

Country Ways

By Norman Mayersohn

Today's Farm Report on Ricky and Leo Klarr's Homegrown Horsepower Crop

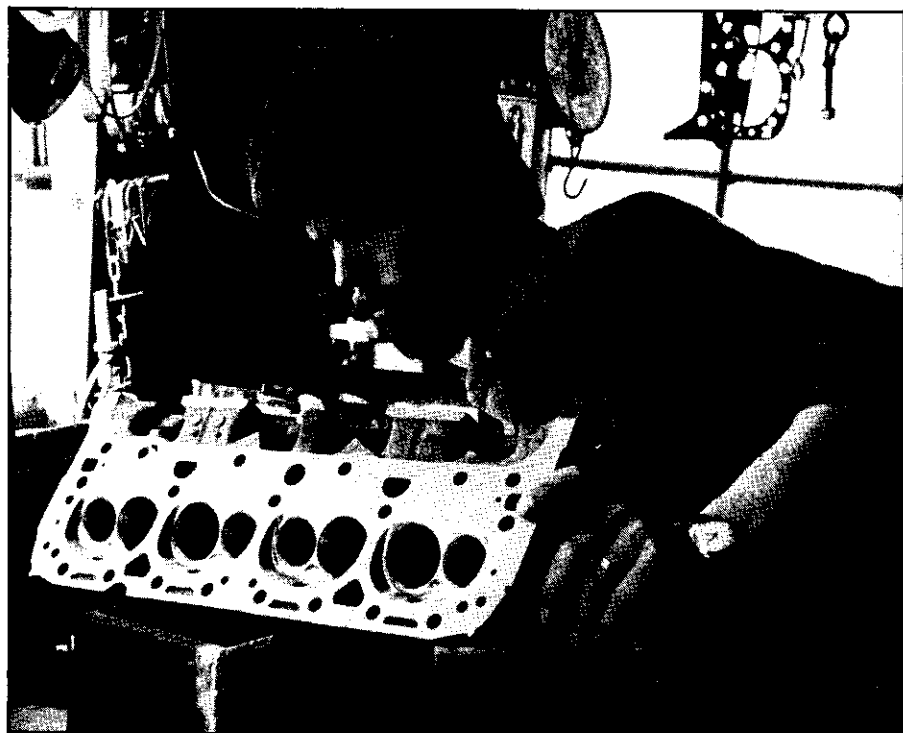
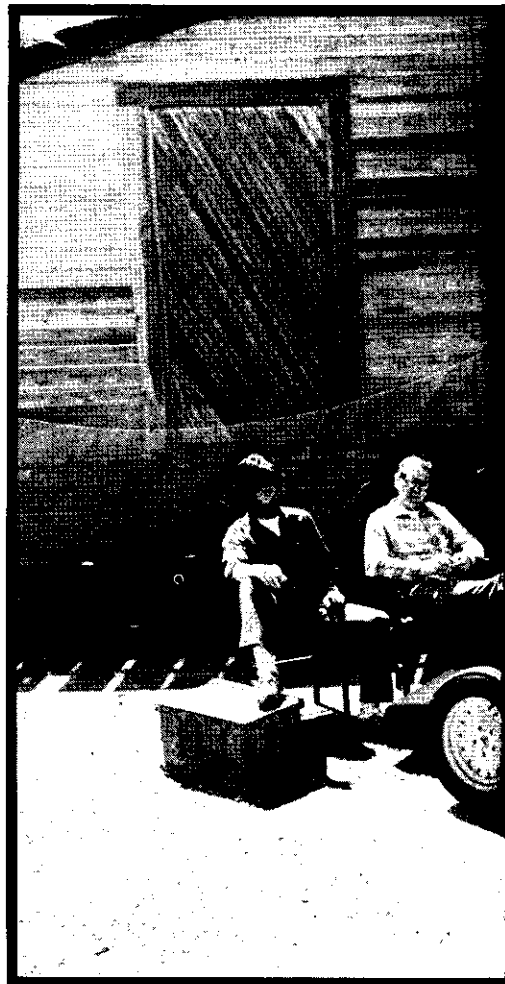
Most of us tend to think of Mississippi as a flat patchwork of productive farmlands, so it's a surprise to discover that much of the state is covered by low, second growth pine forests. In the early 1800s, those settlers fortunate enough to put down roots in the Mississippi Delta region found the weather temperate, the soil rich and their survival assured. Those who homesteaded even a few miles outside the fertile floodplains of the Mississippi River faced an arduous existence of wresting crops from the sandy topsoil. The settlers persevered, and though they never accumulated the wealth of their Delta neighbors, they maintained what could optimistically be called "working farms."

Down in Hattiesburg, in the southern part of the state, Leo and Ricky Klarr tend to a hundred acres of prime zoysia and centipede sod, top quality grasses used for golf courses and athletic fields. Leo's farm is blessed with untypically good dirt, perhaps a gift brought in ancient times by the adjacent Bowie River. Nevertheless, theirs is a working farm, producing a respectable crop from a similar amount of labor put in. In many ways the red A/Econo Altered roadster that Ricky and Leo race is the quarter-mile extension of that rural Mississippi ethic—a working race car if there ever was one.

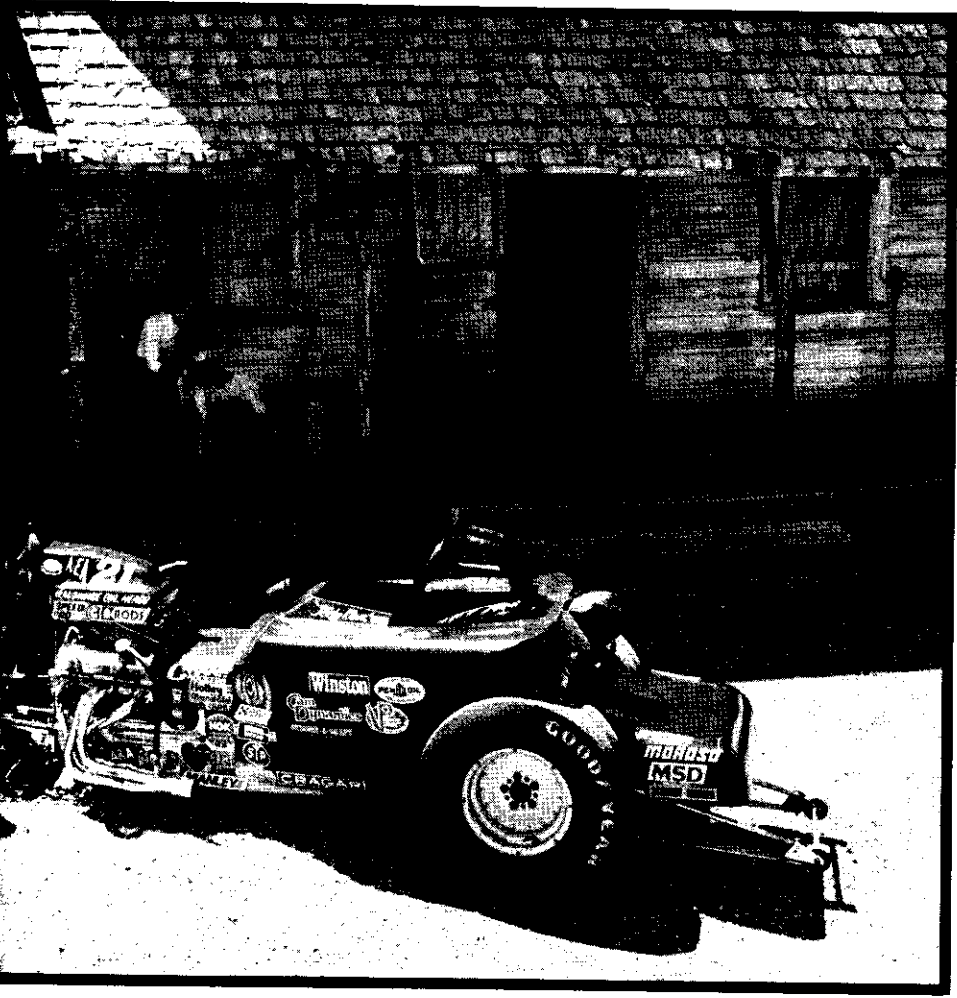
Don't think of it as the farm's prize Clydesdale, but rather as the totally dependable plow horse. If there is nothing fancy about the Klarrs' racer, there is also nothing unnecessary, so it totals up to one of the really consistent threats in

Competition eliminator over the past two seasons. That's no hollow threat either: As winners of the Division 2 points championship and the Cajun Nationals in 1980 and back-to-back points meets in the early part of the '81 season, the Klarrs have come to be national event level contenders.

In an eliminator overrun by Top Fuel-appearing C/ED's and triple axle Chapparral trailers, the Klarrs' racing hardware is visually underwhelming. Only the time slips are spectacular. With 305 cubic inches, unported turbo heads, a single 850 cfm Holley carburetor and

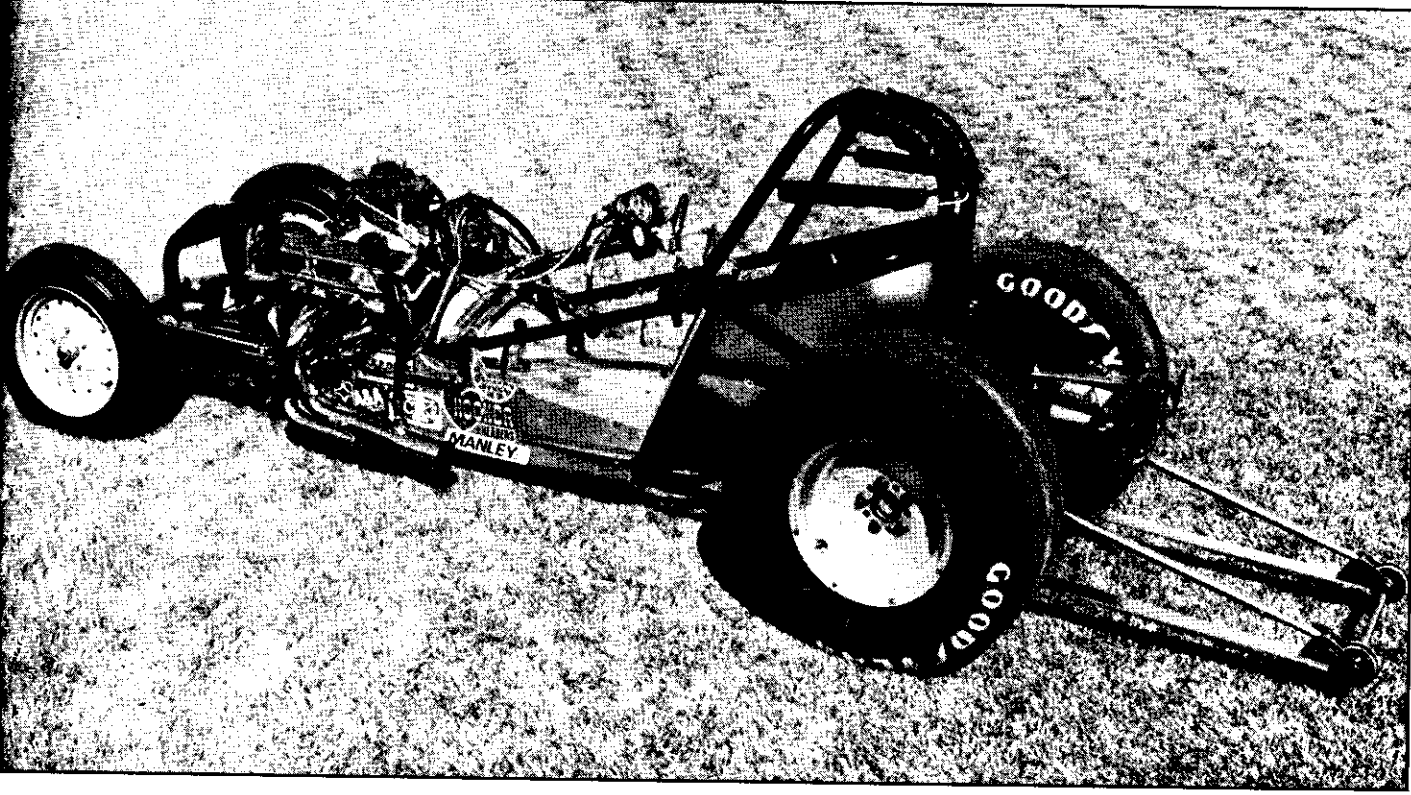


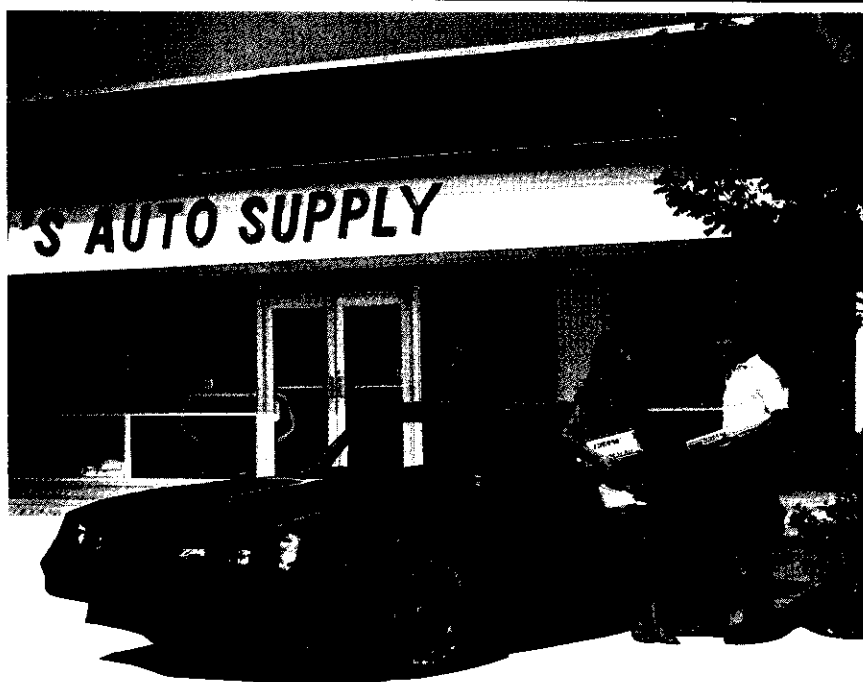
Ricky eyes up a head casting for future use, looking especially for one with four equally good parts.



a Powerglide transmission, Ricky generally qualifies the car with times equal to the best Pro Stock clockings, 8.30's at 157 mph. At a national event you might not even notice their presence until you check the top of the qualifying sheet or wait for the final rounds of eliminations, but the rest of the racers always know what the father and son team of Leo and Ricky is up to.

Horsepower is a large part of what the Klarrs are up to. It takes nearly 600hp (596 to be precise, as measured on the Reher-Morrison dyno) to accelerate the 1525-lb. roadster through the quarter-mile at a pace four-tenths under the 8.80 index. It would be very convenient if that kind of output could be mail ordered or store bought, but it's simply not available. And building it yourself, even if you have the knowledge, is not easy in this part of the country. Ricky has the luxury of being able to use a number of local machine facilities, but for operations as vital as block align boring he must make a several hour round trip to Mobile, Alabama. Self-sufficiency is not new to the farmers of this area, as the specialized problems often bring about their own homegrown solutions. To Leo that is no drawback, because it is very obvious that the car would never





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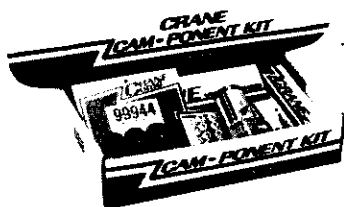
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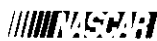
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perform as well with engine shop powerplants. "There's no way anyone in business could put as much time into a motor as Ricky. He can labor over every single detail and work it to perfection. That's an advantage money can't buy." There must be a lot of truth in what Leo says, because no other A/EA in the country runs as quickly.

Ricky's ability to build and develop his high horsepower combinations is the result of nearly ten years of racing, starting with local level machinery and progressing to the early-model Nova Super Stocker he raced before building the Comp car. The current T-bucket roadster actually started life as an Opel GT B/EA, built on a 105-inch wheelbase by New Orleans' Boogie Scott. That body was tucked away in the rafters of the Klarr barn-cum-workshop in order to pare weight for the A class, and it will probably stay there because the roadster is so much easier to work on in every respect. From his starting line observations Leo concludes that "the Econo Dragsters are better under marginal conditions, but at national event tracks it makes no difference." Through all of the cars, Ricky has accumulated experience in tuning and driving, all the while soaking up every bit of technical information he could. And even that has required a great show of effort, as he's overcome the childhood problems of communicating with other people that drag racing to a large extent helped him get over.

The tradition of providing for one's own needs runs deep in the culture of Mississippi and has thankfully been preserved in recent generations. Leo has farmed his acres of the hill country for 30 years, and true to his ancestors, he built his own house on the land. The facilities for fabrication work don't exist locally, but what they can do, they will. Ricky has portions of the house staked out as his cylinder head department, and uses his own Superflow bench to improve the engine's breathing. He spent much of the past winter at the Brandywine Cylinder Heads shop learning how to get the most from the bench, on

the same premise that he could give each port more attention than any commercial operation could possibly afford. It already has turned into a stimulant for Ricky's far probing mind, leading him to develop his own profiles for intake valve heads and to search for a set of head castings with no deficient ports. Even the simple task of clean-up is elevated around here, with each head first getting the soap and water treatment, then blown off with air, and finally blasted by a kerosene jet heater to prevent rusting in the damp Southern weather.

Of course it takes a more than a competent car to put all 600hp on the starting line. While others strained their wallets, the Klarrs put their brains to work. The car incorporates a fairly commonplace ladder bar and coil/shock suspension at the rear, but for ease of adjustment a threaded preload device is fitted in the lower ladder bar leg. Up front we can spot the standard transverse torsion bar to control the front axle, but the farm

folks have added a set of genuine Model T friction dampers to keep things under control when settling down from a wheelstand. Add a Volkswagen issue hydraulic shimmy controller to the steering linkage and you've gone several steps towards making the car a more consistent piece in the eliminator runoffs. Hanging out a bit farther to the front is the extended nose now commonly used to trip the lights a bit earlier for better qualifying times. Ricky noted everyone else's streamlined extensions, but reflected that the straight-down air dams of the Funny Cars really had the right idea. "Doesn't it make more sense to push all that air around the car instead of letting it drag underneath the body?" he asks innocently, maybe testing your perception as much as seeking your opinion.

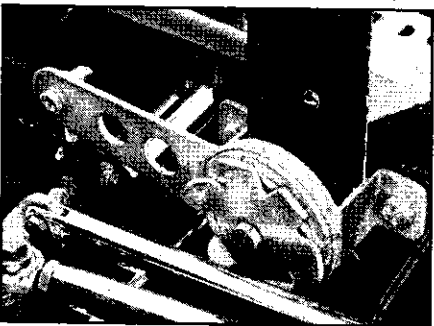
Even during the car's construction the team was thinking beyond their stock-bodied level of experience. The aluminum work has been painstakingly rolled under the car an extra 3 inches on each side in order to direct any oil from a blown

engine between the rear wheels, rather than under them. To further ensure the safety of the team's only driver, and to keep a constant monitor on the integrity of the frame tubing and welds, the complete structure has been built airtight. Each fitting, weld and joint was checked and rechecked until the entire frame could be pressurized with a handy air fitting. The result is so simple it's disarming—if there's a leak, something has cracked, and it can easily be found with a spray bottle of soapy water. This is not leading edge space age technology at work, but rather a straightforward solution to a common problem as seen by some down-home farm folks.

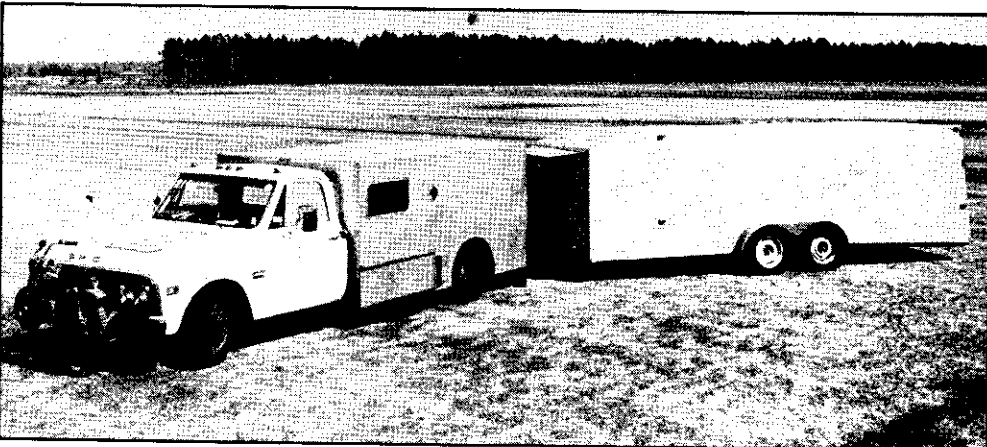
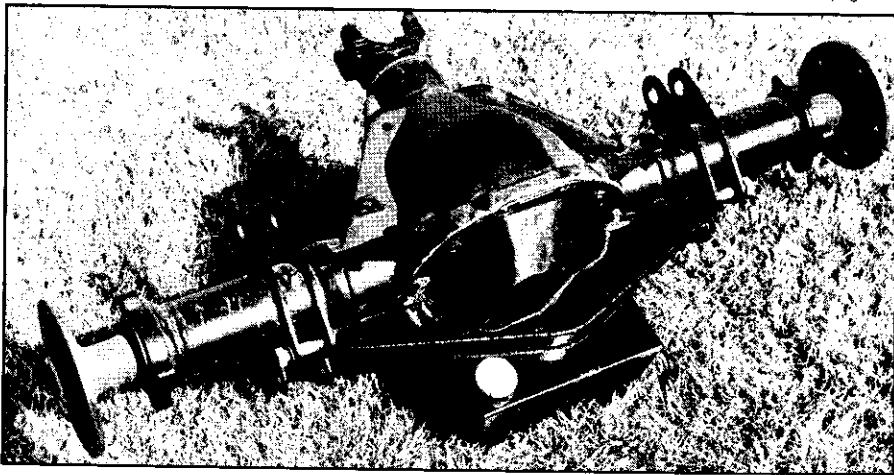
If you try to complement Rick or Leo for their unrestricted thinking you'll most likely get a shrug of the shoulders and a modest disclaimer about "country common sense," with no explanation as to why all of us aren't blessed with the same. Leo is quick to point out, "A man can't buy what he needs anyhow, these

continued on page 107

The thinking man's dry sump rearend, for when a couple of hundredths will make all the difference.



A Model T-type friction damper is used to control the front torsion bar suspension. Order yours from J.C. Whitney.



The celebrated sandwich truck of Hattiesburg. It ain't fancy, but it sure does get the roadster to the races.

Country Ways

continued from page 25

days. You've got no choice but to build it yourself, the way you want it." The official tow rig of the Mississippi Grass Nurseries racing operation is the living embodiment of this thinking. The truck and enclosed trailer look for all the world like the sandwich trucks that lurk in every industrial park during lunch hour, but Ricky will gladly take you around the pits on a tour of the past winners' rigs. "Look around here—none of the guys who really go fast have fancy trailers. They spend their money and time on the race cars."

While that may not be 100 percent true in all the ranks, it is a point well taken. With a custom-built trailer, virtually all the working necessities are in the fifth-wheeler. When the Klarrs tow into the staging lanes, their homebuilt truck (a revision of their old ramp-back transporter) has the tools, air compressor, water supply, generator and fuel all in arm's reach. That can make a win-or-lose difference in between-the-rounds service chores. Ask Ricky about the lack of a trick solvent tank setup and he'll hand you a dishpan and a bottle of liquid detergent. "It all ends up getting washed in the sink anyhow, right?"

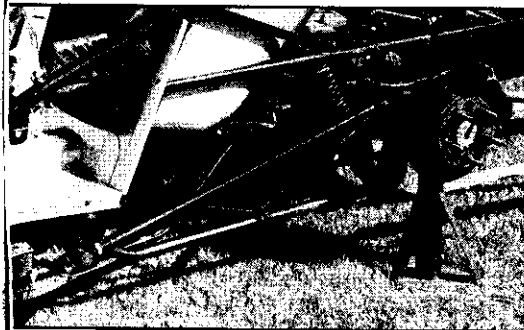
If the Klarrs seem overly occupied by the practicalities of racing it may be a result of living in a part of the U.S. where they can race most every weekend during the season. Southerners may laud the local weather, praise the goodness of the soil and the quality of their crops, but they won't brag about the tricks on their race cars. Naturally they see their innovations as simple solutions to obvious problems, so they really don't go for grandstanding. Take the unusual cover on the spare

rearend sitting in the trailer (a Chevy 12-bolt, used for its low drag properties). Ricky watched the Pro Stockers drain their rearends dry when desperate for a few hundredths advantage in the final round and built his own "poor man's dry sump." Nothing complex—just a deep extended rear cover to hold the required quantity of oil while keeping the level low enough to cut friction and windage losses.

The most lucid of all examples of uncluttered problem solving might be their oil pan research program. In order to improve the pans, Ricky and Leo needed to find out exactly where the oil in a running engine wanted to go without resorting to hearsay and rumors of other people's findings. Taking the bull by the horns, they simply extended their pump pickup to reach a large reservoir and ran the engine up on Reher and Morrison's dyno with no pan at all! It was an unholy mess and took hours to clean up, but what they learned transferred into a new design and increased the power output.

Drag racing, like any automotive activity, tends to become as much a way of life as a pastime. The grass nursery is every bit a family business, with both Ricky and his two older sisters responsible for looking after the day-to-day duties of sod cutting and golf course planting. The racing enjoys a similar participation from all involved. At any time you might discover Ricky and Leo discussing the fine points of car preparation absolutely at the top of their lungs, each convinced of their correctness and most often saying essentially the same thing. But that's how sons and fathers often communicate, and there's not a trace of anger to be found in these conferences. It's just the clash of two fine minds pursuing the same goal of winning races. Given the determination and inventiveness of this pair, it wouldn't surprise anyone to see them succeed in as competitive a world as Pro Stock, a category where their innovations could really shine.

As appealing as that might sound, Ricky and Leo Klarr would have to be slightly out of place in the razzle dazzle world of Professional racing. In an era when you have to look long and hard for the true spirit of Sportsman competition, this pair just might be unreplaceable. ■



Ladder bar rear suspension is adjustable for preload in the lower link without disconnecting the front attachment point.

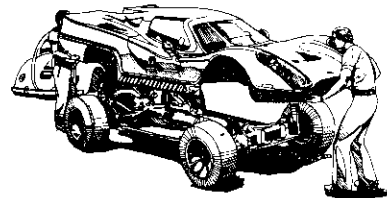
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