

5.0 QUESTIONS

BY DR. JAMIE MEYER

Lidio Iacobelli



A LONGTIME MUSTANG TUNER REFLECTS ON THE PAST AND THE '05 MUSTANG PRESENT

Lidio Iacobelli is an old-school Mustang crafter who built his reputation on clean and fast Mustangs. 5.0 Mustang fans will know Lidio from his yellow '88 LX notchback that appeared in the original BFGoodrich Drag Radial advertising campaign. Modular racers know Lidio for his groundbreaking work with the four-cam-supercharged combinations as well as Marauders that defy logic with mid-11-second performance. Above all, Lidio's creations are simple, sanitary, and quick.

With the dawn of the '05 Mustang, and performance shops clambering to be the first in line, Lidio has embarked on his next project—an automatic-equipped black GT that has already run in the 12-second zone with next to nothing done to it. Even though he is busy at his shop, Alternative Auto Performance [(586)463-001; www.alternative-auto.com] in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, Lidio was kind enough to answer five of our questions regarding his past, present, and future as it relates to the world of Ford performance.

1.0 Was it a difficult decision to take your hobby and make it your business?

Hard to say. While at all the various auto-repair jobs I had, I always did some kind of auto repair or some sort of Mustang performance work in my folks' garage or driveway. I wasn't super-busy with the side thing, but it was starting to happen.

It does look like a hobby from the outside, and I do truly enjoy it. But owning and operating Alternative Auto is the toughest job I've ever had. I don't work for myself. I work for and have to please everyone who walks in my door. I'm not my own boss in that way. At the end of a year, I have hundreds of bosses. During the peak busy season, the wages in no way match the hours for me, but it's what I know and in the end, I'd have it no other way.

When I started the shop in 1990, I was still working at the Ford dealer full-time. I ran Alternative Auto in the evenings and weekends and was happy to make the shop's rent, insurance, and utilities most of the time. Alternative Auto was not always known as a Ford and Mustang service shop. The key thing that kept me busy during the early years at my place in the early '90s was that I specialized in Ford EFI troubleshooting. At that time, only the dealers truly knew how to service and repair Ford fuel injection. I recognized this while working at the dealer and took that to the private repair scene so people wouldn't have to deal with the dealers high rates for EFI repairs. It wasn't until about 1994 that we really became mostly a Ford performance shop, although I was doing lots of that from the beginning.

I quit the dealer in mid-1991 and went full-time at Alternative Auto from then on. It was a very nervous time for me. I was recently married, [wife] pregnant with our first child, and bought my first home a couple months earlier.

2.0 What sort of clientele does Alternative Auto cater to?

I guess I could say something cliché like, our customers have "the-need-for-speed." But, actually 99 percent of our customers are just looking for a small to a medium boost in performance on the street. We really don't build super-high-end, high-dollar, high-maintenance race cars that often. At least these days we don't. These types of cars or projects tend to be unprofitable, frustrating, and ultimately even the customer can no longer keep up with the car's needs. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that most people can afford to build a high-end car, but then can't handle the maintenance and upkeep afterward—including myself. This is why I've

sold my orange, big-tired '98 Cobra and my '93 Renegade car. The mild street cars with more realistic and attainable horsepower goals are our most popular.

I must say, though, these days we've learned that a truly streetable, boosted EFI Ford can double as a race car as well. We have cars with 281-347 cubes with blowers and EFI and non-drag-race suspensions that will go well into the 10s in the quarter-mile, but not look, sound, or feel like a typical 10-second car. This is where I believe we've become recognized and separated ourselves from some of our competitors. I've also learned that offering a proper and final tune with a complete project is what completes the whole package. Nowadays, a project can have all the right go-fast parts, make big numbers at the rear wheels, and even go down the track fast. But if it doesn't idle well, surges, cold starts poorly, or gets bad gas mileage—this can make the whole thing frustrating and unlivable if it's a true street car of some kind, which is what we mostly see.

3.0 Which of your many project cars do you have the biggest connection with?

This is sadly my biggest downfall. I am very attached to all the various, different, and I guess, cutting-edge projects I've been involved in, be it my own car, a customer's, or friend's. But if I had to pick one, it was my partnership and involvement with Joe Spiteri and our green '91 coupe that had the Vortech supercharged, stock '96 Cobra, 32-valve long-block in it. We shocked a lot of people with how that car performed and survived the season of 2000. We debuted the car at the WFC that spring and went on to prove what I said could be done years earlier; that stock hypereutectic pistons could handle substantial boost and not break with the right octane and tune. We did eventually break three stock Cobra motors in that car. But, it wasn't until I really leaned on them. This instilled the confidence in me, that I to this day have, that stock 4.6 short-blocks only fail when you detonate them hard; otherwise they'll go for a while with good amounts of boost. That green '91 coupe and our efforts that summer, I believe, put Alternative Auto on the modular map.

4.0 Is the 5.0 Mustang always going to be a staple of the Ford aftermarket industry?

This is where it all started for me, without a doubt. I will always have a soft spot for the '79-'93 Mustangs. I grew up with them. I bought my first Mustang used in 1984 when I was 17 years old—it was a black '79 5.0 with a C4 in it, stock. I wanted to do a ton to this thing way back in the mid-'80s, but it was tough. There really weren't many aftermarket parts for small-block Fords even then, and I didn't have a lot of money to play with.

Also, my girlfriend then, wife today, bought

the famed yellow '88 LX coupe that we still have. So, I'm very attached to that era of Fox-bodied Mustangs.

Today, the 5.0s do keep us busy, but certainly not as busy as the 4.6 stuff. It's funny, though. Just when you think they can't think of anything new for the '93 and older Fox Mustangs, some thing or part manages to make it to market, and keep interest and money being spent on our old LXs and GTs. I wouldn't be surprised if someday you'll be able to buy a user-friendly, full-aftermarket, ready-to-assemble, street-type, 'glass '93-style Fox-body just like nowadays you can with an old Jeep or street rod.

5.0 What kind of a performance future does the automatic transmission-equipped '05 Mustang have?

This is the key reason Alternative Auto owns an '05 GT with an automatic trans—to see what it will take for power.

From a performance standpoint, the new five-speed auto known as the 5R55S is going to make the best of the available 300 hp and then some as we begin to tune them and, of course, do bolt-ons. With naturally aspirated milder-horsepower combinations, the auto may still not be quite as fast as a comparable stick car, but it will be closer than with previous four-speed autos, with much better consistency. The new 5R55S has a better gear spread and steeper ratios, which is one of the reasons the '05 GT auto runs as well as the stick in stock trim.

How long the 5R55S trans will last behind a power adder—we'll just have to see. I'm sure I'll know by late 2005. The 5R is physically smaller than the previous 4R70W, which was proven by us to be able to withstand 700-plus-horsepower at the flywheel, easily. I think the 5R will be limited to only about 400-450 at the flywheel. The physical size of the 5R doesn't really bother me; its internals are about the size of a C4 and possibly smaller, I've heard. But the way that it shifts from Second to Third and Third to Fourth can potentially flare like a C4 when it has big power in front of it. The flaring is what usually leads to a C4's most common failure. This flaring can be more damaging than the lack of big internals. The 5R55S is totally computer controlled now. It basically doesn't have a valvebody any longer. Everything about how the shifts are handled are totally computer controlled. This to me will be very challenging. Buying a stick version of the '05 Mustang would have been an easy way out, I think. The amount of computer controls for that trans are staggering when tuning. I owe it to that crowd to figure out what it takes to mod it and what it will take in the long run. **5.0**

For more questions and answers, check out 50mustangandsuperfords.com.

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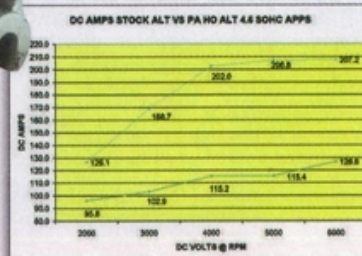
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