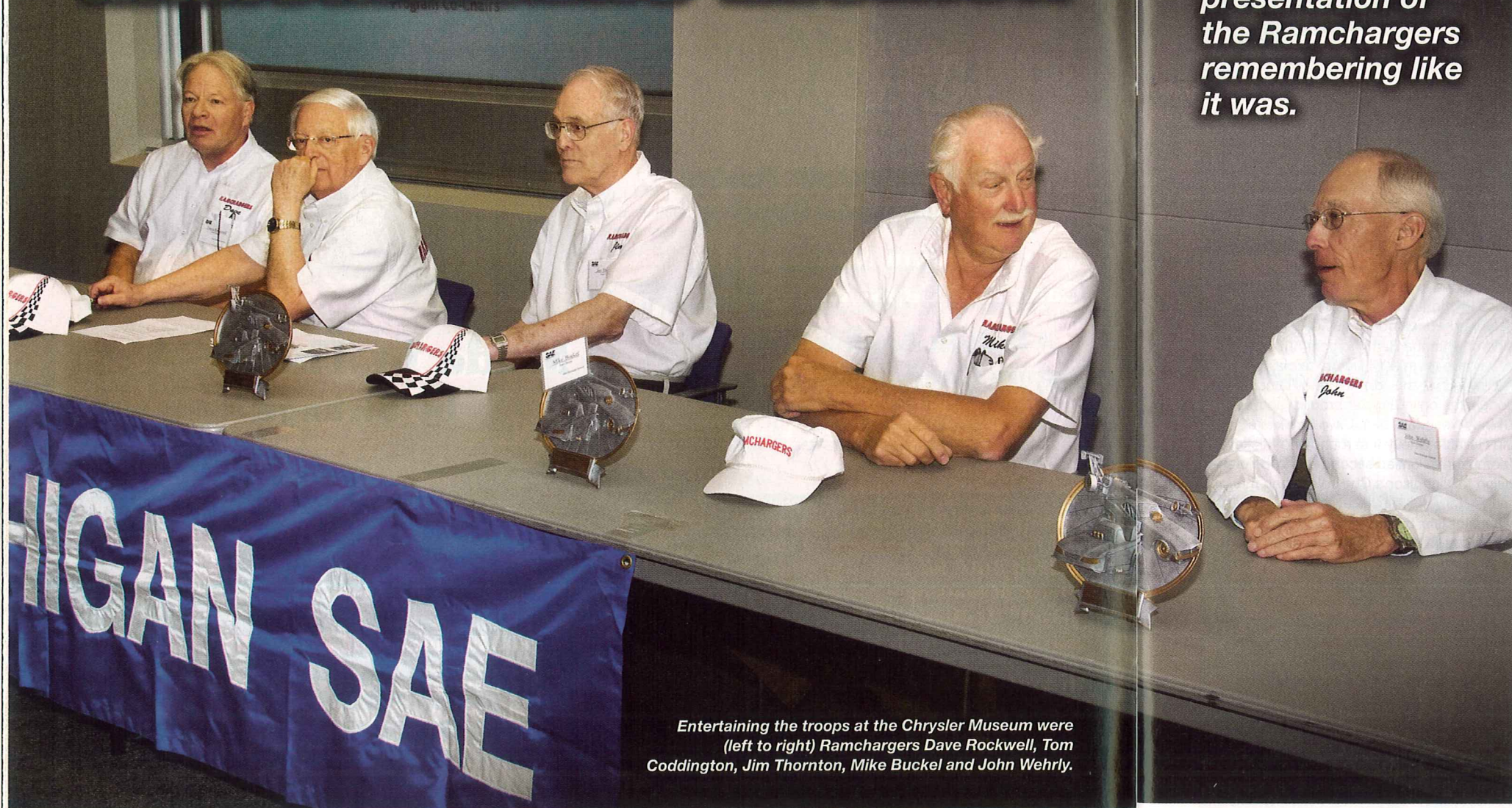




YAKKING IT UP DEPT.

Bill Owen

# RAMCHARGERS REUNION



Entertaining the troops at the Chrysler Museum were (left to right) Ramchargers Dave Rockwell, Tom Coddington, Jim Thornton, Mike Buckel and John Wehrly.

We don a disguise and sneak into an SAE presentation of the Ramchargers remembering like it was.

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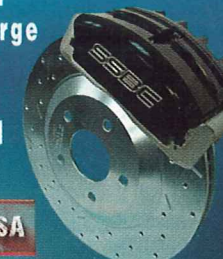
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#### Story and photos by Paul Stenquist

If a handful of young Chrysler engineers hadn't gotten together in the late fifties and started a drag racing club called the Ramchargers, you probably wouldn't be reading this magazine, and, more importantly, we wouldn't have your six bucks. Editor Gromer would likely have pursued his childhood dream as a street lamp inspector, and who knows what mischief Ehrenberg would have gotten into without a trove of Mopar data to pacify him.

Why? Because without the pioneering work of the Ramchargers, Chrysler might never have built high-performance cars. Consider that before the Ramchargers, Chrysler owned 1/2 of 1% of the high-performance automobile market. By the time the guys curtailed their research and racing



A number of race cars were on hand at the Chrysler Museum representing different eras of Mopar high performance. Bob Marshall's 1965 Dodge Coronet is an original A990 car that runs 9.50s at 138 MPH in SS/BA.

activity in 1974, Chrysler owned a massive 38% share of the go-fast category. And the Ramchargers weren't just in the room when it happened. They made it happen, begging, borrowing and stealing to get Chrysler involved in the early sixties high-performance wars. (We would have left out the stealing part, but the statute of limitations has expired.)

On April 30, 2012, five original Ramchargers got together with a bunch of engineers at the Chrysler (WPC) Museum in Auburn Hills, Michigan to talk about the skullduggery and off-campus engineering that led to Mopar milestones. Although the event was restricted to SAE members, we managed to hide in a bathroom until the museum closed, then slipped into the meeting and recorded the goings-on. Four Ramchargers took a turn spilling yarns. Here's a synopsis of what they said.



John Dinkel runs sub-11-second ETs with his B/SA 1964 Plymouth Max Wedge.

**Dave Rockwell—  
Setting the Stage**

Dave Rockwell, whose writing has been featured in this magazine, is a former Ramcharger and team historian. His book, *We Were the Ramchargers*, is an excellent chronology of the group's glory days. He played a similar role here, providing background for the gearhead talk that would follow.

Rockwell took us back to Ramcharger roots, to the '49 Plymouth "High and Mighty" club car the guys built for the drags.

Rockwell said the towering intake manifold that made the car resemble an elephant in heat was the Ramcharger's first experiment in ram tuning and the world's first tunnelram.

High and Mighty played another important part in Mopar history by falling apart. After the Ramchargers had beaten it to a pulp on the dragstrip, they needed a new toy for the '61 season, so they approached Plymouth management and begged. "Get outta here," said Plymouth brass.

Fortunately, some Chrysler biggies were

better tuned in to the rest of the world than those Plymouth boys. When Frank Wylie, a Harvard-educated PR guy at Dodge, got wind of what the Ramchargers had been up to, he gave them a '61 Dodge to play with.

Play with it, they did, and the Ramcharger Dodge, the only Chrysler product at the '61 Indy Nationals, beat Dave Strickler's Old Reliable Chevy first round and Mickey Thompson's Pontiac second round, before losing to Nicholson's Chevrolet when the balky T-85 wouldn't shift. Nicholson won the eliminator title, but the race officials broke with precedent and asked Nicholson and the Ramchargers to come back for a rematch. This time, the trans shifted, the Dodge won, and the world took note.

So too did Dodge brass, and they told Ramcharger Tom Hoover to put together a package for the RB engine that could "beat the Pontiacs," which were the big dog of the day.

The Max Wedge engines were the result, and Mopar rapidly ascended to near dominance in NHRA Super Stock competition. That woke up Chrysler management. They figured that if they could win at the greasy-kid sport of drag racing maybe they could win the roundy-round race at Daytona as well, an event that the money guys considered worthwhile. So they asked Hoover how that might be accomplished.

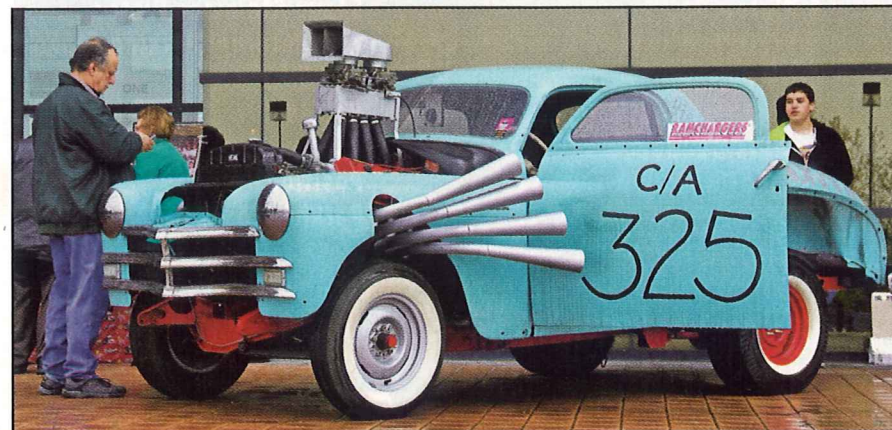
Tom put a pair of Hemi heads on the RB block, and the rest is history. Well, not quite, there were a lot of up, downs and altered wheelbases to come, but we want to get to the tech stories, so we'll just say that this series of events, from 1959 to late 1963, positioned Mopar for the success that followed. Much of that success was about having brilliant people in the right place at the right time.

**Tom Coddington—  
As Simple as ABA**

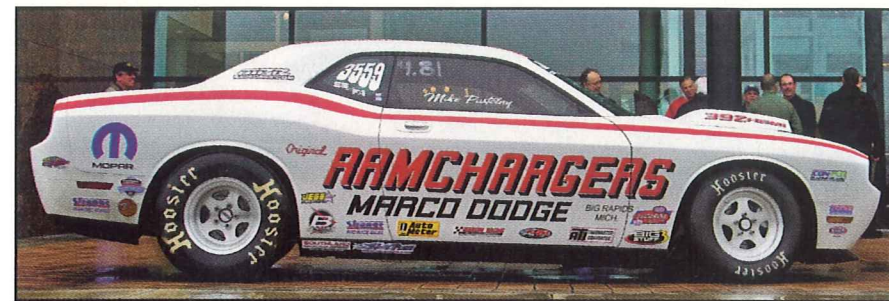
Although Tom Hoover was the Ramcharger's engine guru, Tom Coddington worked with him and was involved in a lot of track and dyno engine testing.



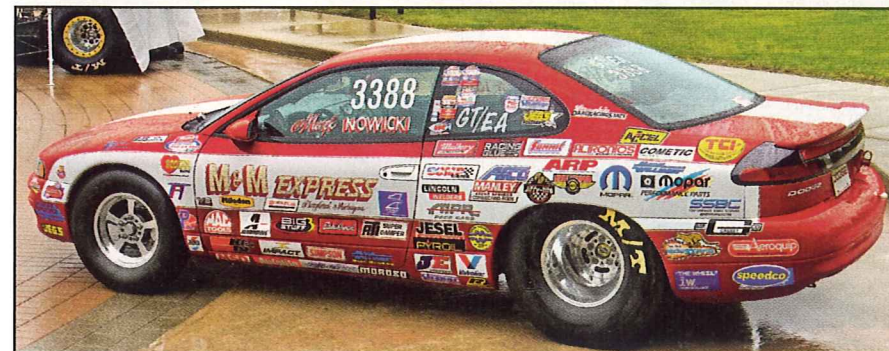
Dave Thomas' 2011 Drag Pak Challenger is equipped with the Viper V10 and races under the Ramchargers banner. At April's NHRA Division 3 point race, Dave ran 9.33 in SS/EA. Last season he set an AA/SA elapsed time record of 9.43 at 143.90 mph.



A replica of the Ramcharger's 1959 club car, the High and Mighty 1949 Plymouth. The long-gone original was a C/Altered national record holder. Its unofficial best was 11.80 at 117 MPH. Painting the front hub grease cap red was a 1950s hop-up trick.



Mike Pustelny's 2010 Challenger Drag Pak. Powered by a 6.4-liter Hemi, the Challenger competes in various stock classes. The car qualified ninth at the 2011 Nats with a 9.88 ET.



Mark Nowicki's 1998 Avenger is powered by a 360 smallblock and has run 9.30 at 140 mph in GT/EA. Mark was runner up in Super Stock Eliminator at the 2008 Nats.



Terry Dye's SS/JA '73 Duster is a factory-built race car that once belonged to Ray Winery. The car was featured in Super Stock magazine in the '70s. Running a low-compression (9:1) 340, Tony runs 10.40s. Back in the day, Winery ran 9.50s, 140 MPH with a more aggressive combination.

"One of the things we tried to impress on other racers was that you have to run closed-loop ABA tests," Coddington said. "In other words, if you're running camshaft A, then try camshaft B, you have to go back to camshaft A to evaluate the results. Otherwise, you can't be sure the baseline hasn't changed."

That technique was easy to master on the dyno, where testing was steady state and an SAE correction factor was built in. But on the dragstrip, conditions were always changing. Fortunately, the Ramchargers had a math whiz at their disposal, a fellow named George Wallace who was able to

develop a formula that took account of changing conditions, including atmospheric pressure and temperature. That formula is still used by Tom Hoover, who now races a pure stock drag car.

Coddington recalled how the team took a Hemi-powered A/FX car to Pomona in early '64, but quickly put it back on the trailer after initial runs revealed it to be slower than the wedge. The engine had performed great on the dyno in steady-state testing, but in the real world it couldn't cut it. That meant the problem was transient.

Back in Detroit, they took the car to the

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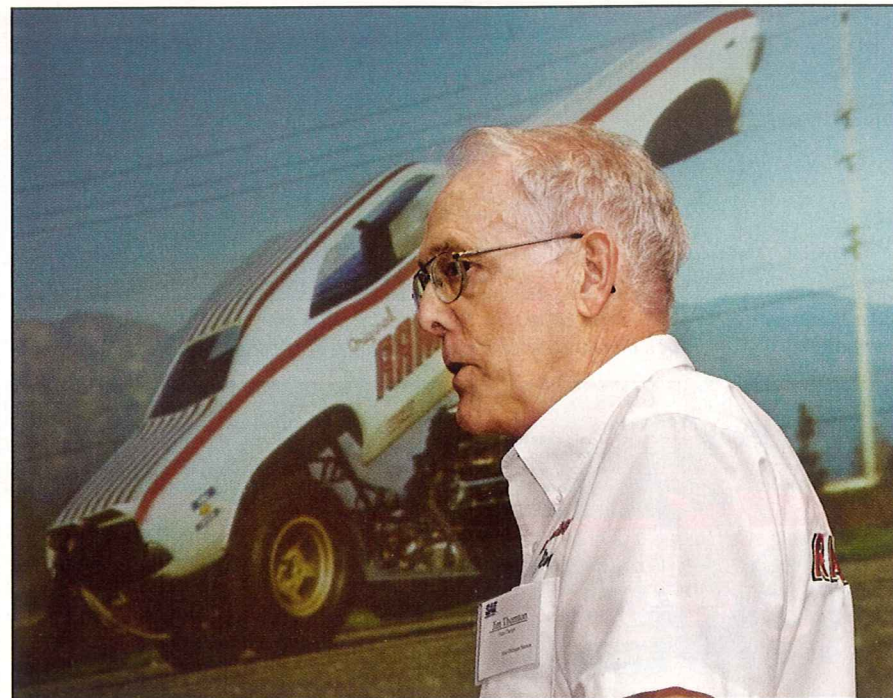
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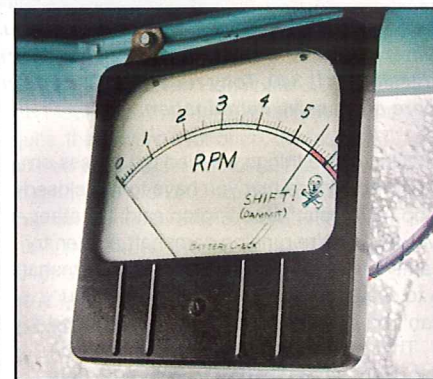
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Calculation using Scientific Calculator (Casio fx300ms)

Steps Enter

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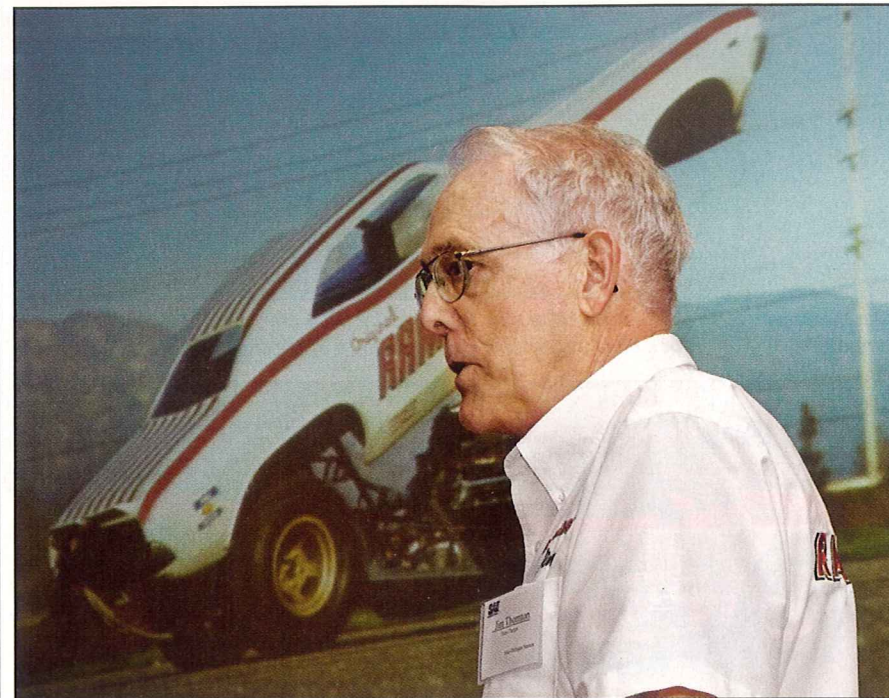
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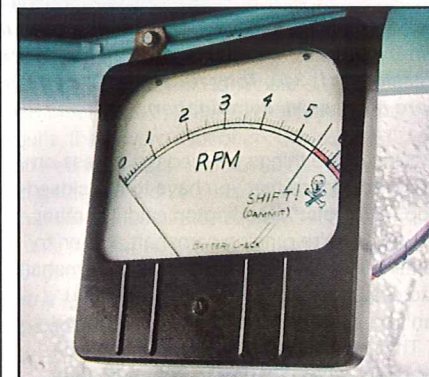
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# THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UBLY

**A devoted Ramchargers fan builds a tribute to the 1964 Dodge 330 SS/A machine—the first Ramchargers Super Stock to race with a Hemi under the hood.**

*Story and photos by Paul Stenquist*

**D**avid Clabuesch was a regular at Michigan's Ugly Dragway back in the summer of 1963. As it happens, the Ramchargers—that renegade band of Chrysler engineers who campaigned drag racing cars in their spare time—were Ugly regulars as well, frequently testing at the picturesque dragstrip way up in Michigan's thumb, far from the prying eyes of competitors. So it stands to reason that the teenage Clabuesch would become an avid fan of the red and white striped Ramcharger race cars and the team that campaigned them. That infatuation boiled over into deep devotion when Ramcharger driver, Jim Thornton, let young David ride up to the starting line with him in the team's '63 Dodge 330—the last of the wedge-powered Super Stocks.

That day at Ugly man. He eventually came to own a number of excellent automobiles and served as a show judge at the Mopar Nationals in the 1980s. It was there he met Ramcharger Dean Nicopolis and forged a friendship that would later lead to acquiring the team's '70 Hemi 'Cuda Super Stock. The 'Cuda had won 37 class championships at national events and was believed to be the only surviving Ramchargers race car. Most of the other cars that the team had campaigned over the years were painted white and sold after their racing careers had ended, and, as far as we know, none can be accounted for today.

David kept the 'Cuda for a number of years before selling it at auction—an experience that apparently ended badly for all concerned. We'd love to recount all the juicy details of that event, David's settlement agreement with the auction company prohibits him from discussing it. But you probably read about it. Not good.

Licking his wounds after the 'Cuda was gone, David, who is closely allied with several of the Ramchargers, looked for a way to make himself and his car collection whole again. With the blessing of the team members, he decided to build what he calls a nostalgia tribute car—a replica of the 1964 Dodge 330 SS/A machine—the first Ramchargers Super Stock to race with a Hemi under the hood and a car that helped establish Dodge and Plymouth as major players in the factory drag wars of the mid-sixties.



Tom Coddington (right), an original Ramcharger, and David Clabuesch got together for a show at the Walter P. Chrysler Museum. Tom counts 1964 as one of the great years in Ramcharger history.

David heats the hides in the Ugly water box. Back in the day, Super Stocks didn't do burnouts, but rather coated the tires with resin.

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That day at Ugly made David a Mopar man. He eventually came to own a number of excellent automobiles and served as a show judge at the Mopar Nationals in the 1980s. It was there he met Ramcharger Dean Nicopolis and forged a friendship that would later lead to acquiring the team's '70 Hemi 'Cuda Super Stock. The 'Cuda had won 37 class championships at national events and was believed to be the only surviving Ramchargers race car. Most of the other cars that the team had campaigned over the years were painted white and sold after their racing careers had ended, and, as far as we know, none can be accounted for today.

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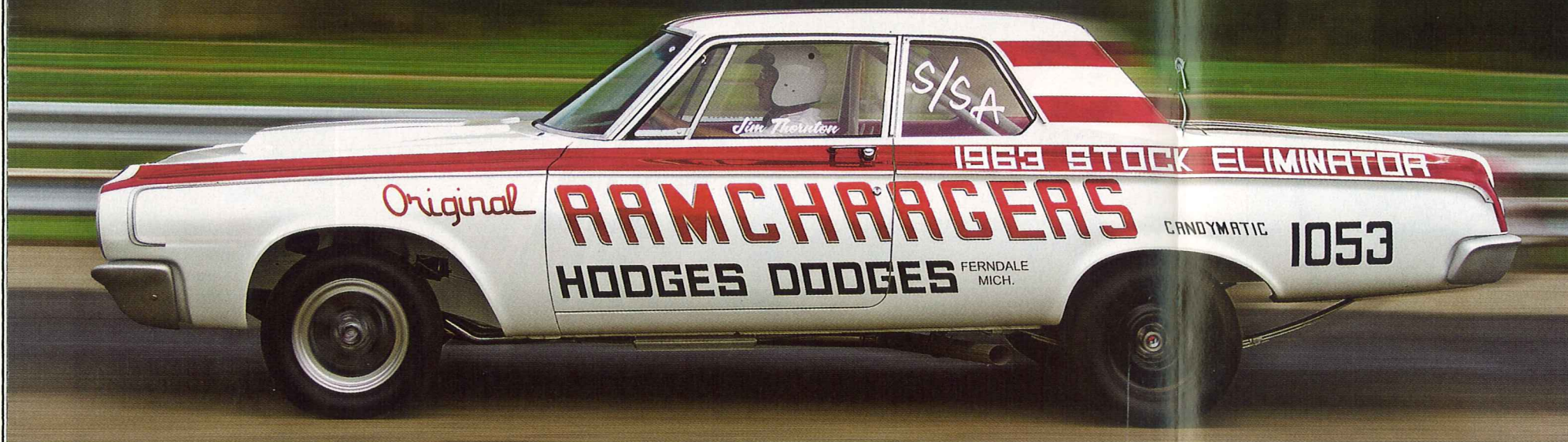
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While the Ramchargers' first Hemi-powered Super Stock was campaigned for only a part of one season, it is undoubtedly one of the most significant Mopars of all time. Thanks to David Clabuesch for his interpretation of this classic.



Thirty feet past the starting line the Dodge is still hazing the hides, but it's tracking straight and true. The rear of the replica car pays tribute to Ramcharger Dean Nicopolis, who passed away in November 2009.

The story of the car that inspired this tribute, the original Candymatic '64 Dodge Super Stock, began in April of 1963 when Lynn Townsend approved a plan to build a modern version of the Chrysler Hemi. The primary objective was a win at the prestigious Daytona 500, a seemingly impossible task for Detroit's number-three automaker. But the success of the Ramchargers, who had proved very competitive in Super Stock drag racing with their wedge-powered cars, led Chrysler execs to believe they could compete with the far better funded race programs of their cross-town competitors.

The new Hemi was engineered in a matter of months, and following some last-minute



The interior of the tribute is not an exact copy of the original but rather a stylized version. The A100 van bucket seats seen here were used in the factory Super Stocks. Like the original, the tribute car has no back seat and is upholstered in red. Other factory Super Stocks we've seen had black carpeting, but the red-on-red color scheme is more attractive. The dashboard layout and steering wheel are a departure from the original. The button shifter doesn't display the reversed pattern that we've seen on 1964 factory racers, and, obviously, the Tuff wheel didn't appear until 1970.

changes to the cylinder block, it was delivered to the Dodge and Plymouth NASCAR teams just in time for a Daytona sweep. Soon thereafter, work began on the development of aluminum heads for drag racing.

The Ramchargers built two Hemi cars for the '64 season: an A/FX Dodge with a shortened wheelbase and an NHRA-legal SS/A. That odd-looking short wheelbase car would go on to help launch a whole new era

of drag racing, with a class that came to be known as funny car. The second car, with Jim Thornton at the wheel, would cement the reputation of Mopar as a Super Stock powerhouse. With very little development time, the Candymatic Dodge 330 SS/A took the class win at the U.S. Nationals in Indianapolis with an 11.37, 128.80 over another Mopar Super Stock—the Golden Commandos Plymouth. Although the

Ramchargers Dodge was quickest and fastest of the Mopar contingent, Thornton lost the Super Stock Eliminator final to Roger Lindamood when the car got a bit loose coming off the starting line.

The Clabuesch-owned 1964 Candymatic Dodge tribute car that you see on these pages isn't an exact copy of the original, which was sold shortly after the end of the '64 Nationals win and is apparently missing in action. But the replica was created with genuine Ramcharger DNA. Built by Jeff Thomas and Tom Bloom of J & B Custom Classics in Clio, Michigan, it includes parts salvaged from the Ramchargers' stockpile, including a 538-cubic-inch Hemi built by Dean Nicopolis. The engine proved to be one of the last that Nicopolis would build as he passed away in November 2009.

While the original Candymatic Dodge Super Stock had aluminum doors, fenders and front bumper, the replica is equipped



The original car had a Chrysler 8¾" rear, but the tribute car has a huge motor, so Jeff Thomas installed a durable 9-inch Ford rear (Boo!).

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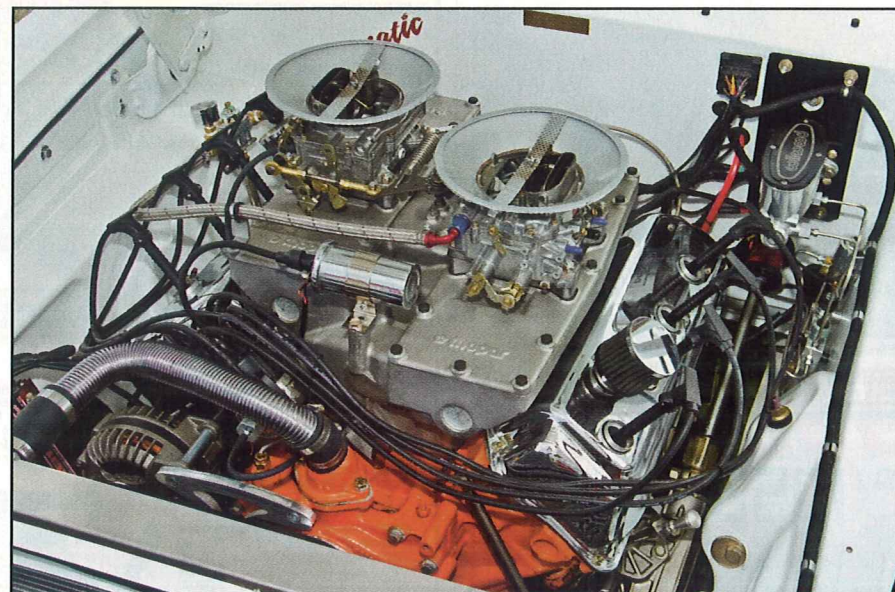
The thoroughly modern trunk of the replica Super Stock boasts a fuel cell and an aluminum battery box.

with steel doors, fiberglass fenders, and a fiberglass front bumper. The side windows are Lexan, which wasn't available in '64. The interior, which was designed and built by Jeff Lemke, is a stylized version of the original. It incorporates the Bostrom A100 seats that were used in the 1964 factory Super Stock and, like the original, has no rear seat, but it takes liberties with the design of other passenger cabin elements.

In place of the 8 3/4" third member that was standard for early Dodge super stocks, J&B installed a tough 9-inch Ford unit. Jeff Thomas explained that he would have opted for the Dana 60 that many racers used, but parts are more plentiful for the Ford rear.

But David's nostalgia tribute car does carry the Ramchargers name, and it always will. Soon after work had begun on the car, David learned that the Ramchargers speed shops, which held the trademark and rights to the name, were going out of business. He bought the rights, and now is able to use and license the Ramchargers name.

Two modern stock eliminator cars, the AA/SA V10 Drag Pak Challenger of David



Ramcharger Dean Nicopolis built the 528-cubic-inch Hemi with parts from the team's stockpile. He told Clabusch that it could be expected to put out more than 700 horsepower. Like the first version of the 1964 Super Stock engine, it's equipped with AFB carbs. The team later switched to Holleys. Very few underhood details are period-correct, however.

Thomas and the A/SA 392 Hemi Drag Pak Challenger of Mike Pustelney, now race under the Ramchargers banner, with licensing provided by David. At this writing, the Thomas Challenger held the AA/SA ET and mph records at 9.43, 143.90. Pustelney's Challenger started the season on a high note as well, qualifying fifth in stock eliminator at a May 14, Division 3 race with a 10.11.

David displayed the '64 Super Stock tribute car this past June at the CEMA car show, which is held annually at the Walter

P. Chrysler Museum in Auburn Hills. Joining David at the show was Tom Coddington, an original Ramcharger. Nicknamed "the ghost," Coddington, like the other team members, was a Chrysler engineer. As a Ramcharger, he helped Tom Hoover build engines, spent late nights thrashing on the car at the old Woodward Garage, and pitched in at the race track.

"I remember 1964 as one of the best years for Super Stock racing," Tom told us. "It was a great year for us. We were very successful, but it didn't come easy. First time out, the car shocked us a bit with numbers that were no better than our '63 wedge car, but we changed the carburetion and got it right."

Since it was at Ugly Dragway that his Ramcharger love affair began, David wanted to put the reincarnated Candymatic Dodge through its paces for the first time on that very same asphalt. We went along to take a few snaps. While we had hoped that some of the original Ramchargers would make the trip as well, scheduling didn't allow that.

The track was closed on the day we traveled up to the thumb, but track owner Dennis Janowiak, who has known David for many years, opened it up for us. Running without clocks, the car sounded great and went straight, despite hazing the 8 1/2-inch-wide M/T street slicks most of the way down the track. It was David's first turn behind the wheel, and he got into the rev limiter a bit, which was set at a very modest 6500 rpm, but the car handled well and David was pleased.

While David's Candymatic Dodge won't be driven extensively, David does plan to take it down the track a few more times. And you can be sure that the track he takes it down will be a pretty little dragstrip called Ugly. ★



Jim Thornton and Roger Lindamood leave the starting line together in the Super Stock Eliminator final at the 1964 U.S. Nationals. Thornton, who had won class, spun the tires and lost to Lindamood. But he came back for a post-race encore and ran what was reportedly the first 130 mph super stock pass in drag racing competition.

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