so we could fit in a nice wide tire under the car. We then stretched the rear wheel opening out .75 inch to help get the tire tucked up tight under the body and give the car an aggressive appearance."

Instead of using the full Dynacorn sheetmetal, the front end is a "fiberglass Shelby-style clip," says RPM, which also installed a Shelby taillight panel, rear deck lid and spoiler. "With all of this custom work on the outside, we just couldn't leave the inside of the car alone," RPM continues. "We constructed a complete custom dash and fabricated all of the interior panels."

For more information on the contest, visit www.good-guys.com.

To see photos of the car's build at RMP, visit its website, www.rpm-hotrods.com.

— Larry Edsall



while bringing its visual appearance back to original condition.

With the hood closed, the car looks like any brand-new 1954 Darrin. But open the hood and there's a 502-cubic-inch Chevrolet Ram Jet V8 linked to a 700R4 automatic transmission and a nine-inch Ford rear end.

"We probably pulled the [one-piece fiberglass] body off thirty or forty times [during their seven-year restoration effort]," Lee Abrahams said.

The Darrin was produced with an in-line six-cylinder Willys engine. Fortunately, Lee said, he was able to find a plastic version of the Ram Jet engine block that he easily manipulate as he fashioned new mounts and repositioned things such as the radiator so he could insert the big V8 to the Darrin's small chassis. The car is built on a modified version of the Kaiser Henry J frame.

The biggest challenge, Abrahams said, was making sure there was enough clearance between the car's hood and the engine's injection system, that and fitting the exhaust headers and pipes beneath the fiberglass bodywork so the car still looks box stock.

To keep the car looking stock, the Abrahams left in the original clutch pedal, even though they installed an automatic transmission.

Another big issue was finding parts they needed, especially those made from rubber, which had deteriorated after years of storage in Arizona's desert heat.

"You can't go to the local auto parts store and say 'I need parts for a Kaiser Darrin'," Lee said.

He found many parts he and his brother needed through the Kaiser Fraser Owners Club. But when no one had the rubber grommet he needed to go around the gas filler pipe, Lee Abrahams started contacting rubber parts manufacturers.

"I sent drawings to 15 rubber companies," he said.

Two that responded wanted to know how many thousand he would be ordering.

"I was thinking 10," he said, adding that was 10 units, not 10 thousand.

Finally, one company agreed to produce a couple hundred of the grommets, which Abrahams now sells to others through the Kaiser Fraser owners club.

Two months ago at these same WestWorld grounds, two Darrins sold at the Barrett-Jackson collector car auction. One went for \$101,200. The other, which was equipped with a supercharged six-cylinder engine—which Darrin himself added to several cars after Kaiser ended sales with 50 cars yet to find owners—brought \$220,000. Vintage car pricing guides list Darrins between \$40,000 and \$140,000, depending on condition. Brand new, the factory price on a 1954 Darrin was \$3,655.

As I wrote earlier, this bright red Darrin was Lee Abrahams' second. He bought his first when he was a 15-year-old high school student back in his native Cleveland. His family moved to Tucson two years later, in 1963. The family owned and operated a gas station and car wash in Tucson for many years.

Lee Abrahams souped-up that first Darrin as well. He installed a fuel-injected big block V8 and turned it into a drag racing special. Competing at Tucson and Phoenix, the powerful but lightweight fiberglass-bodied sports car and its young

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Photo: Larry Edsall



1948 Diamond T belonging to Mike Kane of Carefree (above). 1929 Mercury-based hot rod belonging to Rick Nantais of Dream Field Toy Factory in Apache Junction (below).

Photos: Joe Sage (2)



Photos: Randall Bohl (4)



This 1936 Dodge Coupe in Exotic Light Orange Pearl (above) belongs to Jim and Bonnie Ford of Lake Havasu City and is powered by a 1958 392 Hemi, with a Dodge Dakota front end and 9" Ford rear. All work was done by the owners at their home. The beautiful bare metal 1965 Shelby Cobra 427 5-speed (below) belongs to Wes Henderson of Phoenix.

Photo: Randall Bohl



driver turned the quarter-mile in 9.5 seconds at a top speed of 150 miles per hour.

With family life approaching, "I sold the car 30 years ago," Abrahams said.

But, family now grown, he found his original Darrin through Kaiser Fraser club members. The car was in Florida. Abrahams has reacquired it and plans to restore it to racing condition in time for the 2011 Kaiser Fraser club convention.

Let's hope he finishes in time for the 2nd annual Goodguys' Spring Nationals next March at WestWorld.

(Writer's note: I focus in this article on the Abrahams brothers, but could just as well have written about how Mike Kane, who restores vintage motorcycles in Carefree, needed a truck to haul those bikes and went onto the Internet, found a 1948 Diamond T in Texas, brought it to Arizona and has turned it into a customized dazzler, or how Rick Nantais, who remembers it being 50 degrees below zero when he was running a car dealership in Sudbury, Ontario—some 300 miles north of Toronto—moved 25 years ago to Apache Junction, where his Dream Field Toy Factory does hot rod and custom cars, including the stunning 1929 Mercury-based hot rod that he finished just the day before the Spring Nationals began. That's the thing about such classic car shows—every car and every car owner has a story, and often a wonderfully heartwarming story, to tell.) ■

After working as a sports editor for daily newspapers in Michigan, **LARRY EDSALL** was on staff for 12 years at *AutoWeek*, most of it as managing editor. He has driven more than half a million miles testing cars on four continents. He helped launch www.izoom.com and also helped found PAPA, the Phoenix Automotive Press Association. His books include *Masters of Car Design (Genius)*, *Miata 20 Years* and his eleventh, *Camaro: A Legend Reborn*, all available at amazon.com.

