

Lure of the Compacts

A 1985 Dodge Omni GLH leads to this modified '73 Dart Swinger

Back in 1987, Bristol, Connecticut's, Dave Dionne found a one-of-6,513 blacked-out '85 Dodge Omni GLH for sale, except that this particular 2,300-pound compact wasn't just another dressed-up econobox. It was packing an optional turbocharged version of the EFI 135-cu.in. four-cylinder engine that was officially rated at 146hp. By no

to New England Dragway in Epping, New Hampshire—having missed his opportunity to race at Connecticut International Raceway by just two years—before improvements at New York's Lebanon Valley Dragway led him to choose a much shorter race track commute.

It was also within that decade-plus

which I sold to help with other purchases. Another friend had a set of W2 heads and headers. Still another had a four-speed from either a B- or E-body that he didn't need. I was also able to locate an 8¾ differential," remembered Dave.

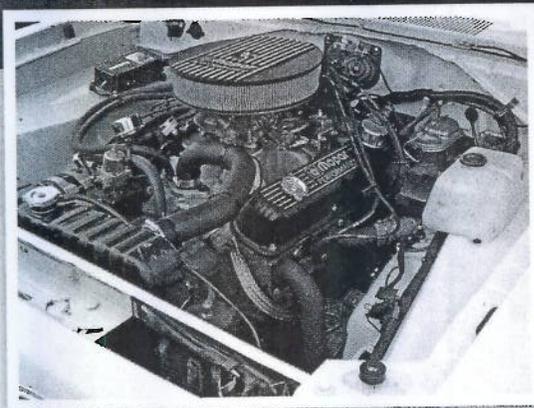
By the fall of 2009, the old Six had been removed and fresh paint applied to the engine bay. The first notable mechanical alteration was to the 340 engine, which was stroked to 416 cubes. Capped with the aforementioned, unported W2 cylinder heads, compression was worked out to 9.0:1, and although camshaft specifics were undisclosed at the time of our interview with Dave, he mentioned that it featured a .550-inch lift.

Stuffing the four-speed into his A-body required Dave to fabricate custom brackets, enabling the shifter to barely make it into what would have been the stock location on the transmission tunnel, had the Dart not been built as an automatic. The Swinger's power steering system was also eliminated, leaving plenty of room for the headers Dave intended to use; the Dart already had manual brakes, which were retained. After a set of M&H DOT track radials were installed on the rear wheels, the Swinger was ready for track action in 2010.

In two short seasons, Dave's best with the Dart has been a 12.20 @ 115 (on pump gas) during Muscledalooza XIV in September 2011. Unfortunately, a clutch issue arose that now has Dave contemplating the possibility of bringing his GLH out of retirement, at least for the time being. "Right now I'm thinking that I'll race the GLH in 2012 and rotate the two cars annually thereafter. It's hard to pick a favorite; they're both a lot of fun to race. Getting a choice each season is kind of nice, too." 🍀

Do you enter your muscle car in

some form of competitive motorsports on a regular or semi-regular basis? No matter if it's drag racing, rally racing or anything in between: We'd love to hear from you. Print-quality photographs (or digital images), comments and contact information should be submitted to Weekend Warrior, c/o Hemmings Muscle Machines, P.O. Box 2000, Bennington, Vermont 05201 or e-mail Matt Litwin at mlitwin@hemmings.com.



timespan when Dave's mind began to focus on a grander plan. "I had been wanting to do a V-8; parts for the GLH were becoming scarce. Sometimes the hunt for stuff meant you had to scrounge around junkyards instead of swap meets. And the GLH became a relatively rare car. That combination led me to the V-8 conclusion," he recalled.

In September 2002, Dave was wandering through the grounds of Carlisle's fall swap meet when he discovered the 1973 Dodge Dart Swinger Special pictured here. Devoid of rot and packing a Slant Six/TorqueFlite combination, the 37,000-mile Mopar had seen just one repaint despite its New Hampshire origins. It was a perfect candidate for his plans, and a relatively inexpensive purchase.

Rather than jump right in, converting the Dart to an optimized V-8 powerplant, Dave thought the process through carefully. "I really didn't want to spend a fortune, so I took my time, collecting parts as the budget permitted. A lot of what I amassed came from friends. One had the 340-cu.in. short-block, the internals of

means a Corvette-killer, but sprightly nonetheless, the Omni "was one of those cars that I had wanted, so I didn't hesitate to buy it," Dave said.

Life in the fast lane with the turbo GLH didn't commence on day two. During Dave's first year of ownership, it was a daily commuter—even subjected to the hazards of winter driving like any other late model. By spring, however, at the age of 19, Dave started thinking of the hot hatch as more of a pleasure vehicle. Consequently, the GLH was reserved for car shows and fair-weather cruises, living the life of a Weekend Warrior. Over the course of the next dozen years, Dave began making the six-hour round-trip trek