



STORY BY HUW EVANS
PHOTOS BY TRACY STOCKER

THE DRIVEABILITY GUY

"As long as there's fuel to burn and cars on the road, there will always be hot Mustangs."

— Lidio Iacobelli

Driveability. Many of us have our own idea of what it constitutes and some of us will know, from experience I might add, that the terms driveability and highly modified Mustang don't always seem to go together very well – a bit like fish and peanut butter really. You start with all intents and purposes in building a car that's fast and fun, but also reliable and will get you to the store and the office with few complaints. Unfortunately, trying to strike the balance can be very tricky and time consuming and it often takes a special talent, not to mention eons of experience to really make it work. Lidio Iacobelli, proprietor of Mt. Clemens, Michigan-based Alternative Auto Performance, knows this only too well. For more than a decade his shop has specialized, not only in building performance Mustangs and Ford products, but how to make them work, day in and day out.

We got together with Lidio on a cold morning this past February, to find out all that's going on at Alternative Auto these days.

MM "Enjoying this weather as much as we are?"

LI "Yeah, really. We got hit with some more snow last night and the side streets are a mess, but the worst is over, customers are really bringing their cars in now and it won't be too long until spring. I'll tell ya though, what I am looking forward to is getting down to Florida for the Spring Break shootout (as I'm sure you guys are) and getting some runs on the track with my '05 GT."

MM "You can say that again, Orlando's gonna be great. Anyway, how's your '05 coming along?"

LI "As you probably know, I originally purchased this car in early 2005. I put a Vortech on it in the fall, but blew the engine because it leaned out. We rebuilt it, but kept the cast

crank, the forged rods and pistons. The motor's now been bored and the heads ported and cleaned – I've got a blower and methanol injection on it now – nothing exotic, but I'm excited because I'll be running it in Fun Ford's new Ultra 'Stang class. It's specifically designed for the new S197 Mustangs – for street cars and I want to see how much power and abuse the stock crank handles. It'll be interesting and I think it's relevant to what a lot of owners are doing out there."

MM "Sound's cool. Do you plan on making it a competitive car in the class?"

LI "Like in the past, my primary reason for going to the FFW events this year is to generate exposure for Alternative Auto. It's also a great way for us to really see how our tuning pays off. If I win or have a good race, to me it's a bonus."

MM "Driveability is something a lot of us talk about, but your take on it is quite unique

— tell us a little bit about how you got so involved with it and come to think of it, how you got started in this business.

LI "I think why I'm so into the whole driveability thing has a lot to do with my background in troubleshooting and general automotive repair. As to how I got started playing around with cars, it all goes back to high school in the early '80s. When I was 17 I bought a used 1979 Mustang. This was around 1984 I think. The car had a 302 and a C4 automatic, but the engine was hurt. I didn't know that at the time, but when my dad and I inspected the engine, it turned out the flat tappet cam was wiped. We did some R&R and I put it back together in the high school shop. When I got out of school I went into the trade. By 1987 I was working in a carb shop, we rebuilt and tuned them. I gained a lot of knowledge about carburetors and making them work – a lot of our customers back then had old school muscle cars, many with multiple carb setups, so it

was great learning the ins and outs of making these cars run better."

MM "You got into new car repairs around about this time didn't you?"

LI "Yes I did. In 1988 I went to work for a Ford dealer. At first I was just doing dealer prep, but then I became a driveability mechanic. Ford's EEC-IV was really coming on strong by that point and I gained a lot of knowledge and experience working with electronic fuel injection – learning the tricks, fixing problems. I worked there until 1991, so I was right in the thick of the 5.0 Mustang thing, when those cars were brand new."

MM "When did you decide to go it alone?"

LI "It was toward the end of my time at the dealership that I started thinking about my own shop. I worked on the side for a bit – I opened my first shop in about April 1990, but in 1991 I went at it full time."

MM "But it wasn't just a Mustang specific Performance shop in the early days was it?"

LI "That's right. We did work on performance cars, but we also did a lot of general repair and maintenance work – including a lot of carburetted cars. If you'd come by the shop then, you might see a Mustang, but you might also have seen an old Econoline van, Dodge Aries K Car or a big V8 sedan being worked on."

MM "When did you start to focus primarily on Mustang Performance?"

LI "It was around 1993 when we started to shift our focus from general repair and more toward Mustang performance. The general repair stuff and carburetor rebuilding was starting to thin out – by the following year we were pretty much a full high performance Ford shop, specializing in fuel injected Mustangs."

MM "What was your shop like back then?"

LI "We started out with a 1,600 square foot facility. It was small, but at the time it was adequate."

MM "But you upgraded soon afterwards didn't you?"

LI "Yeah, I guess you could say we did. What ended up happening is that we purchased the facility next door to our existing shop – that one was about 3,000 square feet and we moved all our stuff over to there as the business began to grow."

MM "What was your take on the whole Mustang 5.0 thing as it got going in the 1990s?"

LI "Even when I was still doing general repair, I could see that this Mustang thing was hot and it wasn't going away. By about 1995/96 I could see that it was becoming really big, but I also saw that I had a future. The magazine coverage was getting bigger and brighter, more people were showing up to the races and more specific Mustang race cars and events were sprouting up. But I also saw that even though the cars were getting really popular, a lot of guys still didn't understand fuel injection that well. With my

"Unlike some of the other guys specializing in Mustangs, I wasn't a drag racer who decided to open a shop."



troubleshooting background I'd been constantly learning and trying things. Because I looked for problems, I understood where our customers were coming from. Unlike some of the other guys specializing in Mustangs, I wasn't a drag racer who decided to open a shop, I was a shop guy and mechanic who occasionally went racing."

MM "When Ford switched to Modular Engines in their V8 Mustangs for 1996, did things change that much?"

LI "At the time it was a really big deal. These new engines were a lot more complex and had far more powerful and restrictive electronics. Some guys wouldn't touch them at first, but again, for our shop, my background in driveability and diagnostics really helped. We started using Chipmaster software from

Logic, which allowed us to change parameters within the stock computer. There weren't many people doing it at that time, but it's become increasingly important in order to make power."

MM "Fast forward 10 years and it's probably fair to see that there isn't a lot you can do to a modern Mustang without going into the computer, right?"

LI "You couldn't have said it better. On the new S197 cars, about the only things you can do without causing driveability problems are pulleys, air filter and exhaust, anything beyond that and you're going to have to play with the computer. Even if you just bolt on a big MAF meter or switch to high flow cats, it will trigger the check engine light. Even with the slightly older cars – I'm talking about the '99 and up Mustangs – you have to place a lot of emphasis on custom tuning. Take the gears for instance. Because of the electronic speedometer, if you change the final drive, the speedometer reads incorrectly and in order to make the new gears work properly with the speedo, you need to change the EEC-V's (and now Spanish Oak) tune to make it work."

MM "What would you say is your main focus these days at Alternative Auto?"

LI "Without a doubt our main focus is good running street cars. That's the primary reason why I take my '05 racing – to show off what the shop can do. My own shop cars are basically street rides with lots of bolt ons, it's what a lot of guys want and can relate to, that's why I'm running my 2005 in FFW's new Ultra Stang Street class."

MM "How's your other personal 'pet project' coming along – the Mach 1?"

LI "Funny you should mention that, because the car's really doing great. My goal from the outset with that thing was to get it running 10s just with a Kenne-Bell 2.2 blower and exhaust. Well it did it, but the motor blew on the return road coming back. Currently the Mach has a 4.6 with forged pistons and rods, a K-B 2.2 Blowzilla and is dialed in with 19 lbs of boost and is set up with a methanol kit. The car still has the automatic trans and with shortie headers, 2 1/2-inch exhaust and still the original should be shorty 3.55 gears; it runs 10.50s and makes 640 hp to the wheels. Once I get the methanol and the nitrous dialed in, the car should go 10.40s, even 10.20s. For now I just drive it around. It's got these really cool Hot Wheels 18-inch rims on it and 345/30R18 tires out back – it really looks mean."

MM "You've also worked on some other FoMoCo products recently, besides Mustangs haven't you?"

LI "We just did a Lincoln Mk VIII for a customer. With Mach 1 heads and cams,

steel crank, H-beam rods and Diamond Pistons, a long exhaust and 3.73 gears, it made 530 rwhp – on pump gas!"

MM "What would you say is the coolest thing that's happened in recent memory?"

LI "Definitely methanol kits. We've been doing a ton of them and I'm doing a little story about them on our website. The thing is, these kits work really well for supercharged street cars. You can up the boost, say from 8-9 psi to 12 and with a stock 4.6 engine, you're making 475 horsepower to the wheels, yet you have great driveability. It allows owners to comfortably up the boost level without the risk of detonation. For example, we've got a 2005 Mustang in our shop right now. It's all stock except the blower and a methanol kit. We dyno'd it and the car made 473 horsepower at the wheels on 93 pump gas and we were a long way from detonation on the air/fuel. It's just great, you've got the boost, you've got power, you've got the driveability and you can run it on fuel from any gas station. We can now have power and driveability undreamt of, even 10 years ago."

MM "Where do you see the Mustang hobby heading down the road?"

LI "That's always a difficult call, because you can't predict the future. The introduction of the 3-valve engine and the more powerful electronics has been a challenge, but like anything else, it's an obstacle and you rise to the occasion. People said the same thing back in '86 and look what you can do to a fuelie 5.0 today. Beyond that I think we'll still find ways to make these cars fun. As long as there's fuel to burn and cars on the road, there will always be hot Mustangs and people wanting to build and drive them."

MM "On a final note, looking the other way this time, do you think you might have taken a different path?"

LI "I'd have to say, looking back, that things have turned out well. I knew that by the time I'd reached my late 20s I'd done something different. I knew I understood the driveability thing and 'the craft.' A lot of guys can slap an engine together but they don't know 'the craft.' I'm lucky in that I have a deep-rooted interest in modern automotive electronics – it's crucial and we've also been lucky and grateful that there are companies like SCT that help us really exploit the power potential of these modern engines. Without them I'd probably just be installing parts." **MM**

Alternative Auto Performance

586-463-0010

www.alternativeauto.com