



BIG, BOLD, AND AGGRESSIVE

ENZED CENTRAL MUSCLE CARS ROUND THREE, FROM BRUCE MCLAREN MOTORSPORT PARK

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Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, as much as it pains me to say this, it has to be said — Enzed Central Muscle Cars (CMC) is, at this time, arguably the best motorsport category in the country. Big, bold, aggressive — and that’s just the statement. It goes without saying that the cars are that as well. The club is not interested in that title, nor is it interested in pushing itself as being of that standard — the conversations held between various media reps and the general public are where the assertion comes from — but it simply cannot get around the fact.

I did put the word ‘arguably’ in there, though, because many will want to have an argument about it — especially with the handful of other good categories out there — but I think that people have clear reasoning as to why this is the way it is. Let’s start with the machinery. These vehicles are quite simply amazing looking, they sound as badass as a race car can be, and they are bloody fast. In the argument, those points are surely non-negotiable. Then there are the people. They are as genuine and down-to-earth as you can get; they are truly passionate about their machinery; and, while

they don’t race for glory or gold, they are still competitive and continually looking for ways to improve their cars and their own skills. Finally, to cement the position, the category provides fantastic racing. This is proved by the number of racing fans who watch — whether online, on television, or at the circuit itself — every single time the cars go out on track. Rarely, if ever, would you see a CMC race that involves a fully spread-out field circulating with no passing or action. Yet, surprisingly, there is very little damage among the field — to the cars or egos.

In the same breath, you could say that there is no mob racing, either, even though people do like to see a big pack of cars scooting around corners together — but, let’s be fair, that kind of racing is rare on any racetrack.

One could also put up the argument that a reverse-grid handicap is no way to run a category. You won’t see that in top-tier championship classes anywhere around the world. That’s fair enough, too, because, in those categories, you should not fabricate. However, in CMC, it is the perfect thing to do, and it gives so much back to the drivers, the teams, and the watchers.

This point was clearly illustrated at Taupo on the first weekend of December. The limited crowd that attended — that’s just a thing at Taupo — immediately focused their eyes towards the track whenever the big beasts started lining up on the dummy grid. You won’t see people heading to the hot-dog stand when the muscle cars fire up. While Bruce McLaren Motorsport Park has a reputation as a limited-passing venue, this particular category shows that it can be done, over and over again. It also shows that, during the handicap racing, not only will the powerful chase and weave their way through the field, but those with lesser machines and lesser racing craft can





also get themselves onto the podium — delighting everyone, including their fellow competitors. This was exactly the case for Rick van Swet, a competitor for the past four years. Van Swet had never savoured the taste or the smell of the podium-winners' chocolate fish — no thirds, no seconds, and no firsts; nothing at all for four years, yet, at Taupo, Rick finally won a race. Now, this might again be construed as a fabricated result because the fastest cars were way behind, but that particular debate is not fair and does not take in the entire situation. Just like a standard scratch grid race, a handicap race puts drivers directly around their closest racing peers. However, unlike the scratch race, a handicap actually adds pressure — that's right; it's harder for everyone. Not only are you battling directly with your closest rivals, but you also know that, at some point near the end of the race, when you're

starting to get tired, hot, and sweaty, the big dogs will be chomping at your feet. Van Swet, like any human, was over the moon with his victory. After 12 years of racing classic Minis, a win with a big V8 under the bonnet was especially sweet. "I'd raced Minis for so long, but I decided a few years ago that I wanted something faster, and I've been OK with not getting on the steps," said van Swet post race. "The '67 Camaro shape was always my favourite machine, and when I saw a bare body come up for sale online, I figured it was a sign, so I took it to Ken Hopper in Whenuapai. I leased a bit of his workshop, and we got into it. I've never regretted the move to a muscle car, much as I loved the Minis," he explained. Rick's story is a familiar one up and down the garages — cars built and driven by pure >



THE BATTLES WE GET TO WATCH ARE BRILLIANT DAVID-VERSUS-GOLIATH MOMENTS





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enthusiasts of many kinds. Some are the nostalgic types, others are just V8 nutters, and there are those who want to drive what some of their racing heroes once did.

However, as a Group 1 competitor, van Swet has an extra burden to bear — just like every other Group 1 racer, he is always looking over his shoulder for the 'others'. Who are the 'others', you ask? They are those scary Group 2 people, that's who.

Group 2 competitors are not second class; technically or mechanically, they may be lesser, but they constantly punch above their weight. Stalwart Steve Noyer states the situation perfectly. "Fast and furious. It doesn't get any better than this. We mix it up with the bigger boys, and that is what it is all about for us. To be able to beat some of those Group 1 guys with our little small block Windsor or equivalent is awesome."

Regardless of the drivers' selfish, yet somewhat understandable, reasoning, overall, the category provides much to its followers.

When it comes to the actual racing, there are

mini battles wherever you look — not just up front with the more powerful Group 1 cars but throughout the field. In fact, given that so many of the Group 2 cars end up being faster than some of the Group 1 cars, the battles we get to watch are brilliant David-versus-Goliath moments. Sometimes they have equally legendary results. Take the tussle between Dean Perkins and John Midgley. Across the entire weekend of racing, each of the two square-nosed Falcons tried to go for the jugular. That might sound bullish considering the gentlemanly way the club operates, but you can't restrain the natural competitive streak in people; that can only be self-managed. Perkins and Midgley's wrestle for the delight of a chocolate fish was immense, as always. Perkins completely blew his race-one start from pole position — the wheelspin off the line was impressive to watch but lost him four spots before turn one. He then had to spend the rest of the race chasing, and any hope of catching Midgley was unrealistic.

"I completely ruined the start, which is something

I'm good at," said Perkins. "I thought I'd cured my issues with that but I had another brain fade."

Midgley was quite circumspect in his driving response: "I saw him out of the corner of my eye. I thought my start was bad as well, but it hooked up, and I was able to get away. I couldn't believe my luck, so, for the first couple of laps, I tried to get a gap, because I knew he'd be hunting me down pretty quickly. Then I just backed it down a bit, as we only get limited tyres."

Midgley was correct in his assumption as, per the script, Perkins closed in as the laps went by. However, they only get eight laps, and it just wasn't enough for a swap in position. However, that struggle set the standard — not just for those two but for the entire category.

During the last race of the weekend, which is the scratch race with grids sorted on points, regular front-runner names appeared on the first four rows: Perkins, Midgley, Dalton, Hopkins, Tony Galbraith, Dean Hansen, Bruce Anderson, and Tristan Teki. The spectators who had remained at the track for the after-five cocktails — yes, it was that late — were going to be treated to a right-royal fight.

However, it wasn't the fight up front that was intriguing people; it was the one two spots back, to see who would garner the barbecue bragging rights of third place. What unfolded was pure racing: no positional changes — simply one driver trying to do everything possible to pass legally, the other doing everything legally possible to stop that from happening.

This battle was between Hopkins and Dalton — two completely different cars peddled by people with completely different driving styles — and, for eight laps, the crowd would "ooh" and "ahh" on every turn. It is extremely difficult to paint a picture of what went on, but, to put it simply, Hopkins would catch Dalton on the twisty corners, and Dalton would do enough to stay in front and pull away along the straights.

It would be fair to say that if all this had happened in a 'regular' touring car race — either here in New Zealand or across the Tasman in Australia — the front car would have had damaged panels, a lost mirror, and possibly been pushed into the gravel, while the following driver would be visiting the officials post race.

This episode showed again that a category can provide brilliant racing without trading paint, regardless of whether it's at the hot pointy end of the field or further back in the pack.

Taupo was exactly what the doctor ordered with regard to a motorsport fix. Not even the rainstorm that swept through at 6pm on Saturday and delayed the race till Sunday morning could dampen anyone's spirits.

Whether CMC likes the attention or not, the category is on a high and getting a lot of praise. Maybe there is concern that the increasing popularity could in fact be detrimental to the club — but it's CMC's own fault; these drivers race cool cars, and they race them well. **WB**

