

2008 LeMons Arse-Freeze-Appalooza

Contributed by A. U. B. I. E.
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Running the 24 hours of LeMons is a confluence of the bizarre. Mix 100 parts jalopy, going faster than you ever have in rush hour traffic, a race track, Halloween, and the attempt to take all the seriousness out of a race driver while still trying to keep the participants out of harms way and you're only a couple steps into what this is about. For the uninitiated, the basic concept is that you'll be racing wheel to wheel in a \$500 car. Since you don't actually want to die in the process, safety equipment is exempted from the base cost.

Some people wrench on their heaps for months, substituting elbow grease and tears for the shine the years have taken off whatever four wheeled crate is unfortunate enough to be subjected to this. Other folks approach the LeMons in a caffinated sleepless frenzy, a spur of seat of the pants inspiration. Then there's the lazy people who slap a roll cage into something they just pulled out of the local river and managed to get the engine to turn over once. Ours was a parts car with a bent chassis that happened to run, and miraculously survived the 2007 LeMons at Altamont, more through divine intervention, luck, and a couple hours of field medic bandages than any sort of skill.

If you've seen Shawshank Redemption, LeMons is kind of like how Red describes the inmates. "I'm the only guilty man here" he says about the prison. "My car is totally legal and legit. We didn't spend a dime over \$500 on it!" is echoed like a bible passage up and down the grid. For the record: I totally believe all of you. You betcha. Put it in writing. Any series where bribes are practically written into the rules, well, go into it with your eyes open and just have fun.

The team was put together by Ken Huey. We were: Ron Dale, Kim Dale, Jim Breazeale, John Montano, both of whom are from EASY (European Auto Salvage Yard, <http://www.easypor.com/>), and myself. Like so many other teams, we were just there for the fun of it, some laptime, and the spectacle of what other ridiculousness on four wheels we might encounter. All I wanted to accomplish was practicing my heel-toe in traffic when I wasn't bombing down the back straight of Sears Point at 95 MPH, headed towards that blue and yellow tire barrier on the brakes with a 911 breathing on my back bumper. That, keep the car clean, and work on traffic.

We carried some residual value from the previous event so we added a few suspension components and better rubber but were otherwise unchanged from the last go-round.

The more automotive stuff you do, the more you start meeting people you know from other events. I ran into some of the PRC folk we race with. Jay was running the 101 E30 BMW team. I had the pleasure of sharing an otherwise freezing cold lunch line in conversation with his lovely wife who runs grid for our races. Jarusak Dusuntia I met from my SCCA autocross days was there for his second event. Jalopnik's Evil Genius V8olvo was there. Anything that brings the motorsport community together is a good thing, and if nothing else, the 24 Hours of LeMons proves that if it moves, someone somewhere will try and race it. Doesn't matter if it runs on dino-juice, sunlight, gravity or muscle.

{mospagebreak title=Drawing Straws} Drawing Straws

Of course what every race driver wants to know when participating in an endurance race is: When is my turn? Ken's goal as team captain was to get John some seat time, as he wrenched for us last time and EASY always provides us with a cheap source of parts for our race cars. He also wanted to get Kim in the mix, as she's been in several HPDEs and we figure a lower-speed wheel-to-wheel event is a good introduction. LeMons doesn't require a race license (scary but true) and the chicanes as well as volume of traffic keep maximum velocity down from normal track activity. The first stint has the most compression as all the cars are out, so is the most dicy. A third to half of the people in the field with you have never raced before, so as with your daily commute, you have no idea what they're doing, mostly because they have no idea what they're doing. Since Ron and I had race experience and I had run LeMons before we tossed the hot potato back and forth until I landed in the driver's seat off the line.

One hundred and two cars strolled onto the 1.9 mile track. I exited the hot pits casually in third gear, not breaking for the sweeping turn one on cold tires and unintentionally drifted the car to the apex. The car was even slicker than I had anticipated, but at least it didn't roll at a 45 degree angle whenever you turned the wheel on the stock suspension like last time. A couple of turns later I had enough heat in the tires to at least feel like I wasn't driving on a soaking skidpad.

Transponder checks have to be the second most frustrating part of LeMons (constant yellow flags being the most frustrating) as race control tries to get a handle on a crapload of rustbuckets that have no business being on a track.

Ken was in my ear that the starting flag was to fly. I upped the revs, dropped a gear and started gnawing on the bumper of an ancient Datsun. Carl Mc Ginn's voice from my Driving Concepts racing school echoed in my head: "Those that look for space will find it." You feel like God for a few fractions of a second when you rocket past six cars in a row, right up until you realize they're queuing for the single-file chicane that's staring at you as a four foot stack of wall. The specboxster.com sponsored Crown Victoria run by some POC guys shoots past me on horsepower then checks up like I did at the chicane.

I retaliate at the next chicane late, but don't give him quite enough room and he taps my back left quarter panel. Someone who doesn't know what they're doing in a VW is staying middle on turn two as I scoot around him on the inside and they're split on the outside by another creaking tub of metal. I dive through the chicane queue again but shave it too close. The Saab I cut off deftly swerves off track around the tire barrier instead of into me, and brings it safely back onto the tarmac. Keep it clean, I remind myself, feeling guilty.

The air is filled with overrevs, squeeling street tires, a noxious intoxicating sickening fume of burned rubber and twenty year old engine combustion unfiltered because dozens of catalytic converters have been cruelly hacked off by a wood saw and frustrated hamfisted twisting.

An E30 pops up behind me, he dives as I back off of slower traffic entering turn three. I slide outside a flat black corvaire as he comes in and the bimber gets stuck behind and I apex for four. I have no illusions on the current limits of my driving ability, but making a pass on the outside on the off camber turn three confirms that with this much traffic there is no driving line. There are no apexes. The only thing is managing your track position and getting around people while keeping your eyes on the flag stations. Each blind turn reveals a sideways 2002 or a smoking Triumph that further obscures your view. The black and blue 3 and I have a few laps together, splitting huge packs of traffic ending up on each other's bumpers.

I'm in shock as Geo Metro scoots past me. After passing what felt like fifty cars to be passed by a Metro is rather humbling. The thing is so small it shifts in and out of tight spaces I'm wary of chucking my chassis into. I'm thinking this while I've got two wheels over the burm of corner four because a crusty Mustang thinks it can pinch me off the apex I'm already on. I scan traffic into the cyclone and put my door next to someone who hasn't reached the turn in. I track out, giving him a width and a half and jam it into third then fourth on the downhill, pop the brakes and slide to track out for turn six. Never race on new tires. I'm understeering on entry and oversteering halfway out.

A restart after a prolonged yellow taught me that I should always remember to keep the brakes warm. I scored the rotor on a dive past a couple competitors, one painted like a Japanese Zero fighter and one decorated like a Santa Sleigh.

After that if you wanted more than about half the brakes you had to deal with some pronounced wobblies. I rounded another bend and suddenly I was staring at the back of what looked like a cherry '57 Chevy, only to find out later that it was a body kit on an dinosaur of a Volvo. I felt bad even driving near it as it looked so nice in the shaking vibration of my visor that I gave it a generously wide birth in the hopes it would last several more minutes in such a pristine state.

Every few turns Ken's in my ear with yellow flag/green flag pauses and restarts. Sometimes he calls in green but my local station is still waving yellow at me. Sometimes he calls yellow and my flagger is sitting on his colors. I rumble over a track-out burm and the hood pops. I feel like it is about to slap my face at the next full throttle but it holds. I radio in. Processing all this and trying not to hit anyone. Black flag.

Black flag? That was at me.

I had yellow at six, nothing at seven or eight then checked up when I was side by side with a station wagon at turn nine/fifteen. After an hour on track I was just getting started, but I had to run up to the tower. They confirmed that I blew a yellow and I headed for the penalty station. I pounded my helmet and yelled "Keep it clean" to myself. How did I miss it? I thought I was checking the stations every chance I got.

Penalties and LeMons are one part 'just plain mean' because they want to get it through your skull that you screwed

something up and put someone else at risk, one part kool aid acid test, and one part grease monkey. One 'totally innocent' driver wouldn't stop talking back when the corner workers called him in on penalty. Never talk back to the stewards, folks. Sledge hammer meet HANS, and take your attitude with you. My fate was much less costly, as I had to 'preach to the choir' of my team, by reading some tale about a guy racing a Pinto on a road circuit and taking it to the Bonneville salt flats. I had to scream it out at the top of my dehydrated lungs while standing on our hood, nearly dropped my glasses along with my voice. A half hour penalty was cut short due to whatever musterings of enthusiasm and volume I gathered and Ron hit the pavement.

I was bummed that I cost the team some track time and position, as I had worked us up from the rear of the field to 22nd. Ron and John followed with clean stints and got us into the mid thirties after the penalty. Time to get Kim in there. I remember the first time I headed into wheel to wheel, all that chaos around me, unfamiliar with the track layout, I was confused and just trying to survive. Driving in survival mode is never a good thing but with each shift, corner and braking zone you start to get more comfortable. Unfortunately Kim had an early spin and lost some nerve. "They just don't care if they hit you" she said, to which Ron replied: "Well, they aren't going to stop and take your insurance."

Two hours to go and something clicked. People stopped crashing, breaking down on track and having to get towed off. For the most part the yellow flags ceased. With a thinning field due to mechanical failures, penalties and collisions, we had about an hour and a half to go and Jim hopped in for what would be ultimately be our final Saturday stint. The PA broadcasts that "We are going to stop the race when we can't see the flags anymore, but we don't know when that is." Jim was a machine and just kept on cranking out laps. All that seat time and he set our fastest time of the day for a positive note to end the session. Other than my penalty we had kept the car clean and tidy. John swapped the rotor and we were good to go for Sunday.

{mospagebreak title=Sunday}Sunday

Another brisk, cold, but fortunately dry day opened its cloudy eyes on us. Ken didn't get a stint Saturday so he opened things up with a solid clean run.

Kim was next up, trying to redeem herself, but ended up backwards at the top of five. At least she was having fun this time, and was starting to feel comfortable.

My family arrived just in time to see me exit the penalty box and head out for a congested yellow-flag laden run. The FrankenMiata team's self-declared 'kinda hot girls' started using our radio channel for a yak fest. Somewhere in there the blue Plymouth Belvedere managed to flip a few cars in front of me.

Even with all the interruption I managed to put the car into the high 1:30s, a couple seconds from the Sunday start fastest lap area, although it dropped to the way low 1:30s with clearer traffic late in the day.

Frustrated at the yellows and with towing on track Ron and I swapped. We spent most of the time talking about what to eat with the FrankenMiata team because their driver said she was hungry. Ron had a clean run, and John hopped back in. Unfortunately about halfway through his stint he got loose and fishtailed, when another car ran up his back end and we found ourselves again in the penalty box. Jim couldn't keep his nose clean and another spin and penalty visit left us rather sheepish. Ken and Kim then finished up the day as everyone was pretty spent. We finished almost exactly in the middle of the pack, which isn't too bad considering we expired half of Sunday in penalty timeout.

And from the horse's mouth:
<http://www.24hoursoflemons.com>

The overall winner was that little Geo Metro. I found out it had Honda CBR motorcycle engine power, which is why it scooted so well, and they kept the thing clear of contact and humming all weekend.

More pictures:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/24hoursoflemons/show/>

Remember kids: Racing is not inherently dangerous. It is just dangerous. Dangerous. And fun. Don't go into it with your adrenaline pumping. Go into it with your eyes open.

{mospagebreak title=Kens Wrap-up}Ken's Wrap-Up

Thanks to Aubie for writing a great race report!

We started with a unknown non-running 944 we bought off of craigslist as a parts car, potential LeMons car in 2007. We didn't know what kind of car we had but after we got it running we just install a bolt-in AutoPower rollcage, race seat, harness, fire extinguisher and entered the LeMons race at Altamont raceway last year and to our surprise, it made it to the end of race.

We didn't have enough in the \$500 budget to do much and ran on soft stock suspension, the car didn't even have stock sway bars. Tires are not part of the \$500 restriction but we spent no money on tires and ran on a bastard collection of hard street tires everyone had sitting around in their garages. After the Altamont LeMons race I got a residual value for the car from the LeMons organizer Jay Lamm. I wanted it to be worth \$0 so I can spend another \$500 and Jay wanted it to be worth a little over \$200.

For 2008 our LeMons car was much better prepared. I was able to get a set of used front bilsteins, used rear koni's, used front/rear sway bars from a 944 turbo all for \$175. A set of 250 lb. Weltmeister front springs were donated, the cat. was removed and replaced with a straight pipe and we did the A/C delete using the \$5 A/C delete bracket method . Our car was transforming into a entry level 944-SPEC car!

Not quite a SPEC suspension yet as we get on three wheels.

We had a tire budget this time and got a set of Hankook RS2's mounted on cookie cutter wheels. We couldn't use our Toyo RA1 spec tires because LeMons' rules require tire treadwear to be a minimum of 190. Our Toyo's are at 100 and the Hankook's are rated at 200 treadwear.

I like to thank my 2008 Fish out of Water team members for a fun and memorable event. I know Kim was rattled getting toss out there with 100+ cars in her first wheel to wheel experience. She was very hard on herself for her spins and felt she let the team down with the time penalties but the truth was we didn't care. I reminded her we're just out to have fun. Kim settled down and look like a pro by the end of the Sunday session.

Just looking at the wacky car concepts you can't help but smile.

I knew our car in its current prep level could not win the LeMons but I figure it should be capable of placing in the top 15 without the penalties. The hours in penalties put us in 49th for the final finishing ordering but we still had a lot of fun!

Congratulations to the Geo Metro-Gnome team on their LeMons win!

Congratulations to the other Porsche 944 teams. Team Baconator took 3rd.

"Old Fast Auto Race Team & Sons" took 14th with their 924S