

*If you're old enough to remember Dodge's "Guys in the White Hats" commercials, this Challenger was sold by the dealership that reportedly came up with that slogan.*



*An excellent engine compartment went a long way towards Wright's First Place E-Body Stock award. But the battery tag is bogus and the shock absorber studs never had locknuts. Easy fixes: Just take stuff off. Still, this is a wreally wrighteous wresto job!*

# WRIGHT ON!



*The trials and tribulations of a '70 Challenger R/T Nats First Place winner.*

**By Jim Koscs**

Photos by Bill Erdman

**W**hat's the difference between a restored Mopar that can win second place at the Nats and one that can win First? Ask Ron Wright, and he'll tell you "about \$17,000."

We don't normally focus on the dollars that folks invest in their Mopar restorations, mainly because some of them cost as much as our houses. But for some readers, we think the story of Wright's restored 1970 Challenger R/T can prepare them for what's really in store when they restore a "good, solid car." Others may find an explanation of why the wife up and left in the middle of the resto work.

Wright, a Plano, Texas attorney, had been looking for a Superbird when he found an ad in the local paper for the Challenger. He made an appointment to see it, but

*If you look closely, you can see the performance axle option. Easier to spot are the correct rim rings and the repop tires—filled with repro 1970 air (contact our tech editor for source).*



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*Optional 440 4-Bbl still wears its original Carter AVS carburetor.*



*Luxo SE package included the smaller ("formal") backlight. Bumblebee stripe added eye appeal.*

when he showed up, he found a line of three other hopeful buyers. A bidding war? Not a chance. The seller honored his word to talk to the guy with the first appointment. That's right, Wright. They made a deal and Wright became the car's fourth owner.

It was clear to Wright that the Challenger had been loved. Aside from an expert repaint in 1990, the car appeared mostly original. It was just through normal maintenance and repair over the car's life that original pieces had been replaced with generic or incorrect pieces—things like an incorrect fan clutch, some wires and a replacement wiper motor. Plus, about 697 more items.

The car's 440/4-speed combo and 3.54 rear gearing make for a tempting driver. But Wright has decided to keep his Challenger in Reference Restoration condition, also choosing not to drive it much. He maintains a stable of modern Mopar drivers, including a new Chrysler 300C, a Prowler, a new Hemi-powered Ram and, for his wife Kay, a Merce....errr....Chrysler Crossfire.

Since Wright gravitates toward luxury and performance, you could say he was just the customer Chrysler had in mind when it minted the Challenger for 1970. The marketing people, bless their B-school diplomas, figured the Barracuda would appeal to the Mustang crowd while the Challenger would be aimed more at the comfort-oriented Cougar.

As it turned out, Challenger was a bigger hit than the Barracuda. It was especially popular with performance buyers, who scooped up more than 18,000 R/T models that year. Of those, 3,753 went for the SE package which, for \$232, included leather-faced front bucket seats, an overhead console with warning lights (door ajar, low fuel and seatbelts) and a vinyl roof with smaller "formal" rear window. In true "have-it-your-way" Mopar fashion, you could take cloth/vinyl seats instead of the leather and save \$48.25, as the original buyer of Wright's car chose to do.

The majority of Challenger R/T buyers were happy enough with the standard 335-horsepower 383, but 3,840 of them (875 with SE package) couldn't pass up the optional 440 4-barrel at a bargain \$130.55. Wright's FY1 yellow car also came through with the optional 4-speed, performance axle package (with original axle tag), console, AM radio, power steering and brakes, front discs, performance hood paint, hood pins and factory undercoating with underhood pad. All in all, a pretty potent and rare combination. You know how lawyers can be about evidence and proof. In this case, Wright has the car's original build sheet—but you'll have to obtain a subpoena to see it.

Despite Wright's Challenger being mostly a show car (and show winner, including First Place/E-Body Stock at the 2004 Nats), he says he's more passionate about it than even his 1992 Ferrari. For that, he thanks the Mopar hobby in general and in particular the Nats judges, parts and resto experts Roger Gibson and Frank Badalson and local Mopar guru Bob West.

Wright says he had stopped taking the Ferrari to Italian car shows because of the judges' attitude. They'd deduct points for things like having the wrong kind of leather grain on your string-back driving gloves. In contrast, Mopar Nats judges showed genuine friendly support in helping Wright get his Challenger into show-winning shape. Just a few months after buying the Challenger, Wright took it to the Nats to challenge the other E-bodies. It was a host of "little things" that knocked the car into second place.

Wright had owned a number of Mopars before, but the only one he had regretted selling was a "Vanishing Point" Challenger replica. However, he'd never restored a car like this before, and he admits that a lot of the 600 or so hours spent working on the car were wasted by doing things incorrectly and then having to redo them. At an attorney's billing rate, well...you do the math.



**Four-speed Challenger came with cloth seats. Rally dash features separate clock, tach, and four gauges. Wheel's rim-blow.**

That's where the \$17,000 "or so" comes in—the money needed to turn his Challenger from a mere contender into a champion. Wright says he replaced or had refurbished "at least 700 things" since buying the car, everything from changing out small components for date-code-correct pieces to correcting minor paint trim mistakes made in the respray. The engine, carburetor and radiator were all original on the 69,000-mile car.

Always a Texas car, the Challenger had not a speck of rust. The original owner purchased it from Robstown Dodge. The dealer is long gone, but the building still stands, complete with a giant white hat on top. The story goes that the dealer claimed to have coined the "Guys in the white hats" tagline that Dodge used in its advertising.

The original owner's daughter recognized the Challenger at a show and told Wright she remembered it getting into a fender-bender in the 1970s. She said the passenger side fender and door had been replaced. Nothing else was damaged, and the rest of the car's sheet metal and body hardware remain original. The bumpers had been replaced when the car was repainted, and Wright had the taillight bezels redone. The wheels are original, but Wright had to track down correct trim rings and center caps. Tires are repro.

Wright admits he only got on the right track when he started doing business with Gibson and Badalson. He sent a photo of the engine to Badalson, who helped guide him to the path of correctness. One incorrect item: Wright had installed the wrong kind of underhood pad to go with the factory undercoating. And then he spent months tracking down the chrome trim strip for the front valance and the air cleaner pre-heater.

The interior was easy. The car had been kept out of the Texas sun, preserving the original vinyl and cloth. Wright only needed to get the steering wheel refinished and clock rebuilt.

So, car wins the Nats, case closed? Not for this attorney. Wright says he'll continue to cross-examine his Challenger until every last non-original nut and bolt is brought to justice.