

Decisions

"A story of evolution"

You would think a story begins at the beginning. Sometimes they don't. This is one of them. When you are racing you spend a lot of time on the road driving to and from the race track. As I stare out the windscreen usually my mind is thinking about the tune up or new things to try to get more power or consistency for my race car. On one trip I was reflecting on just how it was that I got here. How well was it planned or did I just end up here drifting like a leaf on the water. How do any of us get here?

Usually a person has a car and decides to go drag racing just to see how well his car will run. They will take it to a test and tune or a street meet and make a few passes down the track. They want a time slip just to show how quick it really is. This evolves to making changes to improve the cars performance to get a quicker time slip. The changes get bigger and bigger in a quest for a quicker time slip. How do I know this? It happened to me and many of my friends. We took our cars that we drove to high school to the race track on Saturday night so we could outperform someone else at the school and brag about it on Monday. If we got outperformed then the other guy must have cheated. Oh well, it was great fun and it taught us a lot. We learned what made the car go faster and what didn't. It taught us how to do careful testing and analysis. It made us think. The quest for more power or performance led many of us to the same conclusion. I was sitting in school one day thinking about my car instead of what was going on in class. I was considering buying a set of fiberglass fenders for my 55 Chevy. I knew removing weight from the car would improve the performance of the car since I had removed everything not **absolutely** necessary to drive the car on the street. The changes bordered on the illegal but hopefully not the unsafe. I had put a roll cage in the car so some thought was given to safety..

This was a very long time ago and I won't tell you how much the fenders were going to cost but suffice it to say they were a week's wages each. As I sat there and pondered the decision, the catalogue I was looking at (instead of school books) had 23 T bodies for sale. They were 3 weeks wages. I really enjoyed racing my 55 Chevy because it was pretty quick and looked pretty good. She had a small block Chevy with two 4 barrel carburetors on a progressive linkage, a fuel injection flat tappet Corvette cam that required enough valve lash that the engine sounded like a sewing machine, a Mallory dual point that would never stay in

adjustment, and a Muncie 4 speed and a Posi-traction 4.10 rear gear with a set of "Cheater" slicks. For the new guys, "Cheater" slicks were very soft compound street tires with a minimum of tread, just enough to pass DOT (Department of Transportation) regulations. My car was white with red stripes and my good friend Danny McCord's 55 Chevy was dark metallic blue and a little bit quicker than my car (he had a bigger engine). My other friend Dallas Hall's 55 Chevy was mint green with black primer spots. There was a new Clint Eastwood movie out at the time and we named our cars after the movie. The Good, The Bad and The Ugly. You figure out which one was which. Now back to the fenders. I sat there pondering the decision. Two weeks wages was a lot of money then, or now. I really liked my 55 and could not see myself driving anything else. My 55 was not just a car, it was me, it was my identity. There was a small dark cloud on the horizon though. The more I hopped the 55 up and the quicker it went, the more parts it broke, and the more I walked or borrowed Mom's car. How humiliating driving Mom's car. Broken drive shafts. Broken transmissions. Broken rocker arms (this was before roller rockers). Broken diffs. I put up with the broken parts only because I thought I had to. Every time I fixed it I *knew* the problem was taken care of. I was wrong. When you are 17 your are wrong a lot you but just do not realize it until later when you look backwards over time. I endured all this pain only because I thought I had to. I had not considered the options, I had not been making good decisions.

I wanted to go quicker and faster and the fiberglass fenders seemed like such a good idea. A bigger more powerful engine was an option but that made the fiberglass look cheap by comparison. As I sat there an idea came to me. Lateral thinking they call this. If I wanted a quicker car (which I did) why have a car with fenders at all? There was no mud or water on the race track so why did I need fenders ? Now let's take this thinking process all the way to the end. What was the *minimum* I needed to build a car with? Instead of starting with a pile of parts that I was driving down the road everyday and taking things off or replacing them with expensive fiberglass, start with a minimum of parts and don't buy *anything* I did not need to get to the finish line. This allowed me to spend every dollar on something that would make me go quicker. Why not start with a clean piece of paper and new ideas?

In the fiberglass catalogue the 23 T body sparked an idea. I could get some pipe and make a tube chassis and put the 23 body on it and it would weigh *nothing* compared to the 55 Chevy. I could take the engine out of the 55 and put it in the 23. Then I could put a more street able engine in the 55, which would be reasonably inexpensive, and drive it every day and keep the car I love so much. Having the two cars would be so much cheaper, I could stop borrowing Mom's car and I would have a very fast race car as well. All my friends had a quick street cars at the time and by me building the 23 T Altered I would have the quickest car of them all. Why did I not think of this sooner? School would be out in a few weeks and I could build it over the summer when I was not working.

Fast forward a few months and now the 23 T body was sitting on the new tube chassis almost ready for the engine. The 23 T bodies available at the time were

just street rod replacement bodies. There were no wheel arches cut in the body for the narrowed diff and we had to make a cover to go over the top to keep the air out. What a lot of extra work. The new Bob Dylan song, "Lay, lady lay", was on the radio. For me this song is forever connected to my first race car. It was the end of September 1966 and the new 67 Chevilles' were just on the show room floor. Every year the car makers were trying to outperform the other and the production cars were getting quicker and more powerful. One of my friends, Tommy Richardson, had come in to be a partner on the 23. I had pulled the quick engine out of the 55 and put a near stock in the 55 so I could drive it on the street. Funny, even with the near stock engine the 55's reputation was still intact and I was still getting guys making comments about the car. Most of them knew the killer engine was back in the shed and could go in the car at any time. I was not looking back though, as I wanted to get the 23 going because I knew it was going to run so much faster than the 55 ever could. I wanted to have the quickest car in town.

The progress on the 23 was going well but as soon as we finished a part on the car I would think of a much better way to do it. We decided that, "Oh well it will still work, lets just get it done so we can race it". There were no race car shops just down the road or parts catalogues with "hard core" race parts like tabs, brackets, or pre-made seats available at the time. We had to make **everything** and it took a lot of time and a lot of mistakes to get it right. One evening Tommy and I were working on the 23 and the parade of interested friends continued to stream through the shop. One of our friends who had taken a keen interest to what we had been doing had caught the bug and had the same idea we had. He asked me, "How much would you charge to build me a car just like this one?" The next day he was rolling his new car out of our shed and Tommy and I were starting on another one. A better one. The second one Tommy and I actually got to race. The agreement was we would take turns driving. Our good friend Joe Lindsey had a near new 65 Plymouth Belvedere with a tow hitch on the back and we talked him into letting us install a bracket under the front of his car so we could slide the push bar on to push the car to a start with. The race cars of the day did not have starters or batteries on board and the norm at the time was to push start them. I think this idea actually came from the sprint car guys who still push their cars to a start. We knocked together a trailer spending as little money as we could (bad idea) and Joe would tow our race car to the track for us while we slept in the back seat. This was only because we had stayed up for 3 days getting the car ready. This was not bad planning; we just did not know what we were doing. We were running on enthusiasm, pure adrenalin.

The first race with the new car I asked Tom if he wanted to drive today and he said, "No, you drive this time and I will drive the next". So I got to drive. At the next race I presumed he was going to drive but he again said "Go ahead today and drive I'll do it next week". Except for the skid on the road in front of the shop he never drove it. We raced at least once a week sometimes twice a weekend. Saturday night at Clay City and Sunday afternoon at Blue Grass Drag way in Lexington, Ky. Things rapidly changed as the carburetors came off and the fuel

injection went on. Then the dual point distributor left and a mag went in. By May 1967 we were running 9.70s with the 23 T altered car when the US Army wanted to give me a fully paid tropical holiday. How could I refuse an offer like that? I took my parts off the car, and Tommy took his parts, and we sold the car because of my impending holiday, the future was so uncertain. We had a very good time racing this car, we learned a lot and met a lot of nice people. People I am still friends with today 30 years later. For me it was the beginning of the greatest set of experiences of my life. I had set in place so many opportunities that would not have been possible any other way. Not just racing either. This set in place the chain of events that saw me meet my wife and wind up living in Australia. This would not have been possible any other way.

Decisions are a funny thing you never know how they will affect you in the long run. When I was in high school all I ever wanted to do was race my car or work on it. In order to graduate from school I had to get a few more credits. I had all the required minimum courses done, though some just barely passing! So I had to take some more from the electives and I did not want to have to take something that might give me homework so I took typing course. This guaranteed no home work from this class. Now this was well and truly before computers so I was homework safe. Here it is a few decades later and computers are everywhere and so are key boards and I can type pretty well and is it ever handy. You just never know where a decision will take you. Make your decisions good ones. Many times what you think is a small decision can become a very large one much later as you add the multiple effect of time. Do you have a future in Championship Drag Racing ? You can if you want it, you can have it, just chase your dream. Try to make good decisions, though only time will tell just how good they are. If you want to be successful pick a path through life and stick to it.

Ken Lowe Race Cars is just a natural progression from those humble beginnings. I still build race cars, getting hands on with the welder and the mills and lathes, but now concentrate mostly on design work, thinking of new ways to go quicker and faster and win more races. Besides supplying complete new cars, we supply a lot of hardware and advice to individuals to make their job of building their race car easier. This is something I needed with my first car 30 years ago but there was no one around to help me. I want to make the job easier for someone else to build their race car. For *you* to build *your* car. By the way I supply *drag race* 23 T bodies with wheel arches, filled tops with windscreens molded in and extended cowls and extended sides. You see, I already know what you are going to need on your race car.

Take a look at where you are with your car today. Are you where I was with my 55 Chevy ? Closely examine where you want to go with drag racing. If you want to pursue a career in Championship Drag Racing then look forward five years or more. Will your present car or plans take you where you want to be ? Maybe you need a dedicated race car and not just race your street car. Tommy nor I could have afforded to build the cars that we built together, but as a team we did. Neither one of us was selfish and was willing to share the expenses as well as the fun. Partnerships are a very good way for two people to do something that

neither one could do by themselves. The tricks to a good long lasting partnerships are written agreements, understanding and co-operation. It is best if you do not get money mixed up. Instead of both of you owning a particular part of the car then you should each own a list of individual parts with an agreement that if the part becomes damaged then each will share the cost of replacement or repair. The agreements should have a life span usually one year at a time and the agreement must be reconsidered each year. If the agreement is not agreed upon then each party takes his list of parts and goes his own way. If that happens I find that by this time each party will purchase the additional parts to assemble his own race car with and start racing by themselves. Agreements should state team objectives and plans so everyone understands what planned objectives are. In other words are you just going to run some local races and have some fun or do you plan to make a challenge to the National Championships. Do you plan on travelling ? Lay out detailed plans so there are no surprises to anyone. Even if you want to change the plans later, you can decide to agree to them at that time. Several partnerships I have known have lasted 12 to 15 years and have won several World Championships. I know these guys and individually they could not have done it but by pooling talent and money they achieved much more as a team than they could have done alone. The best agreements have an understanding of what the start of the agreement is and then an understanding of how it will work once the car is together and racing and then if it does not work out what is the procedure for breaking up. A good partnership is a lot like a good marriage there are many similarities. Honesty and kindness all go a long way. If this appeals to you then go in search of someone who wants to do the same thing. Just remember you won't find them at the beach or a night club, you will find them at the race track because they will have the same passion that you do..

By the way, I still have the little Moon fuel tank off the 23 and it has a place of honor in the lounge room now, along with my NHRA "Oscars" and other awards and memorabilia. For me that fuel tank is priceless. It is a constant reminder of where I came from and where I have been.

See you at the races and I hope to meet you in the finals because if I do then we both did well....