



IS IT WRONG to race your car?

OWNING A SIGNIFICANT VINTAGE COMPETITION CAR COMES WITH GREAT RESPONSIBILITY



Comer running his 1967 Camaro up front — carefully

Whether or not to actually use historic race cars has always been a topic of debate among car collectors. These debates have become a lot more heated lately — especially when it comes to vintage racing. Why?

Values of significant cars are soaring, the venues to use them in are multiplying rapidly, and many owners are throwing caution to the wind and putting history at risk — at least as far as the detractors are concerned.

So, is actually using a car you own in the way you wish as despicable as many are saying?

Well, it depends.

This is an onion with a lot of layers. First, many know that I am an avid vintage racer, and I don't go there to be a back marker. I like to win, and I spend considerable time preparing my cars — and even myself — to do so. Does it always work? Absolutely not. But even when it doesn't there is something extremely satisfying about racing a vintage car that is working well and doing what it was designed to do.

What follows is strictly this racer's opinion.

Right place, right time

First, the venue must suit the car.

If you have a significant car with an important history that appears untouched from its last important race in period, do not race it among lesser cars or in anger. This would be irresponsible, as destroying a

well-preserved piece of history is wrong — and hazardous to your health.

This doesn't mean don't USE the car to keep it healthy. What it does mean is to drive the car carefully — and with preservation as the main goal — in exhibition events.

Now, if you have a significant car that is doing an impersonation of George Washington's ax (three new handles and two new heads) that is restored and has enough modern safety improvements hidden in it to keep you alive, then by all means race it.

Another shunt or another new engine will not be a loss to its historic importance. The same goes for recently “converted” race cars, such as a non-R-model GT350 that was deemed too far gone to restore and

was made into a race car. Go forth and race, my speedy friend.

For example, I have a 1964 Eisert Indy car, s/n 001, that is 100% period-correct — right down to its original engine and the nearly complete absence of any safety items. I “race” this car at about 6/10ths only in select events against similar cars and their similarly scared-shitless drivers.

On the other hand, I have a few 1990s tube-frame Trans Am Mustangs that are historic enough to vintage-race and safe enough for me to run at 10/10ths all day long without unreasonably risking life, limb, or an irreplaceable car.

The road is dangerous too

Second, do not think road rallies are safer than racing. I find them quite the opposite.

First, traffic is going all directions instead of just one. Second, anybody can get a driver's license, but many cannot get a competition license. And let's not talk about the risks of parking outside for days or unforeseen bad road conditions.

I see many historically significant cars partaking in 1,000-mile road rallies on public roads. The same rules as above apply. If you have an irreplaceable, unrestored car, letting it get hit by a teenager too busy texting in a 6,000-pound SUV to slow down by conventional means would be tragic. One needs to use extreme caution to avoid being labeled irresponsible here.



Historic Trans Am: Big history equals big responsibility

But if you have a great old car that you could replace or restore without erasing history if an SUV decided to rough it up — then pass the route book.

Don't mess with the past

Finally, resist the temptation of go-fast upgrades. If you have one of Ronnie Sox's 'Cudas and think you should put fuel injection or a Tremec 5-speed in it, YOU SHOULD NOT.

Go and buy Billy Bob's Barracuda he tubbed in his back yard and ran for years with a BBC in it — and then put your touches on that car. The same goes with any historic race car — it needs to represent its importance at its most significant point in time. Not to burst your bubble, but the car's most significant time isn't when you are racing it.

The Historic Trans Am guys are doing a fantastic job of showing us how to honor a special era and race important cars as they

were in period — with respect and admiration. Check out www.historictransam.com and note how the cars are prepared. If everybody adheres to the same set of rules, then everybody can still enjoy good racing.

Be careful — but don't tiptoe


Bottom line: If you are lucky enough to be a caretaker of a significant vintage competition car, it is a role that comes with great responsibility and clearly requires great restraint. But we shouldn't tiptoe around old race cars as they rot away as static displays. Anything but that, please!

Paintings and sculptures were designed as static displays, but cars were made to be driven, and race cars were made to be raced. I am a firm believer that we need to keep these cars in circulation and not hide them away. Plus, the only real way to enjoy a race car is to race it, and the spectators certainly enjoy it as well.

Racing needs to be done responsibly, and take into consideration the age and importance of the car — as well as the age and abilities of its current driver.

No matter what, if your name isn't Dan Gurney, I'm reasonably sure you can't drive like him, and no matter how well any of us turn a lap, I bet Penske isn't waiting to sign us.

We're car collectors first and foremost, and by definition that means don't mix lemonade in the Ming vase, so to speak. Of course, if you desire to race at 10/10ths all the time with an eye towards the podium, there is always a large selection of vintage race cars devoid of meaningful, period competition history just itching to see the high side of 8,000 rpm.

So, is it irresponsible to race your old car? As you can see, it depends. Choose your weapon wisely, and I will see you on the grid! 

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