

\$ 175.00 NO. 6  
7-22- 19 61  
TOM FINN  
FOR 38 CHEV.

	DOLLARS	CENTS
BAL. BROUGHT FORWARD	<u>930</u>	<u>48</u>
AMOUNT DEPOSITED	<u>80</u>	
TOTAL	<u>1010</u>	<u>48</u>
AMOUNT THIS CHECK	<u>75</u>	<u>00</u>
BAL. CARRIED FORWARD	<u>935</u>	<u>48</u>

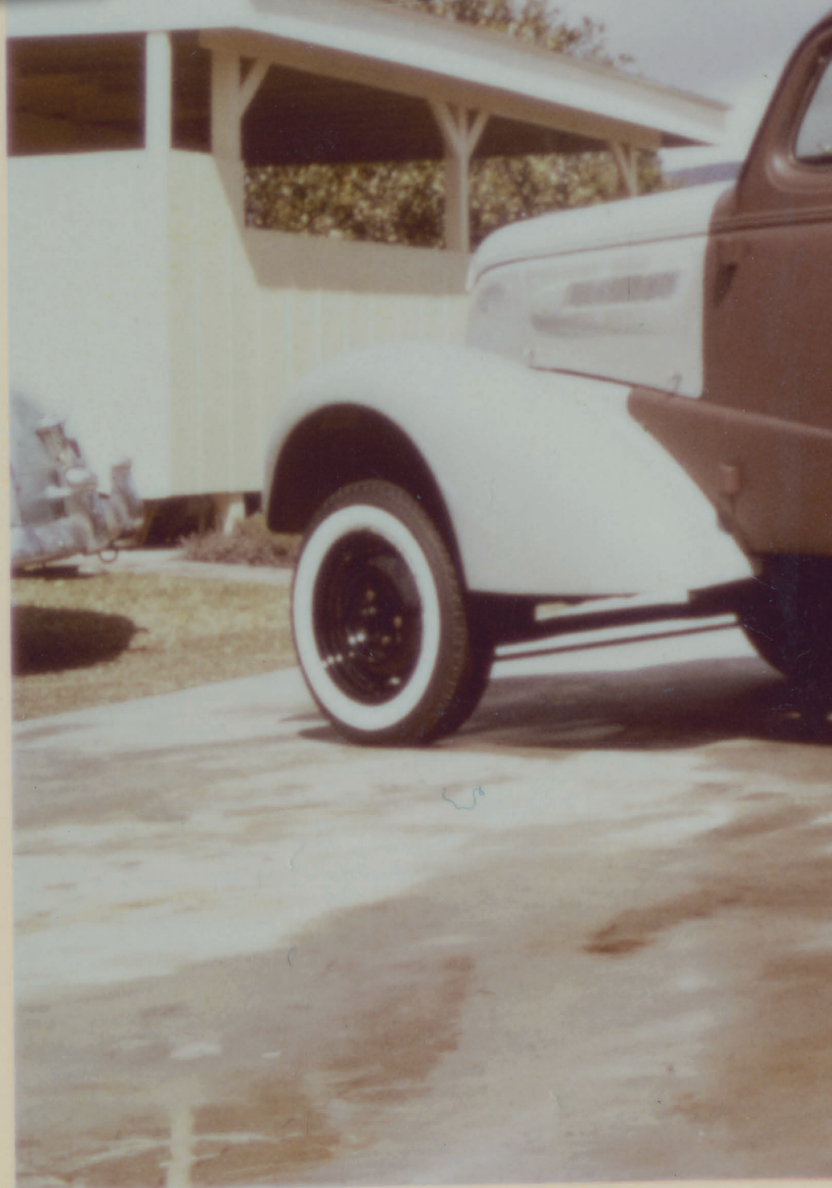
By Joey Ukrop

Photos from the Don Nowell Collection

Don Nowell had already won his class when he pulled up to the San Fernando Raceway starting line on a bright afternoon in 1965. From behind the wheel of his B/Gas '37 Chevy, he looked into the near lane and eyed his opponent—a front-engined dragster powered by a hot four cylinder. The lightweight slingshot had clinched the Little Eliminator title earlier that day, but Don decided to square off against him “just for kicks.” With his right foot planted on the Moon gas pedal and his gloved hand on the shifter, he prepared to launch. The starting lights flashed; Don and his coupe sprang forward, homebuilt 327 howling. At every shift he could see the dragster trailing him, the sun bouncing off its front spokes all the way through the traps. Same e.t. Same speed. But Don cut the quicker light and beat him by half a car length.

“Best race I’ve ever had,” he says, looking back on a lifetime of hot rodding. Don has tried his hand at just about every discipline of motorsports, albeit on land, water or air. Through the years, he’s made a name for himself as a racer, machinist, artist and all around craftsman who’s known for his meticulous attention to detail. Nowadays, he’s constantly sharing his expertise online with younger generations that are hungry to learn how things were done during drag

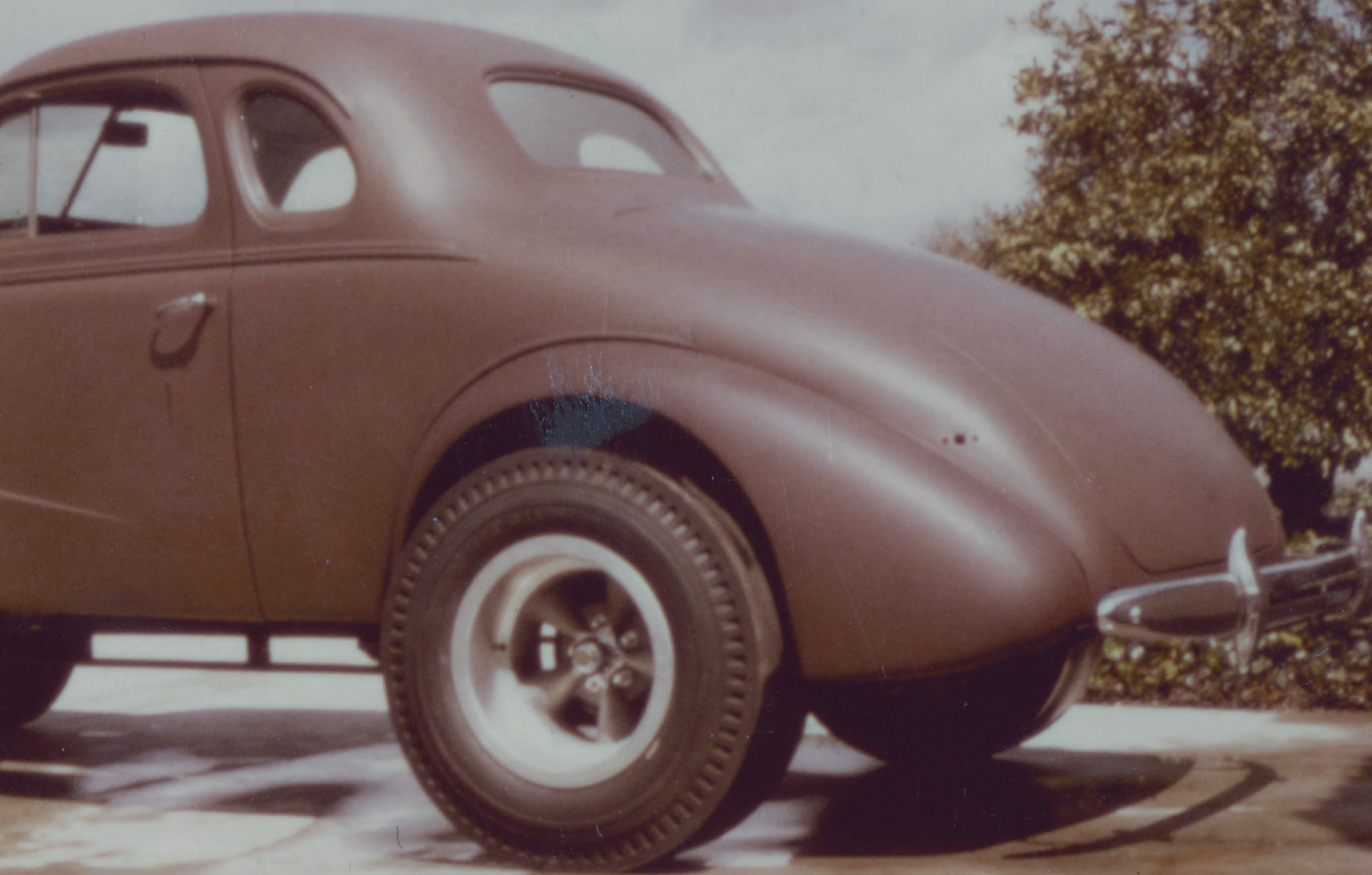
In the summer of 1961 Don Nowell bought an old '38 Chevy dry lakes racer for \$75. He spent the early-'60s building it into a record-setting B/Gasser while still in his early 20s. Here we see it under construction outside his parents' house in Granada Hills, California. With its '37 Chevy nose in place, the coupe is beginning to show the potential of the classic Gasser it would become. The 16x10 magnesium five-spokes were ordered directly from American Racing, while the rear slicks were a gently used pair that came off of Tommy Ivo's "Barnstormer" AA/Fuel Dragster.





# EVOLUTION *of a* CRAFTSMAN

THE DON NOWELL STORY





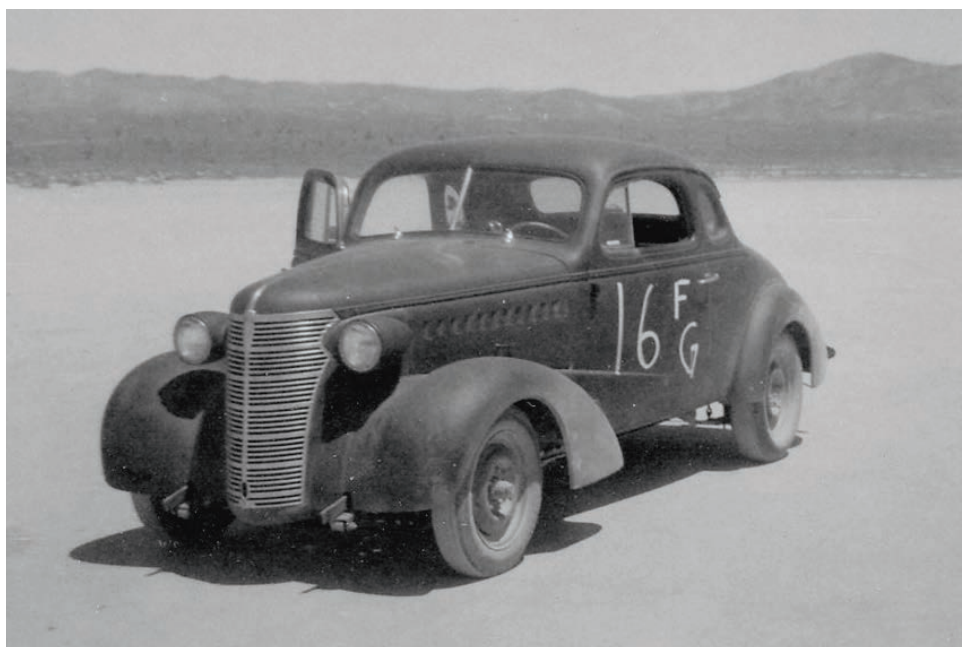






Don campaigned the Mediterranean Blue Chevy from 1963 until 1968, running mostly B/Gas throughout Southern California. He was the only one that ever drove the car during those years, and with good reasoning. "My money and my work, I get the fun," he says. The '37 picked up trophies everywhere from the drags at San Fernando to the NHRA Winternationals car show in Pomona. Silver leaf lettering and American Racing five-spokes with polished lips added to the coupe's clean-cut appearance.

Before it was Don's '37, the coupe was Tom Finn's '38. Don met Tom through a friend at the dealership where he worked, and he bought the car from him sans drivetrain. In lakes trim, the coupe was powered by a GMC Jimmy inline six with a 3x2 intake. The Chevy is seen here at El Mirage prepped for F/Gas competition.







With its Nowell-built smallblock and 5.38 gears, the coupe was more than capable of smoking the piecrust M&H slicks off the line, as witnessed by this pair of mid-'60s action shots from San Fernando Raceway. In the image below, the starter raising his flag indicates that Don was making a solo pass on fuel. "It hazed them good on gas, so I thought on fuel this thing's really going to light 'em up," he says. Even taking off in second, the tires had a hard time hooking up. Inside, Don outfitted the Spartan interior with fiberglass bucket seats, custom-made pedals and a Grant steering wheel. The seats were later upholstered in black Naugahyde, and a Borg-Warner four-speed would fill the void in the aluminum floor.





racing's Golden Age. But the past decade has been tough on the 76-year-old Renaissance man who, with gray hair wiry and wild, welcomes us into his Granada Hills home with a fist bump and smile—telltale signs that he never lost his California cool. He's the first to admit that his body simply can't keep up with his fast-paced mind, a place where new ideas are always brewing. Yes, the years may have taken their toll, but his tales from the past are more alive than ever.

A single drafting lamp illuminates Don's living room, a cavernous space with white brick walls that's connected to his workshop in the San Fernando Valley. The dry California heat, stifling just a few hours ago, has backed off and the crickets in the trees that line the front of the house have jumped into their evening song. It's balmy inside and he doesn't seem to mind. Neither does his pet cockatoo, Wingnut 2, who wiggles around in his cage just inches from his feet.

The Nowell family built the simple, single-story house not long after World War II, and these days it acts as Don's personal museum of sorts, packed with projects past, present and future. There's the chain-stitched jacket commemorating his B/Gas record at Irwindale hanging on one wall and a handbuilt display case filled with custom-engineered scale models wrapping around another. Over in the shop, a remote control glider hangs from the rafters while a tiny brass plaque from the U.S. Patent Office dated 11-10-70 sits atop a neatly organized bookshelf. A rendering of a model ramp truck, still in the works, fills out the drafting board in the corner.

As eclectic as his interests may be, he's constantly planning, creating and executing. He's a natural problem solver who has built everything from the aforementioned '37 Chevy Gasser to highly detailed prototype models and one-off motorcycles for Hollywood stars. It's been a long road to get here, no doubt, but in order to fully understand the work of Don Nowell, we need to turn back the clock to the dawn of hot rodding.

## THE EARLY YEARS

The Don Nowell story doesn't actually start with the man himself. Instead, it begins with his father, Elmer Nowell, who was a diehard hot rodder during the Great Depression. In the

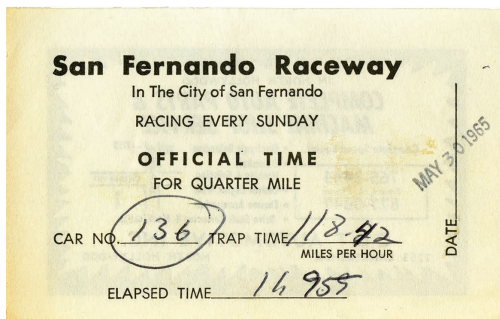
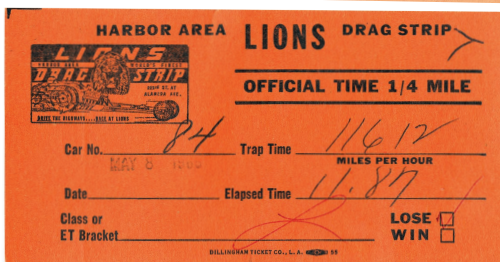
1930s, he was running around Southern California in a Model T roadster that he purchased from one of Indy racer Ernie Tripplet's mechanics. The car was outfitted with some of the hottest speed equipment of the day, including an eight valve Frontenac head, Winfield Carb, Wheeler mufflers and a drilled crankshaft for a pressurized oil feed. With its chopped and raked windshield, Buffalo wire wheels and wooden trunk out back, the full-fendered T certainly captured the street roadster look of the era. And it was a hard runner. Hand-written records from the Nowell family album indicate that the car was capable of 108mph in the early-'30s, and it was later sold to Don's uncle, Dick.

At this time, Dick had built up quite a reputation in the Los Angeles street racing scene. Although the exact details have become hazy, legend has it that a late night street encounter landed him a spot behind the wheel of the Tommy Lee Speedster. Based on a 1936 Ford chassis, the car was coachbuilt by Frank Kurtis and combined the most graceful lines from brand-new Cords and Boattail Auburns. The fenders were removable, allowing Tommy to cut weight and turn the car into a highboy when he was running at the lakes. Never one to settle for anything less than the best, he had Fred Offenhauser build and blueprint a 318cid twin cam Offy four-cylinder to drop beneath the flowing Art Deco hood. The svelte two-seater was expensive, fast and designed to outperform anybody wherever, whenever.

In the early-'40s, Tommy and his entourage would take their own timing clocks out to the dry lakes to dial in the Speedster, sometimes racing behind the little Boattail just for fun. "If they ran the car over the record, they'd stay the night on Saturday and then they'd run a Russetta meet on Sunday," Don says. During a Saturday test session in December 1941, Dick drove the

speedster 148mph against a 142mph record. When they got up the next morning ready to put the record in the books, they soon discovered that Pearl Harbor had been attacked and the meet was canceled. Don wasn't even one year old when this high-speed action was unfolding, but it wouldn't be long before he would get hooked on going fast—just like countless other kids coming of age in post-war Southern California.

Born just southwest of Los Angeles proper in Inglewood, Don was drawn to vehicles from the start. As a child he mowed lawns and sold newspapers before eventually landing



From the SEMA Show to Lions to San Fernando, Don was in the middle of it all during the '60s. The SEMA tag dates back to the early days of Don Nowell Racing Enterprises when he was displaying his new Qwik-Seat valve tool at the Anaheim Convention Center. Although he raced at dragstrips across the greater Los Angeles area, he notes that San Fernando was his all-time favorite.



After a trip to Cohia Muffler, Don's '51 Chevy was sitting just 3/4 of an inch off the pavement at its lowest point. "It rode horrible," he recalls. "It couldn't be any worse. There was no suspension!" But it did have the look, and that's what mattered. He sprayed the Watson-inspired scallops right there in the driveway in front of his parents' house.

Don's '57 Chevy (*far right*) was a metallic gold hardtop with a red and black interior, black steelies and a Ray Cash-built 301 smallblock backed by a column-shifted three-speed. One time he was racing and sheared the shifter right off the tree, forcing him to drive home in first gear without stopping.







a job at the hobby shop across from the local high school. During this period, he built a few model cars and a Ringmaster radio-control plane that helped give him a firsthand look into a bright new mechanical world. Through shop classes at school, he picked up some fabrication and woodworking skills—both of which he put to the test in a big way in 1956. The challenge, sponsored by the San Fernando Rotary Club, was to use the provided materials to create the best electric motor. Each entry was judged on craftsmanship, finish and performance. His motor wowed the judges, earning him top honors out of a 320-student field. “I did some nice work on the motor,” he says. “It was the first time in life where it came right to me right between my eyeballs.” The proverbial light came on; he needed to keep building.

By the time he was 16, Don had scraped together enough money to buy his first car—a Charcoal Gray 1951 Chevy hardtop to drive to class at San Fernando High School. “Everybody was lowered over there,” he says. “A friend of mine was working on the corner at a body shop. He was from Van Nuys, so I started going down to Van Nuys Bob’s with him and that’s what lit my fire.” Knowing that he had to bring the Chevy down to earth, he brought it to Cohia Muffler in San Fernando for a dropped spindle kit, two cut coils, heated springs and four-inch lowering blocks. When it came to paint, he decided to spray some scallops just like Larry Watson was doing. “I did it out in the driveway with an airbrush—cream with gold—and then I thought that it needed a bit more, so I added silver and maroon to match the interior,” he says. According to Don, the mild-custom Chevy was his “skirt chaser.”

The hobby shop gig didn’t last long and neither did the ’51. Next came a job as a lot boy at Tom Carroll Chevrolet and a practically new ’59 Impala powered by a 3x2-fed 348

backed by a four-speed. Needless to say, the W-motor was a big improvement over the hardtop’s straight six, and Don rarely turned down a chance to put the car through its paces. Late one Sunday night, he was driving around North Hollywood when a white ’57 Chevy pulled up beside him. “Rappa-rappa, ‘You wanna race it?’” he says, imitating the sound of the engines. “Rappa-rappa. He comes on—off we go. He gave me about a couple of car lengths and turned left, waved and I went back up here to home.” The next day, Don saw what looked like the same car at the dealership while he was at work. “So I went in the back door of the Buick garage and there’s this tall, lanky dude and it’s Kenny Safford.”

Kenny, an accomplished racer in his own right, was a member of the Road Kings, a Burbank-based car club with a stacked roster that included the who’s-who of Southern California drag racing—“T.V.” Tommy Ivo, Don “The Snake” Prudhomme, Bob Muravez and Jim Miles to name a few. Even though he was younger than most of the members, Don attended a handful of meetings and hooked up with them at the drags whenever he could. After floating the valves in the ’59 on a pass at the old San Gabriel drag strip, he bought a ’57 Chevy, a “street racer, skirt chaser and go-to-work car” that had been fitted with a warmed-over smallblock built by Road Kings member Ray Cash. It had a dual-quad intake, Duntov 30/30 cam and desperately needed to be rebuilt. Don jumped right in and performed his first of many smallblock overhauls.

### **BUILT FOR SERIOUS DUTY**

Those trips to San Fernando Raceway and other Southern California strips had a lasting impact; Don knew he had to get a drag car of his own. In 1959, a friend from the dealership introduced him to Tom Finn, a local hot rodder who was



campaigning a '38 Chevrolet coupe in F/Gas at the lakes. As luck would have it, he was going to pull the car's inline six and drop it in a Studebaker, leaving the coupe up for grabs. "In the summer of '61 I bought the car for 75 bucks," he says. "And that's what started the whole deal."

The plan was seemingly straightforward: build the '38 into a smallblock Chevy-powered B/Gasser. Why B/Gas? "That was the most prestigious Gas class," Don says. "Because A/Gas took a lot of money to make an engine...and nobody had money for stroker cranks and all the stuff. You had to start with a big Chrysler or Oldsmobile, whereas smallblock Chevy—dime a dozen." This meant more competition and, ultimately, more racing.

He notes that he didn't know much about any of this stuff at the time, but that didn't stop him from diving into the project as soon as it was home. Out came the cutting torch and away went the firewall and floor. "All of a sudden there's this hole, 12-feet long," he recalls. "I stood back after I did that and thought, 'Jeez, did I mess up. What am I going to do now?'" With nowhere to go but forward, he laid out the coupe with the NHRA rulebook in hand.

Up front, he maintained the parallel leaves but commissioned local Sprint Car racer Rip Erikson to fabricate a sturdy tube axle. Lift blocks helped raise the nose, while a pair of '34 Willys drum brakes provided the stopping power. Out back, Don installed a Pontiac rearend stuffed with 5.38:1 gears. Tubular traction bars and heavy-duty shocks rounded out the rear. Everything was stick welded; it would be another few years before he learned to TIG weld while he was in the Air National Guard.

Next came the drivetrain, a 327cid smallblock Chevrolet linked to a four-speed trans. Because he had been working with Mouse Motors since 1960, the coupe's smallblock gave him the perfect opportunity to further develop his engine building skills. Don set up the Chevy with top-shelf components, including an Engle "250" cam, Venolia pistons, Hilborn injectors and a Vertex magneto. He says the most trick part, however, was the counterbalanced, chromed and cross-drilled C-T crank. Just like the front axle, the fenderwell headers were

Rip Erikson originals. Naturally, they were treated to a coat of white VHT high-temp paint.

Although the Chevy started life as a '38 model, Don came across some pristine '37 sheetmetal tucked away at Van Nuys Auto Parts and decided to backdate the car. With the body ready for paint, Curt Hamilton stopped by his house and asked to pull a mold off the fenders and hood to create fiberglass reproductions for the Cal Automotive line. Don obliged. "They came out perfect," he says. "You couldn't tell it was a 'glass front end without looking at the back of the hood sides, because the louvers didn't go through. The only hiccup was trying to bolt

it all together and get it all lined up, because there's nothing to tell you what to do or what goes where." Installing the grille trim proved to be extra difficult, but after a little massaging, bracing and bracket work, the '38-to-'37 conversion was complete.

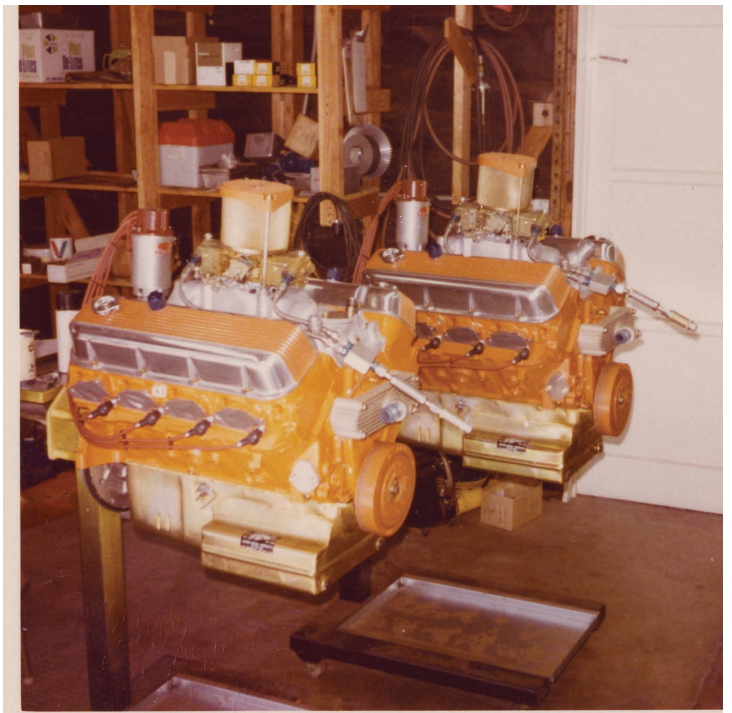
Fit and finish have always been of the utmost importance to Don, and the coupe was the first time where he had the chance to bring his vision to life from the ground up. Once he had the fiberglass mounted and the bodywork sorted out, there was no question about the color—it had to be 1956 Chrysler Mediterranean Blue. "My aunt had a '56 Chrysler Windsor two-door hardtop that she bought brand new," he says. "Every time I'd go to Long Beach to visit her I'd go down in the garage and sit in the car." He eventually bought the Chrysler to use as the tow car and painted the Chevy to match. The coupe's doors were lettered in silver leaf, which complimented the polished lips on the American Racing magnesium five-spokes. "Clean, simple, built to haul ass," he says. "Built for serious duty."

In September 1963, the deep blue B/Gasser made its drag strip debut. Running against an 11.84 record at San Fernando, Don clicked off an 11.85 and went on to win his class—a sign of things to come. For the next four years, he and his coupe were fierce competitors across the San Fernando Valley and beyond. This was Southern California Gas class racing at its peak: a young guy, a homebuilt car and a shoestring budget. He says he never won his class at Irwindale or Long Beach, but he did take home the hardware at San Fernando Raceway and numerous Los Angeles-area car shows throughout the '60s.

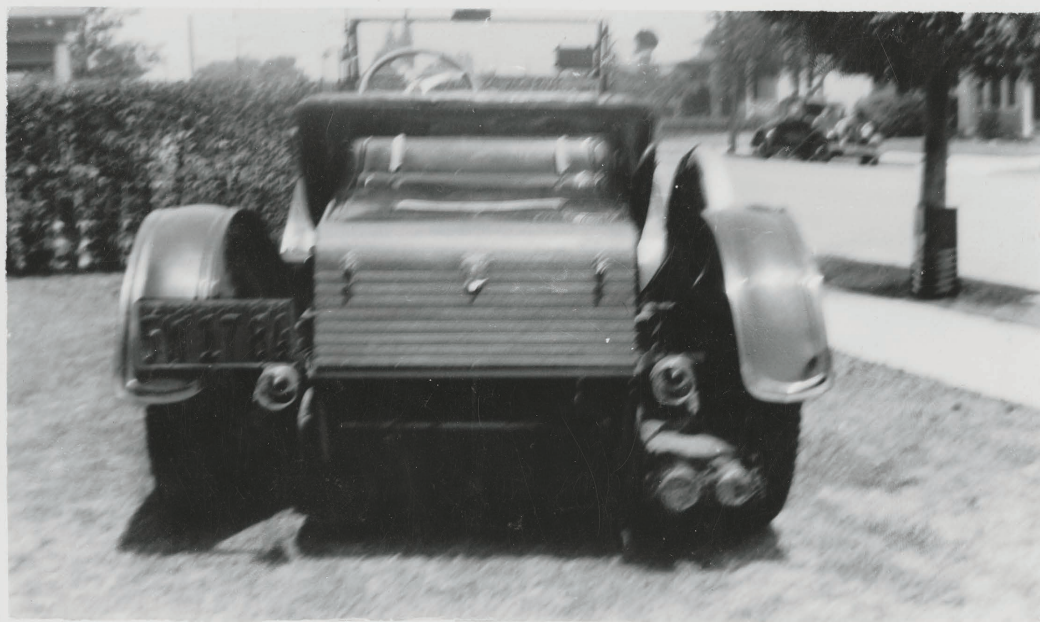
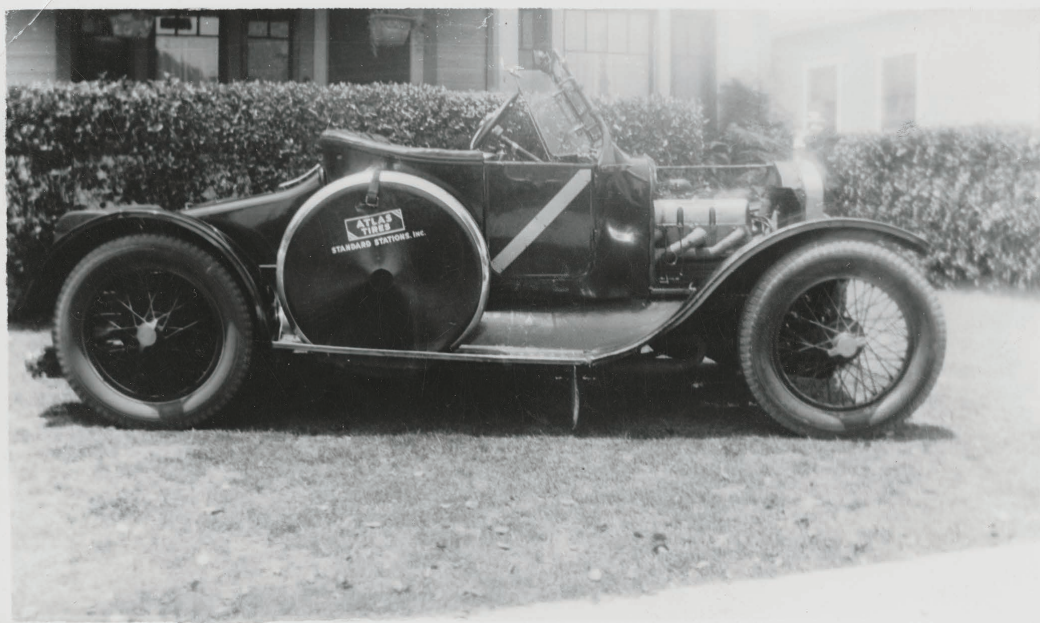
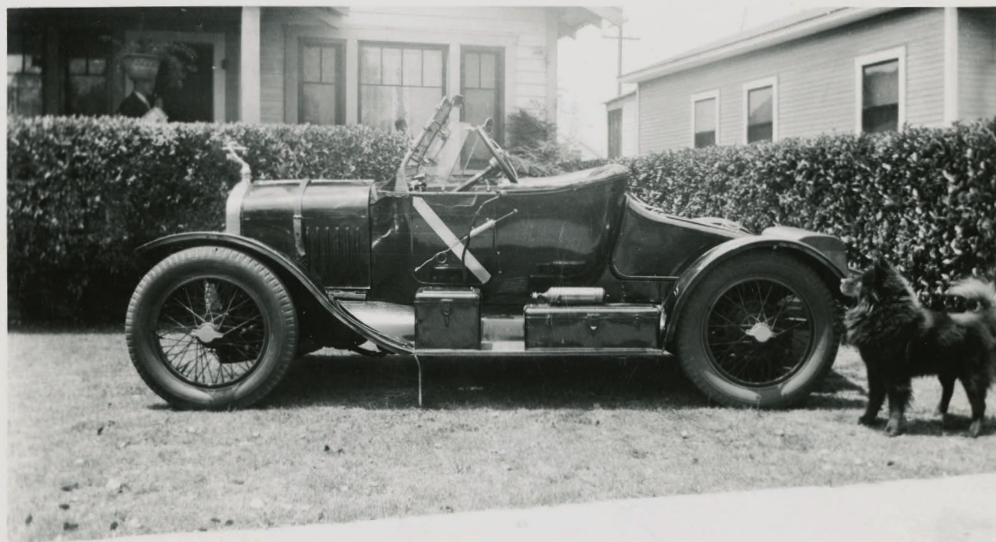


In an effort to simplify valve jobs, Don created the Qwik-Seal; it was patented in November 1970. The list of engines he has built spans across the board, from the 302cid smallblock Chevy with 58mm side-draft Webers (*above*) for the LeGrand Formula 5000 Factory Car to the 272cid Chevy equipped with eight Tillotson carbs (*opposite page, lower left*) for Tom Patterson's record-setting Crackerbox boat. Don convinced Tom to have George Cerny paint the "Sparkler" red, white and blue just like the San Fernando-based Childs & Albert "Addict" AA/FD. Steve Feinberg handled the lettering and gold leaf work. Don assembled the pair of big blocks (*opposite page, lower right*) for one of Roger Hanks' infamous "Blonde" 36-foot Cigarette Boats used for offshore racing.











As you can imagine, campaigning a Gasser in your mid-20s isn't the most economical thing to do. Rather than parking the car when money got tight, Don made the decision to load up the tank with 90% nitro, cut some weight and get paid appearance money (about \$25 or so). "I ran fuel one time and I broke the engine," he recalls. "When you're running nitro, you can get a cylinder full of fuel. I was so damn nervous about learning that I forgot to back it off and went to go start it, hit the switch and broke a rod. I said 'Screw this, I'm out of here—back to gasoline.'" When it was in legal Gas trim, the coupe was capable of high-11 second e.t.'s at just over 120mph.

By 1965, the car caught the attention of Eric Dahlquist, *Hot Rod Magazine's* technical editor at the time. After getting in touch with Don, photographer Pat Broiler was sent to Granada Hills to shoot the coupe for a two-page feature in the December issue. The article itself was fairly standard for the day—six photos and a couple of captions—but through these images it's clear that Don went above and beyond while building the coupe. The fabrication was neat, tinwork was tidy and, in the end, the car looked just like a '37 Chevy Gasser should.

Not only did Don get a *HRM* feature out of the deal, he also scored back-to-back trips to Bonneville in 1965 and 1966. He joined forces with Eric Dahlquist and Eric Rickman, driving the support truck and doing whatever he could to help. Rick paid no heed to Don's lack of photographic experience and set him up next to the racecourse with a loaded Hasselblad. "Here I'm sitting at the four-mile and you can't hear anything; you can't see the timing tower, you can't see anything," he says, recalling the isolation while waiting for the cars. "Whooooo—click—whooooo—click. How bitchin' is that man? Using Rick's camera to take pictures for the salt."

Between Bonneville trips and racing the coupe on weekends, Don always seemed to be involved with something hot rod related. In 1967, he went to his first Can-Am race and he couldn't believe it. "You watch a Can-Am car stop, start, turn left and right, go 200mph non-stop—fuel, tires, all that. That's impressive. They don't break, nothing happens. It blew me away. Been a road racing nut ever since...this is professional motor racing at its highest level." That spring, he started a new job with Al Bartz Racing Engines rebuilding high-horsepower smallblock Chevys for those same Can-Am cars. After about a month, he learned the ropes and he was responsible for not only rebuilding engines, but also building them. He learned a whole lot, but he left in 1968 to branch out on his own.

## DON NOWELL, THE CRAFTSMAN


That year, Don sold his coupe (minus the drivetrain) to start Don Nowell Racing Enterprises, which was based out of his dad's garage. In the mornings he would work at Tom Patterson's fabrication shop building parts for helicopters and things of that nature, and in the afternoons he would go home and focus on engines for customers. While he was there he

learned to work the mill and lathe—invaluable skills that he still uses to this day. For nearly two decades, Don provided high-performance engines for just about every application imaginable. He built smallblocks for Patterson's record-setting Crackerbox boat as well as the late Jerry Titus' Trans-Am cars. From Formula 5000 to the streets of Southern California, there was no guessing where his next engine would end up.

The engine business thrived until the mid-'80s, but Don had other projects in the works too. There were several full-custom motorcycles, such as his personal scratch-built single cylinder Honda and a lightweight Triumph with a Trackmaster frame built for actor Bobby Carradine. And then there was a series of 1/16-scale trucks that he created for the Smith-Miller Toy Company. In order to bring these big models from the drawing board into reality, he got his own mill and lathe and took his machine work to the next level. "The more you do, the more you learn," he says. "The more you learn, the more you do." Fixtures, tooling, casting, metalforming—Don was exposed to a new set of engineering and fabrication processes that helped him move on to prototype work. He created 20 different designs for Smith-Miller and crafted a grand total of nearly 1,000 trucks through the years. Since then, he has designed dental equipment, tackled 1/4-scale Harley-Davidson models and, more recently, launched a collection of contemporary sculptures that tie together everything he's learned in the past half-century.

Don has always seen himself as 50 percent engineer and 50 percent artist. His creative process never stops, and he spends his days at his home shop much as he has done for a half century. When he's not thinking about the next step, he's online on the H.A.M.B. answering questions and sharing his hot rodding knowledge under the username D.N.D. (Don Nowell Design). He's quick to set people straight about how racing *really* was during the '60s—because he lived it.

And what ever happened to his old Gasser? It changed hands a number of times and was never again raced, while the 327 found its way into a friend's ski boat. In the mid-2000s, automotive journalist Jeff Tann bought the Chevy and worked to bring it back to its mid-'60s guise. He lived near the Nowells as a kid, and whenever Don would fire up the car, Jeff would ride over on his bicycle to check it out. During the restoration, Don tracked down the original smallblock and gave it to Jeff. He's since sold the coupe, and it now resides in Dan Miller's private collection near Scottsdale, Arizona.

It's getting late and things are winding down for the evening at Don's house in Granada Hills. The sun set hours ago, and the heat has backed off. Before we hit the road, we ask him if he has any closing thoughts about his lifelong involvement with hot rodding. He pauses for a moment. "I could have been a lot further ahead financially if I had used my head in a better direction," he says. "But I followed my heart instead and had a hell of a life." 

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These images, marked "Los Angeles, 1932-1933," are some of the oldest in the Nowell family scrapbook. Dubbed the "Hot T," the roadster had already been hot rodded when Don's father, Elmer, bought it and it proved to be the ideal early-'30s street and race machine. The handmade wooden trunk and fully covered side-mount spare were nice touches.



Don's uncle Dick Nowell was a street racer extraordinaire who drove the Tommy Lee Speedster on the dry lakes during the pre-war years. The car itself was far ahead of its time with a hand-shaped aluminum body by Kurtis and a 300hp, 318cid Offy. Dick raced the car until the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.





From behind the wheel of the Speedster, Dick talks strategy with Jack, an Offenhauser engineer, at Muroc dry lake in 1940. At this point, the car was running in the 140mph range. Nearly half a century later, the Speedster was restored to its full-fendered form. It sold at auction for \$440,000 in 2007.







With a 3D printed cab and a bed formed from 6061 aluminum, Don's 1/16-scale ramp truck is his latest work in progress. The Sprint Cars feature resin bodies based on McCoy "Mini-Mite" tether cars, and the tandem-axle trailer was also scratchbuilt. We photographed the hauler in Don's photo studio set-up that he custom made. The 1/4-scale motorcycle wheel is composed of 83 pieces; behind it you can see his spoke-bending brake and a tire that he vulcanized using processes dating back to the 1800s. Don (right) spent two years building a flat-track inspired 750cc Triumph for actor Bobby Carradine (left). Bobby still owns the bike and the two remain close friends to this day.

