

# Ragged EDGE

HOW ELSE DO YOU RUN AN 8-SECOND  
SUPER STOCK CORVETTE?

By Steve Collison



Perennial NHRA SS/BA class winner and record holder Dave Thomas relaxes at home. At the track, his 427 Corvette has run an amazing 8.97. "We're constantly trying new stuff to stay ahead of the competition," says the DQ owner. "It's a money pit, but most hobbies are. It's a good thing my wife, Deana supports me."



Dave Milcarek

**W**hy would a guy who can afford to race just about anything choose drag racing, especially NHRA Super Stock Eliminator? "It's the challenge," says Dave Thomas, 49, the second generation owner of a Dairy Queen franchise in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

While prospering from his father's dawn-to-dusk work ethic, Thomas has maintained his priorities: at home his garage is bigger than the house, both of which are custom-built. Parked inside that garage are the fruits of his labors: a yellow Dodge Viper, a red Cobra replica, and two street rods. Out front sits a new Ford Lightning pickup, black with red and yellow flames, and a license plate that reads "IB NUTS."

But the REAL object of Thomas's obsession is parked in a

separate room that looks more like a shrine than a garage. Surrounded by numerous class trophies, photos, and memorabilia sits the quickest Super Stock Chevrolet on the planet, a '69 427 Corvette that holds both ends of the NHRA national record in SS/B Automatic, a class once dominated by 426 Hemis. Thomas should know, he had one.

Thomas had the Corvette constructed in 1993 by Mike Pustelny Race Cars in Michigan. The SS/AA Hemi Cuda he'd been racing was due for a major overhaul, and Dave was reluctant to reinvest in a combination that was hard on parts and marginally competitive. So he switched to a big-block Corvette, reasoning that Chevy parts were cheap and plentiful, and the combination had more performance potential—on paper.

In the hyper-competitive world of NHRA sportsman racing, the "combination" is everything. That's especially true in Super Stock, where the fastest of Detroit's musclecars are classed according to factory shipping weight and NHRA-factored horsepower. When considering a particular combination, racers first consult the NHRA Stock Car Classification Guide for weight and horsepower ratings, then judge the performance of similarly powered machinery.

In the case of Dave Thomas's big-block Corvette, it was patterned after Butch Williams's SS/CA '71 454 coupe—the same car, in fact, that carried Bernie Agaman to the '75 NHRA Super Stock world championship with an engine built by Truppi-Kling in Greenbrook, New Jersey. Twenty-five years ago Bernie's "Bayonne Missile" held the SS/CA record at 10.29/130; Williams has it now at 9.18/145 mph...in the same car!

Thomas got his '71 Corvette from Pustelny two weeks before NHRA's '93 Gatornationals, and arrived in Florida without a motor, which was on its way from Indiana engine builder Mike Keown. "Somehow we got it all together," Thomas recalls. "We made the headers fit, got a Jiffy Lube alignment, and made it to the first round of class without a time run." Fortunately, he had veterans like Bob Thompson, Mark Sanford, Joe Sharon, and "Tired Tom" in his camp. Thompson, a former Modified star, adjusted the four-link suspension and Dave got to the class final before losing to Williams; "He had me by 3 or 4 tenths," Dave says.

The two SS/CA Corvettes traded class wins and national records over the next several seasons until Thomas changed his car to a '69 model with the 427 engine and moved up to SS/BA. The car "debuted" at Indy '97—.10-.15 quicker than the Hemis" according to Thomas—and was class runner-up.

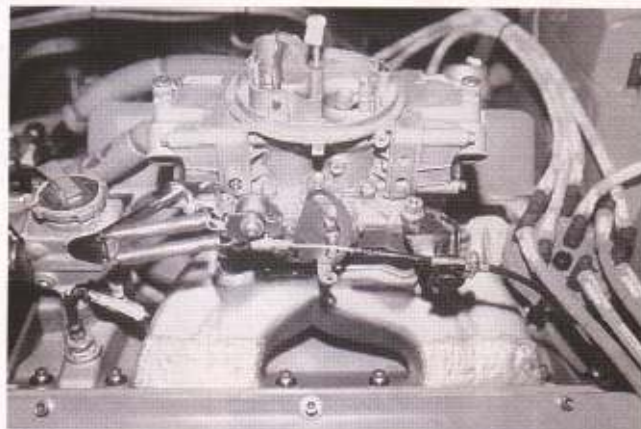
Afterwards, the Corvette was torn down by NHRA tech officials and found to have an illegal aftermarket crankshaft. Thomas was disqualified for one year. "It was my decision to run the crank for longevity," Dave admits, "because we could get only 40 runs before the stock crank started cracking. There was no performance advantage; in fact, it weighed 5 pounds more than the factory crank. I was suspended for a year, which was reduced to six months." The NHRA rules have since been changed to permit certain aftermarket cranks.

"The Hemi guys have been pushovers," Thomas continued. "They dominated 'B' for years, and so long as everyone was within a tenth, they were happy. When I jumped in the class, the Hemi guys were constantly protesting me. At a class race in Texas, they had me torn down again. We were 0.1cc off in chamber volume because of the wrong spark plugs. After this Tech told the Hemi guys to save their money, they weren't tearing us down anymore."

***"We don't just buy a motor, plug it in and run a second under. We work on the car constantly. This isn't bracket racing."***

That brings up an interesting point, says Thomas. "People complain about horsepower factors; some say my car has an unfair advantage. What they forget is how hard we work on these cars. We don't just buy a motor, plug it in, and run a second under [the index]. We work on the car constantly and run it on the ragged edge. This isn't bracket racing."

One who shares Dave Thomas's killer instinct is his engine



***The '69 427 Chevy L88 by Matt Ciarfello makes 810 hp and 620-lb-ft of torque with a single 850 Holley carb. He uses a CNC Bow Tie block with steel four-bolt mains; square port, open chamber, aluminum Chevy #077 heads ported per NHRA specs (2.19/1.88 valves, 115cc chambers); 12.5:1 Venolia "max dome" pistons (Matt spends a week fitting them to the heads); Eagle H-beam rods; and a Chevrolet crankshaft. ("Nobody makes a good stock stroke crank for under \$2,500," Matt says. "By the time we're done massaging, heat-treating, and balancing, we have \$1,000 in a Chevy crank.") Super Stock rules permit any intake manifold, even fabricated sheetmetal, yet Matt chose to use Dart and Edelbrock intakes. "You can't move the carburetor on the manifold, but you can move the ports," he says.***

builder and crewchief, Matt Ciarfello. In a strange twist of fate, Matt has worked on and off for Ralph Truppi since 1972. He's seen firsthand what Bernie Agaman can do. "Bernie believed in thrashing, making the car go as fast as it could," Ciarfello says. "I patterned myself after him." Matt's association with Truppi has exposed him to a lot of high technology, some of which has been applied to the Corvette. "We've been fairly successful [with Dave's car]," he says. "Making a couple 8-second runs is a pretty neat accomplishment, but our goal is to put the record in the 8s." Given the team's dedication, it's only a matter of time.

"To run a SS/BA Corvette, you'd better be ready to do some flogging and get your hands dirty," Ciarfello says. "We're throwbacks to the days when guys thrashed their cars. We're not 'eatin' peanuts,' a phrase we have for guys who park their cars between runs and sit under an umbrella waiting for the next call.

"I'm not knocking those guys, it's just that we don't race that way. If we can pick up a couple of hundredths, we're going to. And we're not the only ones out here who feel that way. You can't sit on your butt thinking about this, you gotta go out and work. I know the manufacturers appreciate us, what with the

inventory of parts we've accumulated: eight converters, 20 camshafts. We've got the best stuff available for our combination, and the only way to use it is to run the car.

"The reason why Dave and I hooked up is because we're on the same page," Ciarfello says. "He wants to go fast and I want to maximize performance. He's unique: he's not just willing to spend the money, he wants to go faster. The car's really consistent, especially in SS/CA."

Matt continued, "We're always trying to balance longevity with performance. Dave likes to race a lot so sometimes we have to back off. We won't shift it as high, we'll have more oil in it, a softer rear gear. It doesn't make any sense to put it on kill to qualify at a points meet, unless they pay No. 1, but then you're gonna get some oddball combination that runs 1.3 seconds under."

"Sometimes I think I could retire tomorrow and live a very comfortable life without a race car," Dave Thomas concludes. "But I have such a passion for this that I keep doing it. That's not how my dad brought me up." **DRUS!**



**Broken parts are a reminder of Dave's Chrysler Hemi days. He's had better luck with the 427 Chevy. "Occasionally we'll touch a bearing because we're always running on the edge with a minimal amount of oil," says engine builder Matt Ciarfello. "We haven't had any explosions; without new parts, the Hemi would explode."**

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**The team is constantly testing to stay ahead, flogging things like camshafts, torque converters, collectors, and tires. "You have to earn performance, it doesn't come easy," says crewchief Matt Ciarfello. He decides on the combination and then flogs it for every bit of performance. It's Dave's job to leave on time and get the car down the track, something he's done as quickly as 8.97 seconds. According to Thomas, Chevrolet built about 117 L88 Corvettes in 1969, 13 with automatics.**



### TEK SPEX

Car:	'69 Corvette L-88
Owner:	Dave & Deana Thomas, West Chester, PA
Class:	NHRA SS/BA, SS/CA
Engine:	427 by Matt Ciarfello; Venolia; Eagle H-beam rods; reworked Chevy crank (heat treated, balanced); Jesel rockers, belt-drive; Moroso pan, oiling system; Jack Davis three-step headers; Burns Stainless collectors.
Trans:	TH400 Rossler trans; Munsinger 8-inch converter, 6,300-stall
Chassis/rearend:	Mike Pustelny four-link w/9-inch Ford rear; M-W titanium spool, 40-spline axles, 5.43 gears; four-wheel Lamb disc brakes; Koni adjustable shocks
Wheels/tires:	Weld 14 x 15/Phoenix 14.5/32-15
Weight/wheelbase:	3,285 lbs. (SS/BA); 98 inches
Miscellany:	Thanks to Bob Thompson, Mark Sanford, Joe Sharon, Tom "Tired" Dispensiere
Best ET/MPH:	8.97/147.50