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A Dream of Lost Gloves

In a parallel universe, a missed biochemistry exam could lead to a Crossle 32F.

By Peter Egan



A Dream Of Lost Gloves

Well, both medical and psychiatric evidence would seem to suggest that I've bought another race car.

First, when I went to bed last night, I had to treat several small puncture wounds in my fingertips from frayed strands of Aeroquip hose—those competition-grade fuel and oil lines with a woven steel mesh for shielding. This stuff often unravels into sharp spikes around the edges and has caused more bloodshed over the years than Attila the Hun. So I woke up this morning with mercurochrome all over the same three fingers I use for the E chord on my guitar—critical to playing "Gloria" properly. There goes my professional music career.

Psychiatric evidence? Earlier in the week I had the Racer Dream again, for the first

time in about eight years.

This is merely a racing version of the nearly universal Missed Exam dream, known to college students all over the world. In the student version, you walk by a classroom and look through the window to realize you're missing a semester exam in a class you signed up for but then forgot to attend. So your life is ruined. You'll get an F in biochemistry and never be admitted to medical school and have to spend your life as a motorjournalist instead.

In the Racer Dream, you're on the false grid, about to climb into your car, when you look into your helmet and realize you have only one Nomex glove. So you go running back to the paddock to look for the other one, but soon find yourself lost in a maze of fences and parking lots and abandoned buildings. Meanwhile, you can hear your race group circulating the track on their warm-up lap. It's too late to get back to the grid, and your driver's suit is torn from climbing over chain link fences. McLaren will never offer you that F1 ride now, so you'll have to fall back on medical school. Then journalism. The whole thing is nightmarish.

But the main evidence of race car ownership, of course, is the car in my garage. It's a black, nicely restored 1978 Crossle 32F Formula Ford that I bought two weeks ago in North Carolina and towed all the way home to Wisconsin after four days on the road. I'm hoping to race it next month as a vintage Club Ford in the autumn VSCDA race at Road America.

I've been working on the car ever since I got it home, changing gears in the Hewland box, checking fluids, adjusting pedals, etc. I've also had to buy a new helmet and driver's suit, and something called a "HANS Device" that I've never used before. This is a kind of horse collar worn over the shoulders that prevents your head from flying forward when the rest of you suddenly stops. Seems like a reasonable idea.

I actually had a nice quilted driver's suit that I was hoping to use, but I'd had it tailored by Simpson back in my SCCA Formula Continental days, when I was riding my bicycle 30 miles every day and weighed 168 lb. Now I'm riding my bicycle about 15 miles every day (started just last week!) and I weigh 178 lb.

I tried on the old suit and asked Barb what she thought. She said, "Well, you got it zipped up successfully, but I don't think you'll be able to sit down."

Time to order a new one—which came yesterday and is more befitting the mature version of my Greek-god-like physique.

So. Lots of the usual flailing, wrenching, spending and organizing going on here, after an eight-year layoff from racing. I blame Aston Martin and our Editor-in-Chief, Matt

DeLorenzo, for the whole thing.

It was they who cooked up our "24 Hours of Rapide" endurance run at Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch in Nevada last month and invited me to be one of the drivers. We drove a couple of Aston Martin Rapides around the track for 24 hours, and I did three one-hour sessions behind the wheel of these marvelous and very fast cars. Needless to say, it got the old racing juices flowing again, and I came home from Nevada vowing to find myself another race car.

Strangely enough, I'd almost called Matt and tried to beg off this assignment, as my chronic hepatitis C had been acting up and I had a pretty low energy level. I didn't see how I was going to be able to drive for three hours in the desert heat. But after I got out of the car on my last stint in the morning I felt better than I had in years. Still do.

There's something about a track session that simply energizes people and leaves them with a strange, lingering high. You can see it after any race, a group of drivers standing around talking a little faster than usual, in a high state of animation. It's probably a mixture of adrenaline and endorphins. Or maybe it's tannins and sulfites. Don't ask me; as a precautionary move, I dropped out of biochemistry well before I had a chance to miss my semester exam.

When it was time to find a car, I had to decide between a sports car, such as an MGB or another Lotus Seven, and a "pure" racing car, built for the job. In the end, I went back to my old addiction to open-wheel formula cars, which never seems to fade. I'd like to have bought a Brabham BT-21 FB car, but these have soared a bit past my budget unless we sell the house, so I started to look for a Formula Ford.

In recent years, many of the vintage clubs have opened their Formula Ford events up to Club Fords, which are the post-1972 cars—such as Lola 342s, 30-series Crossles, early Van Diemens, etc.—with inboard disc brakes and a few other updates, but still with outboard suspension. These are the cars built before the Swift DB-1 made them all obsolete in 1983, and to me they represent a very interesting and competitive era in racing. The glory years, really, when any Formula Ford driver could turn out to be the next Hunt, Mansell or Senna. Unfortunately, I turned out to be the next Peter Egan, but never mind that for now. I did okay and had a lot of fun.

I raced a Crossle 32F in California for several years during the early '80s, and found it to be a rugged and good-handling car, so I started to search for another one last month—and found one on the Internet. Strangely, the Club Ford class has not caught on here in the Midwest as much as it has on the coasts, so most of the pack is still composed of the earlier vintage Fords, such as Titan MK6s, Lola 204s, Merlyn MK11s, etc.

But I like the Crossle enough that I decided to break the ice and show up with one. Formula Fords from the mid-'70s to early '80s are such good cars—and there are so many of them at reasonable prices—I'd expected the floodgates to open when they were allowed in, but it hasn't really happened yet. We'll see...

Anyway, I bought myself a used open trailer, replaced the wheel bearings and tires, hitched it to my Ford van and drove to Greensboro, North Carolina, a couple of weeks ago on the hottest week of a very hot summer and bought myself the Crossle 32F. It was a road littered with more blown-out truck tires than I've ever seen in my life (somebody seems to be selling the truck drivers of this country a lot of dangerously flawed recaps), but I set my own cruise control on 62 mph in the slow lane, dodged all the steel-belted debris on the Interstate, and made it home intact after 2000 miles of driving.

So the Crossle is sitting in my workshop now, pretty much ready to go. There's probably something it desperately needs, but I won't know what until I get out on the racetrack. That's one of the problems with used racing cars; you generally can't test-drive them before you buy. I'll just have to see what happens when I go roaring out pit row in a couple of weeks.

If nothing else, endorphins and sulfites will go coursing through my veins and I can look forward to more dreams of lost gloves.

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