

Octane

Fuelling the passion



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24 HOURS OF LEMONS

The fruits of endurance racing

Disillusioned with historic racing, a group of American enthusiasts created the highly irreverent 'LeMons' series – and it's been a massive hit, with over 1000 racers registered

Words: Rod Diridon Jr. Photography: Rich Hudnut



Above
Once it was a humble Mazda Miata. Now it's Eyesore Racing's Magic Carpet Ride, complete with tacked-on turbo.

'LISTEN UP, this is the only time you'll ever hear this said in your life,' boomed the voice of Jay Lamm, Chief Perpetrator of the 24 Hours of LeMons, over the California Infineon Raceway's PA system. 'Will the owner of the giant V8 Little Red Wagon Radio Flyer please move? The DeLorean needs to get out.'

The laughter spreading across the stands was drowned by the roar of the Ford 302-powered Volvo 244 passing the 1962 Austin Mini. They screamed in tandem down the straight (normally reserved for high-dollar exotics), then split to avoid the Toyota FX16-based Wienermobile.

If this sounds strange, you probably haven't been to a 24 Hours of LeMons

event. The fastest-growing club racing series in the United States, 'LeMons' is reserved for cars bought and built for \$500 or less. It offers those who are equal parts mad scientist, MacGyver and McQueen a venue to go bumper-to-bumper racing.

The *Octane* events pages are regularly covered with exclusive venues and gorgeous cars befitting the prerogative of those with means. The 24 Hours of LeMons is not one of those events.

Hospitality tents? Yeah, right. Try burgers cooked on exhaust manifolds. High-dollar classics in roped-off pits? No way. LeMons racers let people kick their cars for good luck. Etiquette? Huh: most participants would guess the 13/13 driver

probation rule is the automotive equivalent of Spinal Tap's 'my amp goes to 11'.

The first LeMons was a lark held by Jay and his buddies at California's dusty and barren Altamont Raceway in 2006. Since then, the 24 Hours of LeMons has grown to 21 races and three car shows in 13 states.

In truth, the \$500 limit excludes brakes, wheels, tyres and other items that have the potential to cause harm if not repaired. Rollcages, race seats, belts and other safety gear are required. But the rules are simple: the car and any performance-related equipment must cost within \$500. Scrutineers for hidden upgrades will levy 'BS Penalties', adding one negative lap for each \$10 of overspending.



'Hospitality tents? Try burgers cooked on exhaust manifolds. High-dollar classics in roped-off pits? No way. LeMons racers let people kick their cars for good luck'



Left 'Chief Perpetrator' is Jay Lamm, who founded the LeMons series in 2006 and is master of ceremonies at 21 races in 13 states.



Above middle and far right Deathcab V8 Volvo is run by Evil Genius Racing; BMW-free Mini is a rare sight in the USA - and getting rarer by the lap.



Team entry is also straightforward. Four to six of you and your mates can go wheel-to-wheel racing for a \$500 entry fee, plus \$100 per driver. A valid street driving licence and the ability to fog a helmet visor are the only required proofs of your on-track acumen.

These approachable rules and entry requirements have seen people flock to the series in hordes. From an original contingent of 35 teams, 1024 registered last season. An eclectic combination of racers, rebels and comedians, they've created their own circus-like atmosphere.

'The whole point,' says ringmaster and series creator Lamm, 'was to take the tight-assedness back out of amateur

racing. Nobody needs to do motor sport: if it isn't fun, why even bother?'

Any LeMons starting grid can make you laugh, cry or wonder what's in the cigarettes they're smoking. The likes of the Popemobile, Starship Enterprise or a Brit-pop tribute band are not uncommon. All told, the paddock more than tilts the meter for Spandex, fake moustaches and rotund middle-agers in banana-hammock Speedos.

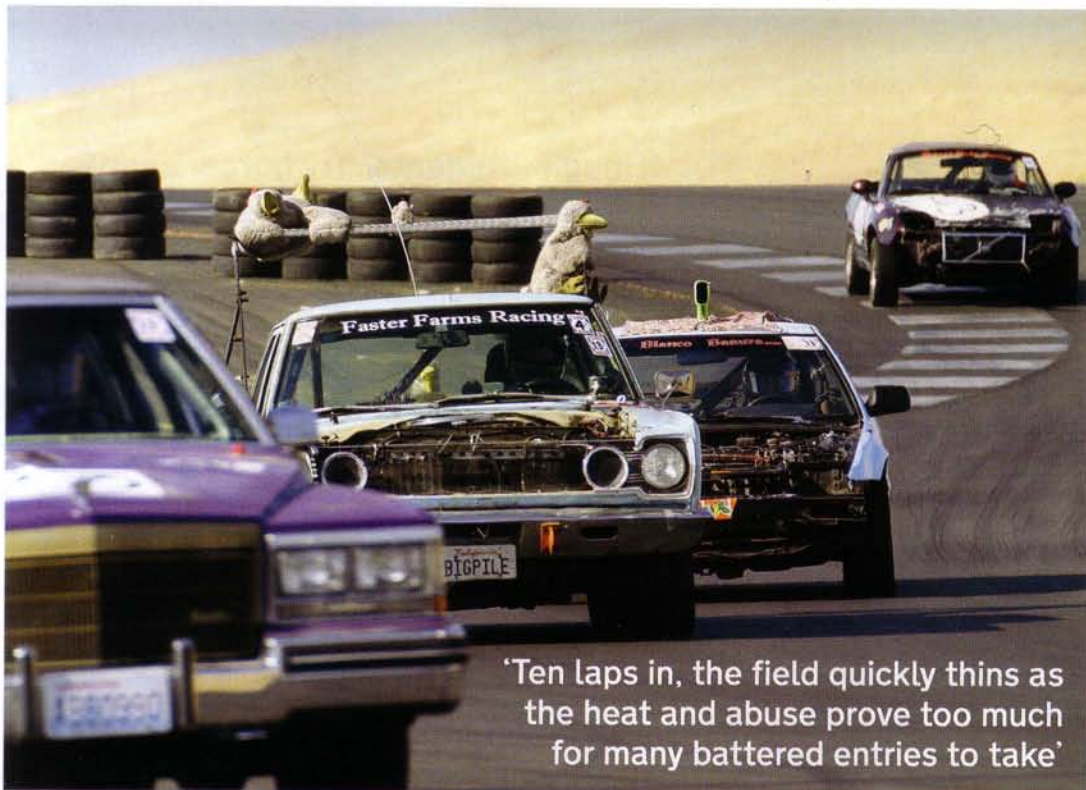
Scottsman Chris Rae's Henry V8th team recently fielded a purple 1984 Cadillac Coupe DeVille with pictures of King Henry's six wives pasted on the sides. With a Queen crossed out for each sixth of the race, the team eventually won the 'Index of Effluency'

for the best-worst car and took home a prize of \$1500. In nickels.

The variety of the cars that find their way to the tarmac is part of what makes the field so appealing. Of course, there are legions of wound-down BMWs, long-in-the-tooth 5.0 Mustangs and thrashed tuner cars. But the audacity of running \$500 cars from mechanically questionable marques such as Saab, Alfa Romeo and Citroën is truly impressive.

Make no mistake though - many of these cars are fast. The leaders have turned 2:13 laps around Thunderhill Raceway and close to 2:00 laps around Infineon's extended course - which is quick for any class, regardless of cost.





'Ten laps in, the field quickly thins as the heat and abuse prove too much for many battered entries to take'

Left
Not a 911RS, a lightweight E-type nor a 250GT SWB in sight. Well, what do you expect when LeMons entry stipulates a \$500 steed?

Right
Leave your ego at the door and don a suitably outrageous costume. These racers take irreverence seriously.



Team Eyesore Racing has competed themed as the Flying Elvises, Alice in Wonderland and the Magic Carpet Ride, to name just a few. Three-time winners and veterans of 14 races, the co-ed team fields a decrepit Mazda Miata with an improvised junkyard turbo plumbed through the bonnet line. Running only 4psi of boost, team member Dan Ehrlich explains: 'You don't need ten more horsepower; what you need is a lot more patience.'

With starting grids of up to 150 cars, even world-class tracks can be crowded at first. But ten laps in, the field quickly thins as the heat and abuse prove too much for many battered entries to take. Success in LeMons is as much about the car and driver as the guerilla mechanic skills necessary to triage and bandage the falling hooptie.

A prime example is Jake McGuire, whose Unsafe at Any Speed team has had the poor judgement to race a 1965 Chevy Corvair Corsa... four times. 'With the Corvair, even one lap is a victory,' Jake says of their efforts to nurse along the tender six-cylinder. A competitive motorcycle racer, his reasons for braving LeMons are clear: 'You don't have to be the fastest or spend the most to be one of the

best at LeMons. You gain credibility by doing something in style or with the right attitude.'

Jake is typical of many LeMonisti. The series has become a haven for both the petrolhead lunatic fringe as well as serious racers who just want a break. Almost to a person, they take racing to heart without taking themselves too seriously.


'You have to disengage your ego when you walk in the door,' reinforces John Pagel, an early aficionado whose pro-level preparation shop, Evil Genius Racing, has worked on more than 30 LeMons entries as well as its usual, high-end club and historic race cars. 'You have to do this for fun. Those who don't tend not to last.'

You'd think that disposable chariots in a series with a broad range of pilot skill would lead to yards of swapped paint and a disregard for safety. Don't. The series throws black flags like the French throw cheek-kisses, a nod to the inherently chaotic starting point of \$500 cars and often first-time drivers.

Those who make it to the penalty box soon meet Judges Phil and Jonny, a LeMons institution dressed in graduation robes and white wigs. They've devised a

series of fiendish penalties to discourage bad on-track behaviour: of the dozen or so possibilities, the 'Marcel Marceau' requires the team to don white facepaint and beret, and mime their crime. The 'Bart Simpson' sentences miscreants to write their infraction 100 times in permanent marker... on their race car. And the 'Macho Man' finds the driving squad donning Village People costumes and disco-dancing their way through the hooting paddock.

For those with serious behavioural issues, the 'People's Curse' is awarded by ballot, thus directing the collective ire of the group. The 'winner's' car is ceremoniously sacrificed three-quarters of the way through the race - crushed and pulled to bits by heavy construction machinery, to the obvious delight of the cheering crowd.

Still gaining momentum, the 24 Hours of LeMons will continue to breathe fresh life into American club racing for years to come. Think you can be a racing driver? At least at the 24 Hours of LeMons, yes, you can. 

The last race of the season is 30-31 December at Palm Beach. See www.24hoursoflemons.com.