



Start your engines: Sheriff gets 'fast & furious'

Written by Chuck Kurtz

Wednesday, 02 September 2009 00:00



Johnson County Sheriff **Frank Denning** has one of the sleekest, fastest cars around, a 1971 Chevy Nova with a 454 cubic inch small block that can reach 120 mph in less than 11 seconds through the quarter mile.

But unless you're a criminal he has to chase, the only other way to see Denning's personal car in action is to watch him drive it Sept. 10, 11, 12 and 13 during the Muscle Car Reunion and Nostalgia Drag Races at the Kansas City International Raceway, 8201 Noland Road, Kansas City, Mo.

Some might say Denning has come full circle. During high school, he was a self-proclaimed "street" racer.

"I got into trouble with the law and a cop was the one who actually put me on the other side of the windshield, and that's part of the reason why I'm in this (law enforcement) business quite frankly – that's a true story," Frank said.

He stopped racing when he began showing cutting horses.

"I did that for 15 years, but the horses aged out and this job is so labor intensive I stopped racing," Frank said.

But his brothers Jim and Hank didn't. Not long ago he helped his youngest brother Hank as a member of the pit crew during a race in Great Bend where Denning grew up.

"He told me to take it down the track," Frank said. "I told him no because it had been a long time. He told me to drive it, so I climbed in it and oh boy!"

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He laughs as he recalls the feeling and the power of the car going down the track.

And then he found the Nova in a ditch near Wellsville.

"It was canary yellow when I found it and I was just going to drive it, which I did for about a month," he said. "Then I started fixing this, and then I fixed that, and I thought, 'This is really a nice car and if I do this right, just one time...'"

"I ran junk my whole life when I was in the racing game when I was young. You wrenched on it yourself in the backyard and you ran trash, so I thought I would do this one right."

One thing led to another, said Denning.

"And then I took the whole darn body off, tore it clear down to nothing," he said. "It's an all-steel car now and has a full set of roll bars."

But you would never know it's a track car by looking at it. Not only is the outside a shiny black, just like the fleet cars used by Johnson County Sheriff Officers, the inside also was completely restored. The only way to see the roll bars is to look inside.

"I restored the interior so when you first walk up to the car it looks like a restored Nova until you look inside," Frank said. "It's called a Resto-mod because the roll bars fit into the interior. You can see them, but the car has a full-set interior, a full set of glass.

"It's really a fun car and it turned out better than I ever anticipated."

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Denning debuted the car at KCIR and turned 11.2 seconds in the quarter-mile.

"It's a 10-second car; I just have to get used to it," he said. "She's wicked fast."

Was the blood rushing?

"Oh, man!" he said. "The motor I bought, it's the **Bill Mitchell**, it's the new technology motors. It's a 454 cubic inch, 625 horse, but it's a small block. The technology they have now, the 454 block used to be the big block Chevrolet and when you look at (the engine), it looks like a 327 motor but it runs like a 454.

"It runs really good."

Although Denning had done some restoration, he had it totally redone by Hot Rod Express in Blue Springs, Mo.

"I have it street legal; it's muffled and tagged and I take it out because now I know how to behave," he said. "If I had this when I was 20, you don't know how to behave when you're 20; when you pull up to a light or anywhere and somebody even looks at you, you're going to smoke 'em.

"But we don't street race. I don't want to pick up your paper and read: 'Johnson County sheriff clocked at 119' – not cool, not cool! That might be good for the newspaper but not for my career!"

Denning did have in mind to use the car in parades and other special events and occasions when he had the car painted to match the department's squad cars. He even has a suction-cupped flashing red light to put on top of the car's roof.

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"I thought about using it (when he races), but my fear is I would lose it going down the track and scratch the paint," he said. "We'll do a set up like that in parades. We're going to put it in the Old Settlers Parade (10 a.m. Sept. 12 in downtown Olathe) and then we're going to enter it in the Old Settlers Car Show."

The fact the car is street legal prompted Denning's wife **Robin Lewis**, an Olathe attorney, to drive it to her work to show her friends. It's even inspired her to want to race it.

"I'm going to teach her," Frank said. "In fact, I just ordered her fire jacket and her helmet; she's never done that in her whole life. I always tease her and say if she and I were in the same high school together, we'd never be walking down the hallways together; I had a black jacket with the little flames on the back and she was always the academic."

"I tell her she graduated from Washburn magna cum laude and I graduated from college Thank-The-Lord!"

Robin, a 1975 graduate of Olathe High School, said she is looking forward to getting her drag racing license. She rode with Frank while he warmed and prepped his car before a race in Great Bend.

"I love carnival rides, like roller coaster rides, and (driving this car) beats any carnival ride I have ever been on," she said. "The Great Bend track used to be an air strip. They have this one long strip, not the race track, but an area where you get the car tacked and warm it up."

"He drove it, not even full throttle, basically it was half throttle and, oh man, it is very exhilarating. It was a hoot; it gives you those butterfly feelings in your stomach. I really enjoy it."

Robin said drivers have to go through a short series of lessons, including driving solo on the quarter-mile race track, to qualify for a drag racing license.

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She even has experience being in the pit for Frank's brother's car doing things such as checking the air pressure in the tires, checking their torque, filling the gas tanks and checking the oil level.

"His brother Hank was very kind," she said. "We would go down and he would show me how to set the pistons and how to set the timing with the separation with the spark plugs," Robin said. "The bottom line is the Frank and Hank both just welcomed me with open arms."

Denning doesn't get much reaction from other racers to the fact he's a sheriff.

"A lot of them don't even know I'm a cop; they don't know I'm a sheriff," he said.

And he's not going to make any predictions about how well he thinks the car will do during the Nostalgia races this weekend.

"Sunday is the big race day; that's the elimination day," he said. "I don't know how well I'll do. I'm not that confident because I'm up against some really fast guys.

"But it will be fun – I know it will be fun."

And fast!