

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Story and photos by Brett Becker



The Life's Good Racing team is taking a very red — and white and blue — approach to endurance racing.

When you think of endurance racing cars, you often conjure images of Porsches, BMWs and even Mazda Miatas. Well, team Life's Good Racing is hoping to change a few minds and add the word Camaro to that thought process.

Team owner Karl Chicca has long been known for his 1969 Camaro, which is pretty enough to turn heads, but it's also a quick Time Trial car. But '69 Camaros are becoming rarer and more valuable, so it wouldn't be suitable to take it wheel to wheel racing.

"We've been competing with the 1969 Camaro and just tweaking and tuning on it," said Life's Good Racing co-driver Dave Brown. "Running a 1:45 on the full course at Sonoma, that car

isn't messing around anymore. It is really dialed, and it's gorgeous because of its stock body lines. It's got a little lip spoiler on it, but it's essentially pure mechanical grip in getting it to go that fast.

"Of course, as racers we always want to go faster, and to take it any further, and any faster we were going to be forced to ugly it up," he added. "It's going to need aero, big wings, diffusers, big splitters and canards and all that kind of stuff because it's really at its aero limit at the speeds that it's going and we really didn't want to do that because the car is just gorgeous."

Brown had a 1996 Howe Racing Enterprises stock car chassis that had been in and out of service over its lifespan, but was just sitting in storage. So they pulled it out, stripped it down and got to work.

LIFE'S GOOD RACING 2012 CAMARO

WEIGHT:	2,800 lbs. with driver and half tank of fuel
ENGINE:	550-hp Schwanke dry-sump GM LS3 V8
SUSPENSION:	Front: double wishbone with Penske 7500 series double-adjustable shocks with coil overs Rear: Richmond quick change live axle, four link with panhard bar, Penske 7500 series double adjustable shocks with coil overs
TIRES:	Hoosier bias-ply 15-inch slicks
BRAKES:	Wilwood calipers and Hawk pads and rotors
DATA ACQUISITION:	Traqmate linked to GoPro cameras
SPONSORS:	Hawk Performance Brakes, WORKS Motorsports at Sonoma Raceway, Competition Clutch, Supertech valves, Advanced Ignition Products, Redline Oils



Howe offers Gen V Camaro bodies for its current stock car chassis — which oddly enough are hugely popular in the Camaro Cup racing series in Sweden — but the body fit on Life's Good Racing's old 1996 chassis without much modification. Now, Life's Good Racing has "bookend" racecars.

But there's a lot more equipment needed for endurance racing and stock cars just don't come with it. The car needed lights, wipers, data acquisition and an alternator that would power all that stuff. It even needed to have all the brackets fabricated to mount all that additional equipment. Oh,

and it needed coolers. Lots of coolers. Two engine oil coolers, a transmission cooler and a differential cooler with a pump driven by a belt off the driveshaft.

"If something is going to run for 35 minutes it's one thing, but if it's going to run for 25 hours, it's another thing altogether," Brown said. "The good thing about the stock car stuff is it's made for 900 horsepower and we're putting 550 through it so it should be pretty bulletproof equipment all the way around."

At 2,800 pounds with a driver and a half tank of fuel, 550 horsepower is plenty, but

the team was focused on reliability. After a nationwide search for an engine builder adept with the LS architecture, they went with Schwanke engines in Springfield, Minn.

The engine features a dry-sump lubrication system, which is necessary because the turning forces have measured as high as 1.8 g in corners and 1 g under braking. The team has been running a relatively hard compound Hoosier slick, too, for longevity, but if they decide to go softer, those forces will increase.

"We've run three hours no problem," Brown said. "We

believe they'll go four hours, but we haven't run any enduros longer than three hours yet. We can turn up the speed any time we want by going to a softer compound."

Believe it or not, the team also has focused on economy, which was one of the reasons they went with a stock car. First, Brown already owned the chassis, so the only big purchases were the body and the engine, which runs on 91 octane pump gas and saves on fuel costs. Also, the car runs on 15-inch steel wheels, which are strong and light, and only



cost \$60 apiece. Fifteen-inch tires cost less, too. In addition, stock car parts are plentiful enough that you can buy them at regular outlets like Jegs and Summit Racing.

"Stock car stuff is readily available once you get in and learn about it," Brown said. "There are guys running stock cars all over the United States at their local tracks, so there's a lot of equipment out there and a lot of manufacturers, and that drives the costs down."

The car's braking system features a system common on stock cars, which circulates brake fluid from a reservoir to the master cylinder to the calipers and back to the reservoir. It uses twice the number of brake hoses, but the system is self-bleeding and maintains a flow of cool brake fluid to the Wilwood calipers. However, live axles on stock cars can hop a bit under heavy braking, so the team added brake-bias adjustment and a surge-suppression device to reduce the initial brake pressure to minimize axle hop.

"It dampens that initial pressure hit and then allows the pressure to go back up to peak so you can confidently just nail the brake pedal at the end of the straightaway without initiating a rear-end hop," Brown said. "So those are two key pieces to having a strong and predictable and consistent brake system in a stock car for road racing."

At the back of the car, the Richmond quick-change rear axle allows the team to adjust the axle ratio to suit the car to any race track. Because



they can change the gears in about five minutes, it also means they can change gears as conditions at a given track change throughout the day.

On track, and in the metal, the car is menacing. Its lumpy idle, wicked exhaust note and heavy gear whine sound formidable. But Chicca and Brown said the car is fun to drive and surprisingly compliant.

Chicca and Brown are using the 2013 WERC season to get their team ready for the 2013 25 Hours of Thunderhill while crew chief Chris Hovey dials in the car. A former endurance athlete, Chicca and the Life's Good Racing team are shooting for the overall victory at this year's 25.

"We tried to solve the endurance racing equation for as many variables as we could," Chicca said. "The benchmark was the Porsche Cup cars they bring in, you know, the \$400,000-plus factory racecars that continue to win the 25 Hours. We used that as our baseline. That's the kind of performance we needed to go after."

"However, we wanted to do it with American Iron," Chicca added. "We wanted to have tried-and-true American Iron because we needed the reliability and we wanted to prove that you don't have to have a \$400,000 car to go win in that kind of a series. You can build a car like this for a tenth of what those Porsches cost. We wanted to be red, white and blue, through and through and that's basically what we've done." **SN**