

Cold Sweat Running Down The Middle Of Your Back...

What might happen given the wrong set of circumstances...

I'm not sure when I first began street racing, but that's really not important. What does matter why I stopped. So that's why I shake as I write this... because had I not been there, I never would have believed it. You see, street racing isn't always as glorious as it seems...

It was a warm spring day, nothing like the nasty wintry weather causing flight delays and school cancellations of this past week. Early May I think. My buddy Rick called me that afternoon to see if I could lend him a hand.

"Hey Mark - ya doin' anything?" Of course, for me to even answer the phone implied to Rick that I wasn't busy, so it was just a rhetorical question.

"Nah... not really. Just waxing the ride. What's up?" I mumbled into the cordless phone cradled on my chin, my right hand busy buffing the dried wax off of the hood of the Buick.

"Well, I was wondering if you could give me hand sliding the motor back into my Mustang this afternoon. I got the heads back on a few minutes ago and by the time you get your lazy butt over here, I should be ready to drop it back into the engine bay. Can you break yourself away from the Zaino for a while?"

He was always jealous how wet my paint always looked and yet he never (and I mean NEVER) took the time to polish his own car, a '93 Cobra that he had been building to the hilt.

Oh sure - he had the mechanicals down pat, but he always said he was going to paint it "next year" and still hadn't. It wasn't that the teal color wasn't cool, but with his neglect it was slowly turning into a muddy blue with some nicks and scratches that could not just be ignored.

"Ok... I'll be over about 5 or so."

"Cool... see ya then!" Click.

I went back to taking off the rest of the polish, lost in thought about last night's date with my girlfriend. Wow! Now there's a chick to take home to Momma! Not only is she a hottie, but she loves fast cars - especially my car, an '87 WE4. I bought this car new, just out of high school. It has been with me through triumph and disaster, marriage then divorce, searches and discoveries, thick and thin... But it still is my favorite car of all times.

I just love how when I pull into a gas station and nearly every pair of eyes look over it's sleek, muscular lines. Or the stares it gets from behind as they look at the Drag Radials tucked beneath the wheelwells, the dual exhaust jutting out behind the tires. And my favorite part is when they ask "What's she got in her? A Big Block?" and then I just smile and say "Nah, it's just a V6." They usually just drop their jaw and say "REALLY?!" and walk away shaking their head.

Well, after a few hours of wrenching, skinning some knuckles, some burgers and fries, and more skinned knuckles, we finally got Rick's motor tucked into between the shock towers. I will definitely give Rick credit - the guy can build a Blue Oval motor. This one was no exception, beginning life as an SVO 351 having every possible bolt on including a stroker kit, a Vortech and followed up with a bulletproof driveline, it definitely is going to be a killer car.

Rick is a street racer - nothing more, nothing less. And, he's good at it. He doesn't run his mouth, he knows the right bait to use, and the boy can drive a car. I don't know of anyone who can shift like Rick can and he does NOT lift the throttle. He has never missed a shift since I've known him and that's been for over 6 years now. He and I have raced several times, and he's won some, I've won some. We respect each other's car a lot and have kind of settled into a very comfortable friendship based on mutual respect.

I leaned back against the workbench, a shop towel hanging loosely in my right hand as I tried to shrug away the tension in my shoulders from leaning over the fender too long.

"It looks good, Rick... real good." The fluorescent lights overhead gleamed off the polished aluminum intake we had just finished tightening up to blower outlet pipe.

"Yeah... I think it ought to be low 11's easily. Hopefully, it will hook. What do you think?"

All I could do was nod, but I noticed something outside his garage door and looked past him and said "If you don't get a high 10 once you've got it dialed in, I'll buy you dinner." There was a dark car driving slowly by that I thought I had seen earlier in the evening but this time it was stopped right at the end of the driveway.

Rick turned and looked out to see what I was staring at. "Friends of yours?" he asked, noticing it was another TR. This car I had never seen before. Oddly, it had a very strange exhaust, sounding like an open setup running straight off a big turbo. "Nope, I don't know the car. But let's go see what's up."

As we walked out the door into the cooling night air, the car sped away. Hmmmm... I began to think back to a couple of weeks ago when Rick and I were up in the district trying to get a street race for his Cobra when it still had the nitroused 5.0 in it. The action was really thin that night, but there were a couple of guys that had walked over to look at Rick's car and wanted him to pop the hood. He asked them what they had and they said a "Cobra Killer". Rick, being cool and all just said "Yeah, right. That's what they all say."

The shorter one of the two, exhibiting an extreme case of SMS (Short Man Syndrome - all mouth with no a\$\$ to back it up) lit off immediately. "Hey man! Why you dissin' my ride? Huh?" Rick just looked at him like something you might find on the bottom of your shoe and said "Go get it."

The punks just laughed then and said "Oh we know where you live man. When we're ready, we'll let you know. I'll tell you this - the plate says 'SNK KLR' and that's all you see besides the tail lights. You've been warned."

So now, as I watched the TR pull away I saw the plate - SNK KLR. Yep, this was it. Oddly, I think from the sound of the car and the not so subtle whistle, he might be right. If this car was as quick as it was good looking and sounding, it probably was a high 10 second ride...

"That's the Mexican dude from down at Sonic that night" I said. Rick nodded agreement. We watched the taillights disappear around the corner and still, from three blocks away, could hear the demonic whistle as the turbo spooled up. "I want to run that guy so bad" murmured Rick. "Yeah, I know. But you're still a long way from being ready."

We listened as the exhaust slowly left our ears to be replaced with the sounds of the suburbs settling in for the evening. Somewhere, someone was grilling out because the scent of BBQ sauce sizzling on top of some good beef hung in the air. Kid's voices were heard, mingled with complaints of "But, I don't want to come in yet.." as Moms called in their charges to get ready for bed. Yep... spring was in the air heavy that night.

"Hey... let's take your car and run down to Autozone" said Rick. "What for?" I need to get some more zip strips to tie up that harness and besides, you haven't had me in your car since you put that Tripodi Alcohol system on it."

"Ok... but I just waxed it, so don't be getting your greasy butt all over my paint. And put a blanket down on the seat too!" Rick laughed out loud, knowing that I was dead serious. I wanted my car to look as mean as it is and I wasn't gonna let his disdain of wax bother me. So, out we went...

As Rick was paying for his package of Zip Strips at the counter, I heard a familiar whistle over the noise of a customer talking about needing a part for something or other, and the acne faced kid trying to explain that he had to have at least some idea as to what kind of problem the guy was having to offer his advice. It was then that I saw the distinctive squared headlights pull up outside, right next to my car. Then, the other TR backed up into another parking place and sat there idling... parking lights only on... mumumumumumumumum... ssssSSSSSSsss.....mumumumumumumumumumum.... Sounds of a heavily built Turbo Buick breathing deeply...

I nudged Rick to look outside. "It's him. Let's go." I nodded and we both walked out and headed over to what has to be the most awesome silhouette in all of the automotive world

- a Turbo Buick. We both stepped around to the driver's window, the cool night air dipping down my shirt collar as I wished I had grabbed my sweatshirt off the back seat. "And?" was all I said as I raised my eyebrows...

"Where's the Garter Snake?" mocked the short guy with noticeably bad teeth. The smell of burnt rope wafted out of the open driver's window, Eminem strangely enough turned down on some high dollar aftermarket stereo with dancing EQ lights visible in the dark interior. "You know" Rick said, "I haven't said one bad thing about your car. Actually, it's pretty cool. But buddy - your attitude sucks. Tell you what - look me up next weekend and I'll be ready. But bring some cash cause I don't run for free."

"I've got 7 bills that says you will see my taillights" coughed the short man in the wicked car, "but you got to run me tonight. I'm ah, shall we say 'going away' tomorrow and I won't be back for a while. Everyone says you've got the car to beat so I want your ass tonight."

"Look, Napoleon (the humor was lost on the Mexican) - my car isn't ready, so go play somewhere else. I told you - I'll run you next week, but not tonight."

The wildly dilated pupils looked odd in the street light as the driver looked right at me. "How 'bout you, pretty boy? Wanna run a real car? Or is yours just for show?" a comment which he and his two buds found hysterical for some strange reason.

"Run you? Tonight? I wouldn't waste my time" knowing that this would definitely get some sort of reaction. Well, it did - but not what I expected. "Tell you what, I'll offer you the same deal - 7 big ones, all or nothing. Your buddy can even hold the money."

Hmmm.. I don't even have \$700 just laying around that I could afford to lose, but then - who said I would lose?

"Ok... follow us" I said. "Nah man... you got it wrong" mumbled bad teeth again. "We're not going out in the country to your spot. Un-uh! YOU follow ME." I looked at Rick and he could see I was pissed. The cool air again wafted down my shirt collar again and I paused - something was wrong....

You see, I'm not into street races as much as Rick is. To me, they're too dangerous. Oh, I'll pick my battles but I only run in deserted areas but I had a feeling that this nut wasn't as selective. "Where we going if I agree?" I asked. "Over on Secor, behind the mall" he smirked. "No cops there, just some straight streets with a half mile between stop lights. Chicken?" he smirked again. Damn - I hate smirks.

I thought for a moment... at this late hour, it would probably be ok. So, I agreed.

"Ya sure ya wanna do this?" asked Rick as we followed SNK KLR through town. "Yeah" I said - "It'll be over in 11 seconds anyways and I'll be \$700 richer!" We finally pulled

into the now empty mall parking lot to make some adjustments and to give Rick the money.

"Ok, here's the deal. We start down there at the light at Secor and Short Streets. The end of this parking lot is exactly 1/4 mile away from that stop light and that street light over there is the "finish" line. Got it?" I shuddered again as I felt a cold hand in the small of my back. Something (or someONE?) was trying to tell me something was wrong here... but I couldn't figure it out just what it was.

I had popped the hood and set up the fuel pressure 4#, dialled up the thumbwheel to my race setting, looked and made sure there was plenty of alcohol in the reservoir, cranked up the boost rod the right amount to give me 26psi, and then closed the hood. I lowered the air pressure to ~17psi in the Nitto's, popped the cap off the dump tube (don't you hate laying on damp pavement to do that?) and then said "I'm ready" as I stood back up. "Let's go" was all he said as he slid beneath the seat. And the cold hand in the middle of my back that now felt like it was turning to ice. What did it mean?

I followed his car down the street to an Arby's and turned around. As we circled through the lot, I saw several people looking at the two TR's motoring through and noticed that a few cars followed us out, one beeping the horn wildly as if he wanted to wake the dead, the driver leaning out and shouting what must have been words of encouragement - in Spanish of course - to the Mecican dude. Well, either that or he was commenting on how well waxed MY car was...

The intersection where it all went down was empty. It was two intersecting four lane streets and well lit, as well as having street lights placed all the way down as far as I could see. The mall parking lot was on my left, I was in the left lane, and a housing edition was on the right, albeit with only one access street about half way down this makeshift quarter mile.

I remember looking at my Indiglo watch - 10:13PM. No traffic on this side (the back side) of the mall. We pulled up to the light just as it turned red for our lanes and waited... a very cold bead of sweat began to trickle down my back, slowly freezing nerve endings along it's way.... I was hunched up over the wheel, my left foot planted firmly on the brake, the boost gauge easily visible on the A pillar and slowly rising as my right foot began to massage the pedal beneath it. Rick and the other guy were at the far end of the parking lot (the 'finish line') waiting to see who got there first. I noticed a Mall maintenance truck swooping about the lot at the far end... some sort of street sweeper.

2psi... 4psi... on the boost gauge. I could feel my car began to sit up... The shrill whistle of the other TR was easily heard over mine... 6psi... The lights for the cross traffic were now yellow. 8psi... 9psi... The brakes on my car were groaning, the 3000 rpm stall converter was fully loaded... The K&N was sucking in huge volumes of air, cleaning it and sending it through the MAF and into the voracious throat of the Turbo to be compressed before snaking through the IC and being swallowed into the huge throttle body....

Yellow... Yellow... Red.... GREEN!

I sidestepped the brake pedal perfectly, but the other TR was away and had a lead of almost half a car before the 1-2 shift came up. Damn! I definitely had my hands full this time...

You know... often when things happen time seems to slow down. Even though events might occur in just seconds, to the brain it may be as if it took minutes. What happened after the 1-2 shift was one of those times....

I never race with the stereo on - except that night. Just as the light blinked "Green" for us to go, one of my favorite songs came on - "Bad to the Bone". George and the Destroyers... but what was odd, was that it seemed to be playing at about half speed. That's what time does when things go wrong... it slows down so you can see clearly what you did wrong. Or - what the other guy did wrong....

After the hard shift of the 1-2, I began to pull even with the other TR. Cool alcohol was being injected into the intake to offset the high boost/low octane fuel and helped to make insane horsepower. God, I love the thrust of torque...

"...nurses all gathered round and gazed in wide-eyed wonder..." George was singing but it sounded like Darth Vader's voice....

I watched the reflection of the passing street lights shimmer and dance off the sides of the other Buick as we went beneath them. Icy fingers now were holding the base of my spine...

"...the head nurse spoke up - said 'Leave this one alone!'"

As we raced toward the half way point, I felt those icy fingers pulling at my back. It was then, during those slow motion moments that I saw the glare from some headlights begin to illuminate the road from the side road out of the housing plat to my right. Oh my God! Don't let a car pull out!

"...she could tell right away - I was bad to the bone..."

Some people can look back over their lives and see moments when they made the right decision. The times when you asked your girl to marry you. That house you put in the low bid for and they surprisingly took it. When you accepted the new job. Other times, you can see the errors you made - clearly, concisely, obviously. That night was my error... I knew I shouldn't be here, at this spot, at this time... I just KNEW it.

As slowly as it seems to watch the sun cross the sky, I saw a small white car approach the intersection that two TR's were going to cross at high speed. Had the driver of that white car stopped, nothing would have happened. Had we not been racing and going almost 90

miles per hour at that time, nothing would have happened. But it was a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time after making the wrong choice and not listening to common sense.

In slow motion, I watched the white car run the stop sign at almost the same time the TR to my right entered the same intersection. I went wide left, over into the turning lane, hoping to give my opponent room. Luckily it seemed, the white car was also turning right, going the same direction as we were and he hugged the curb. The other TR came over into the lane I just vacated and barely missed clipping the white car's left rear corner by what could only be inches.

"...b-b-b-b-bad.... bad to the bone."

For just an instant, I thought that we were the luckiest street racers alive. We had narrowly, by the slimmest of margins, missed a high speed crash. But no... it was only going to go downhill from there.

A driveshaft is an incredible piece of metal. A hollow tube with yokes welded onto each end, balanced and trued, then connected to the output shaft of the transmission and to the input shaft of the rear end by Universal joints, it's seldom thought of. It has one simple function - to transfer torque to the ring and pinion and move the car.

I had long ago put a driveshaft safety loop on my car after watching an '88 IROC polevault and roll at high speed following a U-joint failure. But - bad teeth didn't do that. Perhaps he never thought about it. Perhaps he just didn't think it mattered. Either way, he didn't have one...

Just as both our cars passed the terrified teenager in the White Jetta, the front U-joint failed on SNK KLR. Have you ever seen a car dig it's driveshaft into pavement at high speed? It is not something you ever forget.

Fortunately for me, just as his shaft let go I was about a car length in front of him. In my passenger side mirror and then immediately in rear view, I saw his car jerk, the headlights lunge downward as his rear end went skyward and began to twist.... throwing the rear of his car over into the path of the Jetta. As his car hit the pavement at about a 45* degree angle from direction of travel, it almost flipped. Sparks were flying everywhere, the Jetta's headlights jerked furiously to try and get past the 3800 pound obstacle that had just planted itself in it's path.

I slammed on my brakes and watched the TR lean precariously upon it's right side tires, then bounce HARD to the pavement and slide equally hard into the curb, the driveshaft rolling from beneath the car, bent, only to dig itself again into the pavement and began doing endovers across the pavement in the Jetta's headlights - right toward the rear of my car!

I floored it once more but not in time - the shaft came down hard across the rear of my trunk, slamming into my rear window and shattering it before finally expending it's energy thudding hard - into my headrest. Only 2 inches of padding and foam surrounding a flimsy frame saved me from becoming another statistic that night.

How did it end? The Jetta never stopped and most likely went back for a change of clothing. Bad teeth and company had to have their car hauled away, but that wasn't the worst of his luck. For some strange reason, they hauled HIM away too in cuffs. Seems he had an outstanding warrant on drug trafficking. Luckily, we weren't cited for drag racing. I had to get a new trunk lid, rear window and some other incidentals but I saved the head rest. The tear is still in the fabric because I didn't want to change it. Why? To remind me how dangerous street racing really is. To remind me how very lucky I am. And to remind me that life can change in an instant...

Run fast - but... run smart.