

Dodging the Definition of “Too Far Gone”

This poor Dodge Daytona was burned and discarded in 1976, with corrosion so severe that the original air cleaner and valve covers had rusted away

At what point is a car “too far gone” to save? How much of a car can be replaced before it is considered a replica or a rebody? With values of significant cars going through the roof, some previously disposed-of vehicles are being unearthed and “substantially restored.”

Case in point: eBay auction #4650800090, which closed on June 20, 2006, was for the earthly remains—what little there were—of an original 1969 Dodge Daytona. The winning bid was \$40,600.

For this amount, the buyer received legal title to an early production Daytona, S/N XX29L9B355107, a 440/automatic car originally white in color with a red wing, and uniquely optioned with cruise control and power windows. The auction description says the car has been parked (buried, by all appearances) since 1976.

Judging by the photographs, this poor Daytona had been through a terrible tragedy prior to being abandoned. While specifics were not provided, the car looks to have been burned to the ground and then discarded. The 30 years since the fire had not been kind, as the corrosion was so severe that even the original air cleaner and valve covers were rusted away.

Literally, all that is left of the car appears to be the VIN from the dash, the original engine and transmission (hopefully rebuildable but perhaps not, due to the method of storage and/or heat and water damage from the “incident”), the original brake rotors, and, per the auction description, “the (rebuildable) rear end of the car.” The rear axle was described as “looking like a large round ball.”

Simply put, this is an ambitious project for even the most dedicated Daytona fan. No mention was made of the fender tag, so I assume it perished in the fire. The high bidder did not respond to my email inquiring about his plans for this project car, nor did the seller about his plans for the project.

WHEN DOES ONE YELL ‘UNCLE’?

This brings up an oft-debated subject. At what point should a restorer throw in the towel and yell “uncle”? With vintage European cars, making new bodies to fit to the original chassis is a relatively common and accepted means of restoring important vehicles to their original configuration.

However, many modern production cars, such as muscle cars, are built with an integral chassis—called



Two eBay sales could lead to one resurrected Daytona

unibody construction. You could have long arguments about which parts are superficial and which comprise the actual heart of a unibody car, i.e., how much can be replaced due to rust or accident damage before the car is really just a new car with an assumed identity.

My opinion is that any work that replaces the main structure, such as the cowl or core support, is dangerously close to the fine line past restoration and on to recreation. To clarify further, the manufacturers routinely stamped “hidden” VINs in key areas of cars—almost unanimously in the cowl area, and often additionally in the front (core support) and rear (trunk rail)—for identification purposes if the car became stolen or stripped of its tags.

To me, once you cut apart a car to the point of losing these hidden VINs and having to reinstall them on new panels or those sourced from a donor car, you no longer have an “original” car. Rust and accident repair is a necessary evil, and I have seen severely rusted cars brought back in a manner that preserves their original identity and soul.

Unfortunately, for many so-called restorers, the quick and easy route is to find a rust-free donor car and just swap tags. Not only is this illegal, it is unethical, and one may as well just build a replica because that is all you create using this method.

Now back to our subject, the crispy critter Daytona. It’s one of just 503 produced; there is no denying a Daytona is a valuable car. Good non-Hemi examples sell in the \$225,000–\$400,000 range, and the subject car would bring a premium if it had survived intact due to its early production number and unique options.

WHAT TO DO WITH A CRISPY CRITTER?

So what do you do with a \$40,000 tag, title, and remains to a \$300,000-plus car? There are a few options. One is to start the tedious task of restoring what remains. This will involve at least 2,000 hours of metal work, at \$60 per hour minimum, or \$120,000.

Add to that body and paint, interior, and sourcing literally every part that makes a Daytona, and you could easily have exceeded the value of the finished car. Not to mention its history of being a burn victim, even though that could be an excuse to showcase the work of a highly talented restorer. It would not be impossible to restore this car, but it is highly improbable somebody will.

However, on July 2, 2006, another interesting auction closed. Item # 260001842880 was for a 1970 Dodge Charger with claimed “all original Daytona parts sourced from a real Daytona donor car over 20 years ago.” This auction closed for \$29,100, with the high bidder being *the same buyer that purchased the real Daytona*.

The Charger looked reasonably complete, and even claimed to have the original 440 from the mystery donor Daytona. It had a serviceable original nose cone, rear wing,

and the nearly impossible-to-find Daytona scissors jack. The body, while rusty, is far easier to revive than the melted car.

SOME COMBINATION SEEMS LIKELY

The premium paid over a 1970 Charger in this condition without the Daytona parts was roughly \$20,000, or about the value of the original Daytona parts with the bonus being they are bolted together on a rolling Charger storage cart. The seller of this car, along with the previous seller and the buyer of both cars, did not respond to my inquiry as to future plans for the car.

So now, one owner has legal title to a Daytona, along with original engine, trans, VIN tag, and a very crusty body. The same owner also has a spare Charger body and extra Daytona parts. One can assume some combination of the two will be used to bring the original Daytona to life in one form or another, utilizing the best efforts of very talented restorers.

Certainly we've seen cars recreated from less; the Alfa 8C 2900 S/N 412021 that was burned and buried then resurrected and sold for millions of dollars comes to mind.



*Left, Alfa 8C as found
Top, the finished product*

If we had one wish here, it would be that the owner, and subsequent owners, keep a detailed photo album showing the origins of the pieces used to make one car from two, and represent the car accurately. Then everyone is a winner.◆

COLIN COMER is founder and president of Colin's Classic Automobiles and an avid collector and enthusiast.

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