

How To Fillet A Fish - A Two Part Tale

by Chuck Wills

Some of you long-time Miata Clubbers may remember two short years ago when I wrote about an adventure out west. The crew from AIM Tuning embarked upon a journey to participate in the inaugural Spec Miata race in Laguna Seca, California. It was a plan hatched over drinks and altered judgment, to put together a crew and drive 5500 miles to race with 75 other Miataphiles. It seems that every few years I get an itch for an adventure of the automotive kind. Laguna was one of those and once again, all of a sudden, why am I itching?

It all started quite innocently as Shane and I were trying to wait out the Hoosier winter. We were taking in the Performance Racing Industry show at the convention center in early December. As we walked about, we ran into friends of ours from our favorite magazine, Grass Roots Motorsports. These are kindred spirits with hi-octane in their veins, and they happen to print the best darned sports car magazine in the world. We chatted with them and started to discuss one of their annual events, the \$2004 Challenge. It's something that I had read about, but never given much thought to. The deal is, you have a total budget of \$2004 to build a car to compete in an autocross, drag race and car show. What makes this event doubly attractive is that it takes place in Florida the first weekend in April. I can think of no better time to abandon Hoosierland and head south.

As the conversation progressed, I mentioned that Shane had purchased an old Miata for an embarrassingly small sum, and that it actually ran quite well after some TLC. The guys from the magazine only added fuel to the fire at that point. They described how the event was really a gear-head convention and that we should come on down even if we just brought the car as-is. I was hooked, but Shane needed some convincing to turn his street car, named "The Fish", into a budget racer.

I worked on him for several days, saying how with little effort we should be able to run down to the event and at least get some magazine exposure for the shop. That was somewhat interesting to him, but the real convincer was when I said "Shane, you know I've got enough parts laying around my garage to build a turbo kit". That got his attention. The thought of building a low-budget turbo Miata was more than he could stand. He took the idea and ran with it, discussing what it would be like to strip the car down to its bare essentials. Light weight with turbo power, we would be a shoe-in for the overall win. That was a Friday evening.

When I returned to the shop Monday, I found a sleep deprived Shane and a stripped car surrounded by piles of parts and an entire crate of loose wires. He had spent the entire weekend removing parts and re-engineering the wiring harness to take weight out of the car. What started as a 2400lb pig ended up at a fighting weight of 2007lbs. This was the beginning of many sleepless nights and long weekends to get the project together.

The competition focuses on amateur engineering and resourceful home-brew solutions. We developed a keen shopping strategy to find cheap parts. By dipping into our own parts bins, raiding friend's garages and many hours surfing eBay, we were able to assemble a very fast car for well under our \$2004 limit. With parts cobbled together from RX7's, Nissan's and even Saab turbo's, we ended up making over 230 hp on our mostly stock 130,000 mile engine. In our first test session at the drag strip, even before the car was tuned, it went 105mph in the quarter mile. The Fish was going to be a force to be reckoned with. The car was then fine tuned to run on our special brew of home-made "rocket fuel" - a mix of 2/3 premium gas and 1/3 paint thinner. No kidding. With our 105 octane mix, 15psi of boost was child's play. We were ready to go.

The last big question was "How do we get the Fish down to Florida?". We had a truck and trailer, but it would only go 68 mph and got slightly worse fuel mileage than the Exxon Valdez. We decided that if we were careful, we could drive the car down with a second support vehicle full of spare parts and tools. We had a lot of sage advice from guys that have "been there, done that", saying that we should tow the car even though it would cost a fortune in fuel. Too much can happen on the highway, and making the race is too important to risk it.

Being young and invulnerable, we decided that we were going to drive the Fish down to the event no matter what. We loaded up the MSV (Miata Support Vehicle) with tools, spares, 10 extra gallons of "rocket fuel" and prepared for the journey to sunny Florida. We were leaving Wednesday, one day early, which would give us plenty of time to make the Friday registration deadline. We could almost taste the seafood dinner that was waiting for us.

The morning of our departure was cold, rainy and generally miserable. This is probably the time to tell you that the Fish has no side windows and no heater. Those parts were pitched in an effort to save weight. So, as we pulled out of Gasoline Alley for the last time, Shane was bundled up with 2 coats, a hat, gloves and goggles. He looked like an Arctic WWII Flying Ace.

The first two hours southward were uneventful. Cold. Rain. More rain. But at our fuel stop south of Louisville, the clouds broke and things started to look up, and by the time we hit central Kentucky the sky was bright and so were our spirits. The MSV was loping along effortlessly and the Fish was minding its own business cruising in the fast lane. With no muffler to deaden the exhaust, it sounded like a pint-sized Indy car cruising next to us.

As we passed by the Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, I was chatting on the phone with our newsletter editor, Sara J. We were ahead of schedule and would easily make Florida by bed time. Sara was filling me in on the miserable

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