

Local Race Team Competes in 24 Hours of LeMons Series

Team Uber Vogel raises \$2,180 for charity

Mention the 24 Hours of LeMons to any motorhead, and visions of the beautiful Sarthe countryside and pageantry of a French auto race come to mind. The crackle of highly wound exhaust notes from the toughest competitors on the planet piercing the air with the backdrop of elegant people and crisp white napkins.

Closer to home, a local team of raing enthusiasts has taken that same drive to compete in the 24 Hours of LeMons, American-style. No, that's not a typo. It is LeMons as in lemons (see 24hoursoflemons.com for more information).

In this grassroots series, races are held at exotic locales like Altamont Speedway (think Rolling Stones and Hells Angels) and Buttonwillow Raceway (think 104F degrees in the shade). The crew is motley, the napkins are non-existent and the sounds are the hissing of radiator hoses and the howl of street-rubber pushed to the limit.



The fastest growing racing series in the United States, the 24 Hours of LeMons is truly grassroots, limiting the expense of a car to \$500 (not counting safety equipment, tires or brakes). Unlike many series, it does not have a multi-level competition licensing requirement, allowing anyone with a valid driver license to participate.

"When I tell people we're endurance racing a \$500 car, most think we've had a bout of the mad-cow," said Rod Diridon, Jr., Team Uber Vogel team captain. "Jay Lamm, the genius behind LeMons, has done a great job making things approachable for new racers."

To date, the Uber Vogel 190E has competed in five 24 Hours of LeMons events, covering 1,906 laps at Altamont, Buttonwillow and Thunderhill, finishing as high as 6th place. Most recently, the team placed 35th out of 160 cars at the Thunderhill 24 Hours of LeMons race held on the 21st and 22nd of November.

The team has also donated 25 cents per lap, per driver for each of its LeMons races. So far, this has totaled \$2,180 to the American Cancer Society, Canary Foundation, Cort Summerfield Fund, Shriners Children's Hospitals and Veterans of Foreign Wars Foundation.

"Our team contribution from the Thunderhill race was to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Foundation," said Diridon. "It seemed right so close to Veterans Day to support those

who fought to protect our liberties, in this case to race junker cars in a free America."

The 24 Hours of LeMons is part race series and part carnival. This spirit has seen cars decorated in comedic themes including a Popemobile, funeral hearse, Batmobile and Roman chariot. Because there is so much to see, friends, wives, husbands and others not naturally interested in motorsports have been more likely to come and enjoy the show.

In the jovial tradition of LeMons, the 1987 Mercedes 190E the team races has gone through a number of themes. "We bought the car in Santa Cruz for \$300. It smelled like rotten seawater and feral cat," explained Diridon. "It was so bad that for the first race we bolted toilet seats on the side of it with the moniker 'This Car Is A Toilet.'"

Currently, the car has been redesigned as hybrid of a 190E and a 1978 Pontiac, which the team calls a "super-rare Hans-Am edition." Sporting an actual Trans-Am shaker scoop, side vents and tail, with the obligatory "screaming eagle" on the hood, it's a sight that makes purists either laugh or weep.

While the good-humored atmosphere limits the pressure and undertones sometimes found at the track, teams are still focused on keeping their cars going, and as fast as they can. If there was ever a test of the endurance of car, team and drivers, these tracks and this series are a proving ground.

"It's a challenge to build a car with such a limited budget that will actually finish the race, let alone do it quickly," said Peter Congistre from Team Uber Vogel. "The car is an anvil, but the 'guerilla mechanic' skills necessary to keep a \$500 beater alive at the track require a bit of improvisation."

For example, they found the front-biased radiator location of the 190E was great for cooling but bad when hit. The solution was what the team calls the "spring-o-matic." This consists of a leaf-spring from a Toyota pickup that was attached to the front bumper to fend any over-aggressive competitors away from the radiator.

"One of the best things about the 190E is how well balanced and built the cars were from the factory," said Congistre, referring to the car's ability to handle long sweepers at full-throttle while still stopping and turning effectively. "If they didn't get it right at the factory, you're not going to 'tune it in' at LeMons."

The caliber of cars ranges widely, as does the skill of drivers. In any race you'll see all shapes and sizes of BMW, Chevy, Saab, Cooper, Alfa, Honda and dozens of other makes. Drivers range from first-timers to accomplished semi-professionals, all duking it out on the same track.

Team Uber Vogel is based in Santa Clara, California, USA. The team currently consists of Duane Ablamis, Todd DiPaola, Rich Hudnut, Ken Martz, Rod Diridon, Jr. and Peter Congistre.



Team Uber Vogel from left to right: Duane Ablamis, Todd DiPaola, Rich Hudnut, Ken Martz, Rod Diridon, Peter Congistre

While the team has embraced the frugal and quirky nature of the LeMons series, they're an accomplished group of gearheads. Congistre and Diridon are former Porsche mechanics, and Martz was a certified aircraft mechanic with the military and United Air-

lines in the 1970s. Ablamis has restored and raced countless Mazdas and historic Mustangs, winning an SCCA national championship in the 1980s. Together, they have more than 70 years of experience as professionals and dedicated hobbyists.
