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## A Couple of Sliders

We're talking bare Formula Ford chassis.

By Peter Egan



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Photo By Peter Egan

One specification you won't find in the 1997 Ford Econoline Owner's Manual is how many stripped-down **Crossle Formula Ford** frames will fit side by side in the cargo bay.

The answer is "two."

I happen to know that because I loaded two of them into my own Econoline last month and took them from our place in Wisconsin down to Sterling, Illinois. This pleasant little city lies along the banks of the Rock River and is the home of a race-car fabrication shop called Prince Race Car Engineering.

I met the owner, Pat Prince, many years ago at the SCCA Runoffs at Road Atlanta,

where he was fettling the victorious Lotus Super Seven he'd built with 1977 D-Production Champion Tom Robertson. I had several beers and a big plate of barbecued ribs with Pat and Tom one night at a crowded joint near the track, and we've been friends ever since.

I was building a Super Seven race car myself at the time, so we had a lot in common. Lotus Seven owners are not like other people, you see; our weirdness gives off a beatific, radium-like glow that only those of the true faith can perceive. Picture the Twelve Apostles, if they all owned cars with weak rear axles.

Okay, so Lotus owners are indeed blessed. But why two Crossle frames, you might ask. Don't most people have just one?

Well, yes, and I had just one until a few months ago. Then my friend Pete Wood called and said: "After 20 years of racing my Crossle, I'm finally hanging it up. A guy from France is buying the car, but I've got a spare bent frame in my shop and wondered if you'd like to have it."

"How did it get bent?"

"I was coming out of Turn 8 at Road America and my steering wheel broke off. I hit the bridge abutment at the Carousel. It was a glancing blow, but it bent a few tubes. I was going to have it fixed, but I found a good used frame before I got it done. Would you like the old frame? It's free to a good home."

"Sure," I said. "I'll come right over and get it."

Who can turn down a spare bent race car frame? Hardly anyone with an ounce of sense. And, to paraphrase Chet Atkins, I have more sense than most people have in their little finger. So of course I ran right over to Pete's shop and loaded the thing into my van.

Pete's frame was actually a 35F model, which is just a slightly upgraded version of the 32F, in that it allows you to remove the starter motor without so much gnashing of teeth. The frames are interchangeable, and this particular one had been completely bead-blasted down to bare metal, with all those typically beautiful Anglo-Celtic brazed joints visible. Fully prepped for straightening. A nice spare to have.

Meanwhile, back at my own shop, there lurked upon two sawhorses the bare frame from my own Crossle. This one—derived from the car I bought last summer and raced twice—was in slightly better shape. It had been restored only a year or two earlier and neatly powder-coated. The frame was square, vis-à-vis suspension pickup points, but the restoration shop had left a slightly bent and gnarly tube in place, right behind the right front upper A-arm.

Now, I am not exactly an obsessive/compulsive type (ask Mr. Claire, my high school guidance counselor), but in the restoration of cars, motorcycles and airplanes I'm a firm believer in foundations. You start with a totally straight and perfect frame, and then make every effort to mimic that perfection in each piece that goes back on the machine. Any omission or failure of effort along the way will come back to haunt you. You'll probably miss a few things anyway, but you have to make the effort not to.

Basically, I'm not truly happy until I've held every part in my own hands and examined it under a bright light. A race car is really just a vast collection of personal esthetic and technical choices, so I like to arrange things to fit my own prejudiced sense of order and appearance. The project essentially becomes a mirror of your own soul, and you hate to have "Dorian Gray" written on the side of your race car.

So that bent section of tubing in an otherwise nicely restored car has been bothering me every time I look at it, kind of like a picture of Scarlett Johansson with one tooth blacked out. You try not to notice the tooth, but it doesn't work.

Therefore, when I took the drivetrain out to fix a broken clutch and get the engine rebuilt at the end of the season, I just kept going. In one feverish weekend (blame the Red Bull) I had the Crossle completely stripped down to the bare tub. The car all but exploded into various piles of parts; suspension over there, wheels stacked in the corner, fuel cell on a shelf, instruments and wiring nested in a box, etc. At that point I called Pat Prince.

"I've got two Crossle chassis," I told him, "and they both need repair. Would you be able to look at them?"

"Sure," he said, "but we don't have room for two rollers in the shop right now."

"These are just bare frames," I said. "No suspension or wheels."

"Ah!" Pat said happily, "a couple of sliders! We love sliders around here and can always find a place for them. We stack 'em like cordwood."

So I slid the two coffin-shaped sliders into the back of my van and drove them down to Sterling. Pat looked at both frames and said it would cost about the same amount of money to refurbish either one. He noted that Pete's old 35F frame was a bit stouter—and already bead-blasted—so I said, "Let's go with that one."

There was actually a little extra historical incentive here, because Pete's old frame used to belong to my longtime buddy (and current guitarist in our garage band), Pat Donnelly. He raced it in the mid-'80s, at which time it was painted dark blue and in immaculate condition. In some odd, nostalgic way it would be cool to have Pat's old chassis fixed up and back on the track. Call it a recycling of mandalic vibrations. Very

green.

So the old Donnelly/Wood chassis is now in Sterling, about to be reborn. Meanwhile, I've been spending my evenings and weekends preparing parts to go back on the car. Repacking wheel bearings, installing new CV joints on the halfshafts and greasing them. (I've been very greasy lately.) I've also replaced one rear stub axle (bad splines) and disassembled the Hewland gearbox, which needed a new input shaft. More worn splines.

The engine—which failed to blow up despite a wavering 20 psi of oil pressure—is with Steve Knapp at Elite Engines, getting the full rebuild and dyno treatment. And a new \$600 oil pump. The old one looked like an InSinkErator after too many spoons had gone through it.

I should hasten to say here that I'm not complaining; this car's several looming problems were reflected in the reasonable price I paid for it, and most work on the car had been very nicely done. Much money had been spent on costly new parts—and paint as well.

But I may get the bodywork repainted anyway. It has a very nice black paint job right now, but looks just a bit Darth Vaderish for my tastes. I might replicate the paint job on my old Reynard Formula Continental, which was white with blue numbers. I tend to see myself as more Lancelot than Black Prince, though no one else apparently sees me as either. Maybe it's my Midwestern accent.

Barb is a bit perplexed by this total rebuilding of a car that appeared to be very nice. "I thought all it needed was a new clutch and an engine rebuild," she said.

"It did," I said. "But making a race car exactly the way you want it is half the fun of vintage racing. Maybe more than half. We're not trying to win a world championship here; the car's the thing. Also, it's a long winter."

I didn't tell her I would never have bought the car if it didn't need help.

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