

Company Car

BY SCOTT KEYES, PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE BASSO

Gene Hicks has built and restored many outrageous and custom automobiles and Jeeps for his customers at Hicks Total Performance in Mooresville, N.C. Now it's his turn, to enjoy the wealth. Hicks, along with his friends and employees at HTP ventured out on their own last year and built a 1989 Jeep Comanche, that turned out to be more than your routine off road machine.

The key for Hicks was no one had a Jeep of this nature, so it allowed him to use his creative instincts and fabrication skills to come up with a concept all his own.

"I just like to be different," Hicks said, who moved to the Carolina's back in 1990 from East Providence R.I to chase his NASCAR dreams.

"I have learned in all of my years that being different can make all of the difference in the world. Any one can build an off road machine that is equipped with all of the bells and whistles, but to come up with a quality idea and run with it is important in this business. I think we did that with this particular build."



Knowing he was going to be off-roading every chance he could, Hicks wanted a machine that was built not only for durability, but for comfort just like a daily driver.

Upon finding this Comanche, he quickly realized he didn't have much to work with. Hicks thought the price might have been a little steep for the shape the Jeep was in, but he knew with what he had in mind so the money and the effort would be worth the overall price.

"I think once you have a vision of a build you need to run with it because in most instances that vision can take a person a long way," Hicks said. "Money definitely dictates what you can and cannot do, but in this case, this Jeep was basically built with a lot of spare parts we had laying around the shop. So looking at the big picture, it was definitely cost-effective. It wasn't because it was my project, but the build definitely allowed all of us at HTP to showcase our talents."

When Hicks first started the project, he noticed the engine work that needed to be done was minimal. Hicks needed to re-cam the engine, but elected to drop in a 1994 4.0 ci engine in it, which he feels help out with fuel mileage in the long run. The Jeep also had 4:11 gears installed.

"There is just so much more you can do with fuel injection, and another plus is that there are so many upgrades for them,"

Hicks said. "An added bonus was we were able to develop more power and torque on the bottom. I think this motor concept probably is comparable to a small block Chevy."

OLD VS NEW

Hicks' plan of attack was to take a old-time favorite and add a modern feel to the build. In most instances air conditioning wouldn't be an option for a offroad Jeep build, but Hicks thought differently as it is hot during the summer months in North Carolina.

The interior is equipped with bucket seats, four-point belts and a custom internal cage, which was fabricated by HTP. Hicks made the passenger seat slide forward enough so his 10-year-old daughter Holly could enjoy riding around in it as well. Hicks' wife Kim is also a big fan of the Jeep.

Meanwhile, the suspension is a one-of-a-kind built by HTP. The lowers are adjustable arms fabricated by HTP and the shocks are actually from an early

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model Bronco. The front springs are old James Duff springs that have travel and flexibility, which was exactly what Hicks was looking for.

The wheels and tires are radical 35-inch Mickey Thompson Baja Claws built for traction and off-roading fun. Hicks said he would eventually consider going up in tire size, but from an economical standpoint he is happy with what he has.

"When we first started this build we had a look we were pretty comfortable with, but as time went on we kept adding different things and tinkered with the things that we had already done," Hicks said. "I really like having the flexibility of being able to do my own thing within the build. All I really wanted to do was to be practical."

The one thing that really stands on the Jeep is the custom paint, which was done by Jim's Paint Work located in the Mooresville, N.C. area. The canary yellow, which is set off in black, has crushed glass associated within the paint that stands out during the light of the day. Hicks also associated the HTP logos on both door panels. "It took awhile for me to be able to attack a project like this for myself, but I am so glad that I did," Hicks said. "It came out just how I wanted."



By being in NASCAR

different opportunities have presented itself to Hicks Total Performance that otherwise wouldn't be there if the business was located in another part of the country. The location has allowed HTP owner Gene Hicks, who worked in the NASCAR industry for nearly 10 years the opportunity to build relationships with a wide variety of individuals he has met while working in the country's largest growing spectator sport.

Hicks has built custom Jeeps and automobiles for a Who's-Who list of people who are directly linked to NASCAR. From drivers such as Dale Earnhardt Jr., Jan Wood to car owners to crew guys like Ed Watkins, who works for Gillett-Everham Motorsports, HTP seems to have a built a respectable reputation among the racing community.

HTP has been in business in the Mooresville area for almost seven years, and during that time more and more people keep coming back looking to build another radical creation. A lot of Hick's clientele consists of the relationships he built with friends he has made in and around the sport of NASCAR, not to mention a strong word of mouth following.

Through it all, he remains loyal to his craft. "Mainly having the opportunity to enjoy what I love to do is what is key for me in life and in business," said Hicks, who moved down to the Carolinas in 1990 from East Providence, R.I. "NASCAR gave me the opportunity to be able to venture off and do my own thing. I couldn't have asked for a better situation that NASCAR has given me over the years."

What HTP has to offer:

Hicks specializes in general automotive repair and fabrication. Now that HTP has moved into the Mooresville



One benefit to have Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s shop near by was being able to build Dale Jr.'s Cherokee.

Business Park, just around the corner from Dale Jr.'s new 65,000 square foot Junior Motorsports, Hicks is hoping the added space will allow his team of builders the opportunity to do more ground up restoration work.



"We love being able to do a lot of different things," Hicks said, who is spending the next year in Iraq as an automotive contractor for the United States government. "Keeping things unique shows the people we are serious about the kind of customs we want to produce." During a two-week trip to the Charlotte area last year, Hicks showed myself and photographer Mike Basso that he wasn't shy about bringing over recently completed projects during our stay.

During the two-day photo shoot we had planned with HTP we saw everything from a F-250 Super Duty (with a Fab Tech 8-inch lift, decked out in 37-inch Nitto Grappler tires) to a 1957 Nomad (loaded with a 383 ci engine that was capable of pulling at least 500 horsepower.) Everything on the Nomad was fabricated by HTP.

Ideally Jeeps are where HTP has made an immediate impact the most. Junior's Jeep got things running in the right direction then came the opportunity to bring back a 1980 black CJ7 Jeep back to its original form for Watkins, a jackman for GEM Motorsports. "Ed wanted us to take the Jeep all the way back to original," Hicks said. "Usually people want things built, so doing something like that for Ed was a different opportunity for us. We do like challenges though."

As for the 1978 CJ5 we photographed, the owner wanted a full ground up restoration reminiscent to the Jeep he met his wife in. For obvious reasons, the owner got rid of the Jeep long years ago, but always told himself when he could afford one, he would attempt to bring back a similar Jeep back to life. HTP did just that, but Hicks said he might have went a little overboard on the project. "The couple that owned the Jeep always went four-wheeling, so they wanted to get back to that," Hicks said. "We kind of went over board with all the bells and whistles on the build. It was so nice he didn't get it dirty. Sometimes that happens."

The CJ5 was equipped with a stock jeep rear-end housings with four inches of lift on 35-inch tires. HTP built a custom dash, interior roll cage and automated gauges through out. The CJ model never came with steel doors, so HTP added its own flare to the build and built steel doors. This particular CJ5 is powered by a small block Chevy 350 ci engine with Edelbrock cams through out.

"We build customs with attitude and the attitude usually comes from the way the people want us to build their cars and trucks," Hicks said. "Being different and having a concept already in hand makes you stand out in this business I think. That can be the key to success in my opinion."

