

The Battle Lines Are Drawn Around
Showroom Stock Endurance Racing....

Stocker Shock

On Monday, Aug. 13, the dust hardly settled from a hard-fought Escort 24 Hour Showroom Stock enduro at Mid-Ohio, and word got around that the SCCA had made the plunge. Pro Showroom Stock endurance racing became reality when club Vice President Costa Dunias announced to the world that Mid-Ohio was Round Two of what would be a four-race '84 Manufacturers Series. He invited everyone to stay tuned for word on an expanded, six-race 1985 SCCA pro series and admitted to a great deal of enthusiasm.

On Tuesday, Oct. 16, the dust not yet stirred up in the convention center hosting the 19th annual SEMA show in Las Vegas, and word got around that IMSA, too, would make the plunge. The stakes shot up in pro Showroom Stock racing (IMSA calls it "Street Stock") when IMSA President John Bishop announced a Firestone-sponsored, eight-race '85 series. He invited everyone to listen to the details on the Firestone Firehawk Endurance Championship and its nearly quarter of a million dollars worth of prize and points fund money, and admitted to a great deal of enthusiasm.

All that enthusiasm seemed to be worthy of comment.... Ed.

Who Reaps the Rewards?

IT'S

BEEN CALLED "a rapidly growing motorsports phenomenon." It's also been called, by one of its observers, "Racing's answer to golf." (That is, a boring pursuit of rich men.) It is more properly called Showroom Stock Endurance Racing and whatever one's opinion of this type of competition, it is most definitely a phenomenon. And now it's the focus of intense competition between two sanctioning bodies — the Sports Car Club of America and the International Motor Sports Association.

The phenomenon really started with the 24 Hours of Nelson Ledges. Although held in an enthusiastically managed combination cow pasture and swamp in the uncharted wilderness of Ohio, the concept of the Nelson Ledges event took hold quickly in all the right places. The major automobile monthlies adopted the event like a prodigal son, immediately giving it a disproportionate and inordinate amount of ink — after all, here was a semi-real race that automotive writers and editors cum Dan Gurney could participate in and even have a slight glimmer of a chance of winning.

Sponsors, as they are wont, began chasing that trail of ink. Manufacturers like Ford, Chevrolet and Porsche jumped in quickly with the realization that here was a more credible proving ground for their showroom sample than an 18-lap race around Road Atlanta in the SCCA Runoffs. Such distinguished gentlemen as Ford's Special Vehicle Operations head honcho Michael Kranefuss even began participating as drivers. Next thing you know, a tire war breaks out between BFGoodrich and Goodyear, which meant that at the 24 Hours of Mid-Ohio Aug. 11-12 every team on pit road had its own factory tire representative.

With all this action, naturally some real race car drivers began showing up, not to mention teams from Germany that couldn't speak a word of American, except maybe Burger King or Mc Donald's.

So, who is going to reap the harvest of this bonanza? So far the answer is unclear. The SCCA recently announced a Manufacturers Cup for the races at Nelson Ledges, Mid-Ohio, Lime Rock's Little Le Mans (the three-hour event held in Connecticut on the Labor Day weekend) and the 12 Hours of Willow Springs. The Cup will be awarded for the Showroom Stock GT, A, B and C classes. Rest assured that the Cup idea came about rather quickly — midway through the Mid-Ohio weekend it would seem! — because of the competition that's heating up between IMSA and the SCCA in regard to sanctioning the SS enduros.

Costa Dunias of the SCCA explained then that his



Baker, Busby and Knoop made a yawner out of 1984 Nelson's longest day.

Shock

organization's Cup would have a point system weighted toward the longer events. "We have talked with lots of competitors, manufacturers and other sponsors, and feel there is tremendous interest in an SCCA-sponsored National Showroom Stock Endurance Series," said Dunias. IMSA, remember, toyed with a six-race series earlier this year before dropping the idea and leaving more than a few people with some expensive cars and nowhere to race. Nevertheless and despite that debacle, an IMSA representative was nosing around the Mid-Ohio pits in search of corporate sponsors for its own Showroom Stock endurance series even as the SCCA's announcement — concerning '84 and an expanded six-race series for 1985 — was being made.

IMSA's bombshell came two months later on Oct. 16 at the Las Vegas SEMA Show. It would have an eight-race '85 series, sponsored by Firestone to the tune of a \$25,000 purse per event plus a \$40,000 points fund. While SCCA will continue to champion its four existing club racing classes — SSGT, A, B and C — IMSA could set up something different. And very much unlike SCCA, all the competitors in IMSA's Firestone Firehawk Endurance Championship will compete on Firestone tires...

Whatever becomes of the sanctioning joust, Showroom Stock endurance races offer plenty of opportunity to drivers and car owners. While much more expensive than pursuing an SCCA Showroom Stock Divisional title, the series has many more benefits as well. Because of the length of a race, a car owner can sell his seat several times over to cover expenses. Because of the national publicity involved, it is easier for a car owner to line up sponsorship — although that is never an easy task by any standard of measure. For both car owners or those purchasing a ride, a showroom endurance series offers a driver a better arena in which to prove himself or herself and can be a stepping stone between club racing and a full-time professional career. For professional drivers with factory team connections, the series offers another paying weekend in a relatively relaxed atmosphere.

While both IMSA President John Bishop and SCCA President Nick Craw pooh-pooed the notion when asked about competition between the two groups in regard to the Showroom Stock endurance circuit idea, it will be interesting to see if both sanctioning bodies can successfully sustain a series simultaneously. The whole concept is shaping up as an interesting test case: the sanctioning and marketing prowess of IMSA, which many have long accused of a lack of marketing aggression, and the noticeably more aggressive SCCA (which has

become so since Craw took over the reins in June of 1983). The battle lines are drawn around the manufacturers currently participating in what's called the "Prototype" class. Any event without the factory-backed speed merchants truly would become motor racing's answer to golf...

The coming months will bring a lot more answers in regard to the future of this latest brand of professional motor racing in the United States. Considering the phenomenal growth of SS enduros in just a few years, it is no doubt an important fiefdom for any sanctioning body which wishes to be regarded as America's road racing best.

-Jonathan Ingram

What Hath Toly Wrought?

TWO POTENTIALLY important things happened over the past dozen years in American road racing: First, in 1972 the SCCA created a new class called Showroom Stock. Second, a handful of winters ago, Anatoly Arutunoff, in one of his frequent moments showing a lack of lucidity, plunged headlong into show business and held a Showroom Stock race at Hallett that lasted for two years. (Actually it started about half an hour shy of New Year's Eve and went half an hour into Jan. 1; Danny Sullivan and William Jeanes won it.)

Advance the calendar to the present and you have professional Showroom Stock racing featuring Le Mans winners, back-up parts cars for the poorest of competitors, factory support and now, "Oh, go get 'em, SCCA and IMSA, two pro SERIES."

They're both gonna go create rules, decide what is and what isn't, attract sponsors and I don't wanna think what else. I've seen and heard it too many times in the 19 years this sport (oh, sport, hell, BUSINESS) has fed me.

When the SCCA created the now forgotten Showroom Slow classes, we all knew they would be miserably uninteresting and would last forever. The cars would fall over a lot and puke their little Opel, Pinto and Datsun 510 guts all over the track, messing up things for the Bugeye Sprite boys whose races last forever, whose cars fall over a lot, etc., etc. Englewood, nee Denver, made it a Commandment that they race last in the day, giving tracks a chance to let the spectators out early so the SCCA stewards could have an unobstructed shot at the exit gate when the full program was over.

Well, if you've been around long enough, you know what happened next. First it was Showroom Stock Sports Car as an additional class. Then SSA, SSB and SSC. Then SSGT. Then they let in America's only home-grown sports car, the Corvette.



Nelson Ledges: Crude beginnings of Showroom Stock Enduro mania.



Saab brought 24-hour pre-race tests and pro drivers to SS enduros.

(They've never said the name of the club is the Sports Car of America Club. They love their little Alfa Montreals, Renault Dauphines, Alfa Zagatos and would continue to have classes for them until the only one left is in a museum in Watkins Glen.)

Along with the rigid rules, which said you couldn't do nothin' to these little SS hummers, came cheating. First it was dumb but marvelously creative stuff: filling shocks with heavy grease, that kind of thing. And the SCCA would throw your butt out of the CSPRRC winner's circle if you did anything similar.

About the time of Toly's race, the hard-working and unpaid Indians who ran the quaint Nelson Ledges road course had the foresight to expand on something they already had, and created the 24 Hour Longest Day event. First year, 1980, they got 21 cars. This year, 1984, they shut them down long in advance and attracted 52 starters.

A few months ago, the Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course copied Nelson's idea and started 51 cars which produced a helluva race. Many of the drivers had never been to Mid-Ohio before or at least since Jim Trueman bought the place and started throwing money at it, and this made the drivers wonder what ever possessed them to put up with Nelson's gravel pit lanes, single solitary co-ed urinal, knee-high weeds and total lack of an audience all these years. Charm Nelson has and that counts a lot, but at Mid-Ohio they had electric hand dryers in the whizzers and potted plants in their garage stalls. The big time.

The SCCA chose the Mid-Ohio weekend to announce they were going to create a series comprising Nelson, Mid-Ohio, Lime Rock and Willow Springs, make some rules and offer a Manufacturers Championship. (We all know how much the public and press cares about the Manufacturers Championship in IMSA's GT, RS and Kelly series. Zero. But SCCA did it anyhow.)

Since we're looking to attach blame, perhaps we should lambaste the folks at Saab for taking the first dump in the punch bowl. It was the folks from Troll Country, after all, who first hired semi-professional drivers and subjected their amateur racing cars to 24-hour race conditions tests at Daytona before tackling the Summit Points and Nelson Ledges of the world.

Just like IMSA's RS class, which was once a place where you could win in a car with a license plate still on it, things quickly got out of hand when winning, advertising budgets and the heat of battle became important. That's happened to all the SCCA "entry level" classes over the years.

At Mid-Ohio, what was passed off for prototypes included maybe seven cars which were just four-wheeled bastard sons that didn't fit anywhere else: the 1983 Turbo Audi Quattro, and some real prototypes like the Guldstrand Corvette and the Herb

Adams Avanti GT. The silver medal-winning Peugeot 505 Turbo may have been the only legitimate one of the bunch, wallowing its way around the turns and looking like it would run for three years at that speed.

Never mind that the factory spec sheets for some of these prototypes were felt tips on legal pads — the Avanti, for pity sakes, was full of hand-fabricated parts and was so typically Adams outrageous it wouldn't even be legal to drive in Ohio — ignore that aspect. It was fun to see them try.

All this really got serious in 1983 when Fred Baker submitted an entry for the Nelson race for a Porsche 944 Turbo. It was refused because nobody had heard of such a car. Finally, and since Baker is one of the "in crowd" at Nelson (and we were all told the car would be in dealer showrooms soon) it was accepted. It didn't; it was back again in '84 and you still haven't read the long lead road test about it in *Road & Track*.

The 1984 24-hour races at both Nelson and Mid-Ohio didn't appear to have as much factory involvement as the 1983 or '82 races did, but it was there lurking even if Peugeot had the only manufacturing press kit in the room.

Helping Showroom Stock down the road to progress is also the fault of (or to the credit of) the tire people like BFGoodrich, Goodyear, Firestone, Yokohama and one of these days, General, now that Akron's No. 4 company has pirated away some personnel and files from BFG.

Firestones were on three cars at Mid-Ohio — like some of the cars, the tires were so new they didn't even have cute model names — and Firestone has made a whopping commitment by agreeing to pay the freight for IMSA's '85 series.

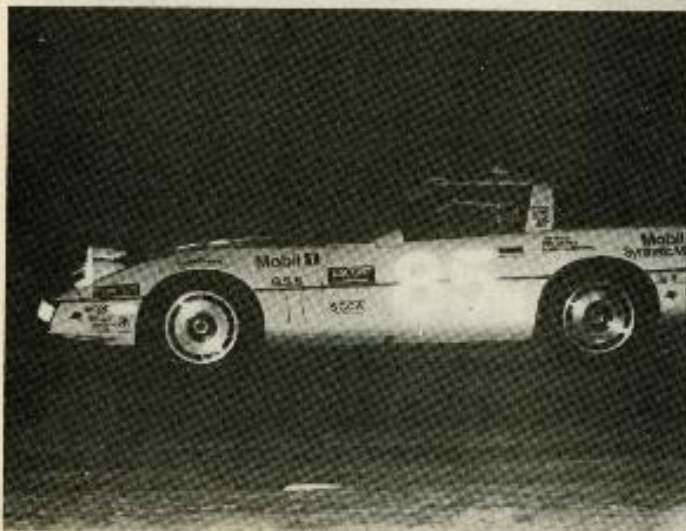
So instead of Vegas racing roof to door panel, we now have '85 Corvettes that need to go from Detroit to Los Angeles for ... uh ... dealer prep, before they come back to Ohio to race. Corvettes probably capable of 1.1 Gs on the skid pad, sporting tires very heavy on the gee-whiz factor, a genuine Bosch fuel injection system, improved suspension and a five-speed. Gawd ... point me toward Woodward Avenue.

All this, plus the presence of a sizable paying crowd at the luxurious Mid-Ohio racing facilities, has totally spoiled the game. And I, for one, couldn't be happier because I love it.

Those people who saw it at Mid-Ohio are going to tell their friends, and they are going to tell their friends, and so on and so on.

So what if the SCCA and IMSA tech inspectors will have to tell the company lawyer to come to the race because Herb Adams is entered? They've already necessitated asterisks in the record books because Mid-Ohio let 'em use alternate material brake pads. Now if they could take off the mufflers, and maybe let 'em brace the suspension a bit, and....

-Dave Arnold



Guldstrand's 'Vette pierces the dark as Showroom Stockers go all night at Willow.



Porsche SSGT swept it all in 1984.