

So you're planning to enter the 2004 One Lap of America?

By: Dale Seeley

With the 2003 event recently completed, it's time to start preparing for the 2004 event. I get emails all the time from people, "I'm gonna enter my..." and then later on, a month before the event the same people send me another email, "Good luck! My car isn't ready yet, see you next year..." I've run One Lap the previous 7 years, sometimes with my car, sometimes a friends' car, sometimes with a lot of money, and I've also spent less than \$500, there's no reason why you can't be there next year.

The number one excuse for not showing up is the lack of a completed car. Number two is a lack of money. Neither is a good excuse. When most people decide they want to enter One Lap, they look into the driveway and envision their car with stickers on it and believe that with just a little work, it will be ready to compete in class. Before they know it, February has rolled around and it's too late to get anything done in an organized manner, and they give up. Those that can't fund their own team, just need to join an existing team that needs a driver, or convince one of their friends to enter their car.

Getting ready for the 2003 event, I realized early on that I had enough money to go to the event, or enough to prepare for it, but not enough to do both. Luckily my teammate, Jamin Cummings, had been itching to enter a Saturn in the Economy class so there wasn't going to be much convincing needed. Jamin had already run two previous Laps, so he knew what he was getting into, realizing that unless you are running Alternate Fuel or Retro class, there is no cherry picking. We started the day after OneLap 2002 ended, we were still working on the car after technical inspection a year later.

Step #1- Start today if you want to run the next event.

Choose a car and figure out what class you think it might be in, guidelines are in the rules that can be found at www.onelapofamerica.com, but unless you are choosing a car that has previously run in the same class for several years, consider making a call to Cannonball Headquarters. After you've determined which class you'll be in, look in last years results to figure out what other cars and drivers you can expect to meet next year, then look for their stories online to find out what the cars really are. In our case, a Ford Festiva appeared to be our biggest threat, how bad can that be? That Festiva turned out to be a ShoGun, #2 of 8 produced by Chuck Beck with a 400 hp supercharged SHO engine in the backseat.

Step #2- Evaluate your car, your budget, and your driving ability.

We spent a couple days taking a hard look at the performance of the car, and what we thought it was capable of with modifications. We accepted that the stock engine didn't produce nearly enough power, and that we'd be pushing our luck if we went as far as doubling it. We accepted that the stock suspension might be good for running the kids to gymnastics practice, but we had to upgrade it to make up for the severe lack of power. The third part of the equation, and probably the most important at an event like One Lap,

is the braking system. Once again, the OEM system is adequate, SCCA club racers are turning tons of laps on the OEM system every year, but there is room for improvement.

With seven consecutive One Lap events behind me, and three behind Jamin, we knew that having a budget was important, but instead of placing a dollar amount as the breaking point, we chose a modification list that we would not expand upon until all of those items were addressed.

When it comes to driving ability, we'd like to think we're not a danger to ourselves, or other people, but then again, every team has some unreasonable expectations and overestimation of how well they will place in the event. We both have quite a few open track days and autocross events to our credit, but so does everyone else that shows up with the intention to win. With the understanding that our stock car wasn't even close to being competitive, we were going to be underfunded, and our driving ability was on par with a middle of the pack effort, it was time for the next step, possibly the most difficult.

Step #3- Set a reasonable expectation and work toward that goal.

Some show up to win overall, some show up for fun, we chose to win our class, Economy Sedan. A reasonable expectation was third in class behind the Shogun and GM entered turbocharged version of our car with real drivers, but we were counting on the fact that during One Lap, highly modified cars break, and people make mistakes. At any other event, this would be considered desperation, but we chose to call it a strategy to enable ourselves to be ready to take advantage of any scraps the big dogs left on the table for us.

Step #4- Make the modifications to the car before the open track day season is over.

This serves two purposes, the car is ready and you can attend track schools with it to figure out how to drive it. It helps you and the car, which really helps the team. Of course, it rarely works out that way, you'll be attending track schools in a partially completed car, or a completely different car, but you'll be attending them.

We began where we saw the biggest opportunity for improvement. We called fellow Onelap participants, Greg and Gary Hagopian, at www.HyeDraCyl.com for a major brake upgrade. Their brake upgrades have been on the class winning cars of SSGT2, Luxury Sedan, Mid-Priced Sedan, and now, Economy Sedan. We had the front suspension off the car getting ready for upgrades there, so it was no problem to send them the knuckle with hub, OEM brake caliper, and wheel we intended to use. About two weeks later they brought our new brakes to Watkins Glen International in New York to test fit their monster brake kit on our Economy car. With four piston calipers and 12.2" diameter rotors, we were guaranteed to have more brakes than we needed. People were quick to point out that the brakes were extreme overkill, we had to smile and agree. We knew that at Onelap, there is no such thing as wretched excess and that we'd be thankful for one less worry and the ability to outbrake everyone in the class. While Onelap rewards high speeds, the punishment is severe for those who make mistakes under braking.

Now we knew that we'd be able to slow down better than everyone else, it was time to work on turning ability. Suspension is rarely overlooked by a Onelap entrant, so we knew that the best we could do is remain on par with the rest of the field. We chose to keep it simple, just in case something bad happened and we needed to find parts along the route. Coilovers were out of the question for us, there's too few parts that can be replaced with OEM parts in a pinch and years of experience have shown that if something can break or wear out, it will do it about 1000 miles into the event. We chose a high linear rate race spring from H&R because we were a lot more interested with handling improvements than we were with appearance or highway ride quality. It was also important that it would work with an OEM strut if something happened to our race struts. Although ride quality and appearance weren't at the top of our list, the springs did lower the car a little bit and highway ride quality was better than I'd experienced in the event previously.

For struts, we turned to a company that makes racing dampers and innovative OEM products, Carrera. Instead of building a whole new strut, they adapted a custom insert into an OEM housing with just a couple modifications. Although they were not adjustable, the correct setting was initially chosen and no further adjustments were necessary. It's true that we lost the 'cool factor' of having adjustable coilovers or highly recognizable colors on the strut housing, but we wanted people to evaluate the car on the track, not in the paddock. The final addition to the suspension was a four-way adjustable rear swaybar. Jamin and I have different driving styles and we were able to use the swaybar to adjust for them. I prefer a slightly 'loose' car while Jamin likes a more 'neutral' handling characteristic. This could also be accomplished with tire pressure changes and rebound in the strut, but we knew that we'd be tired and we certainly wouldn't have enough time to determine what a multitude of settings should be for every track. It was a lot easier to move the swaybar adjustment one notch, then put it back.

The final opportunity was with the engine and differential. Stock, there's not a lot of power and the engine is too weak in stock form to consider moving it up to the 300 or so horsepower that we would have liked. We planned to help out the engine with a little nitrous oxide, just a 50 horsepower addition to make the straights a little bit shorter. We knew we were going to be outgunned, so we moved toward reliability. We purchased two low mileage recycled engines and a spare transmission from www.6thPlanetUsedParts.com with a devious plan. We had a Quaife limited slip differential installed in the transmission, then mated it to one of the recycled engines with a lightweight Fidenza flywheel and Centerforce Dual Friction racing clutch. We installed the used engine and transmission and left the 'alternate' engine and original transmission with 'next day air' shipping paperwork to be filled out later if I managed to convince Jamin to run a 150 hp nitrous jetting. Luckily, we never needed to run more than the originally intended, and very safe, jetting of 50 hp, so we ran into zero issues with the parts we had in the car. Not many people have a spare engine and transmission assembled and ready to drop into their daily driver, but then again, not many people would try to outrun a 400 hp Shogun, a VTEC GSR powered Honda Civic, or a 240 hp turbocharged Jetta with about 170 hp (including the nitrous) in a Saturn.

Step #5 Show up, and win or lose, have fun.

In a perfect world, we entered a third or fourth place car, but it's not a perfect world, and we had a first place plan. The GM backed turbo Saturn was unable to make the trip out because of serious medical problems with one of the team members. That's not at all what we were hoping for, we look forward to testing our 'little dog' approach against them next year. The ShoGun ran very well all week, but was plagued by #1 on the list of "How not to prepare for OneLap". After blowing an engine last year, the owner super-sized the engine and horsepower in the car, the additional engine weight made the already tricky car to drive, a real bear in the braking and turning departments. He was a lot faster when it came to straight line acceleration and top speeds (we were limited to about 110 mph) but our excellent brakes and suspension would place us about 20 places ahead of the ShoGun overall, throughout the event. The Jetta would have had us, but they fell victim to #2 on the "How not to Prepare" list and brought a car that that was highly modified, but hadn't seen a lot of use. They ran into problems throughout the week, finally getting things sorted out on the final day, about three days too late to capitalize on the mistakes we made during the event.

Our plan worked well for the slower Economy Class, but the principles apply to all the classes. If you want to win SSGT1, you're looking at an overall win as well. Follow the same steps, but just make sure you spend a lot more money than we did, and get a lot more seat time. If you can accept second in class, or worse, or just want to experience the traveling circus we bring to town, you'll be well-advised to adapt this plan to your situation, the event sneaks up on you and before you know it, you're sending out one of those "maybe next year" emails.