

CRAFTY GTS



Back in 1968, Richard Gottlieb, up in Ohio, walked into his Dodge dealership and ordered up a very unusual little Dart. Being an impressionable youth, Richard had done his homework and knew what was out there and what his budget could afford, so he checked off all the right boxes that created a brand-new '68 Dart two-door-post sedan with a 273" small block hooked to a four-speed Hurst stick, all wrapped up in metallic blue paint. If that sounds like an extremely odd combo to you, you're absolutely correct, it was just as scarce then as it would be today and it might well have been a one-of-one creation given the options he had on that machine. That small block Dart served as Richard's daily driver in his younger days and served to transform him into a Dart fanatic for the rest of his life. That particular Dart is long gone (although he's still very actively hunting for it), but since that day back in '68, Richard's owned around a dozen '68 and '69 Darts, in addition to a considerable amount of assorted older Mopars of all shapes and sizes. Like most of us who

grew up as car crazed youngsters, Richard generally lived with a variety of car magazines close at hand, because in those days before the internet (amazingly) that was the only way to read about cars or see what was going on in the automotive world. And, like most of us, he generally picked up issues of Car Craft magazine whenever there was something in it that caught his attention. Little did he suspect at that time that eventually, he would come to own a rather hot little Dart that he and tens of thousands of other hot rod fanatics were reading about in the summer of 1969, spread out right there on the pages of Car Craft. History, as they say, has a rather bizarre sense of humor sometimes.

Where to begin with this one is a bit difficult, but I suppose we should deal with the particular Dart at hand. This 1969 F8 green 440-powered Dart GTS began as one of approximately twenty such machines ordered by Saddleback Dodge in Santa Ana, California in early 1969. Given that only 640 of these machines were built,

all backed with a TorqueFlite transmission, that's an unusually large number for just one dealership to order, but then again, Saddleback Dodge was something of the West Coast version of Mr. Norm's in Chicago; a dealership known for high-volume dealing in high-performance new cars. According to those who know a lot more about these things than we do, this particular machine was the only one of those delivered to Saddleback wearing F8 green paint, and with its matching green interior, this might help explain the little Dart's ultimate destiny.

For a bit of history, the big block Darts are something of an anomaly in the timeline of Mopar muscle cars. As the horsepower wars were exploding, it took strong prompting by Norm Kraus over at Mr. Norm's in Chicago to convince Dodge to place the 383 big block into the Dart GT body back in 1967. Factory execs, for whatever reasons, were downright hesitant, and even somewhat resistant, to build these cars, but the zone representatives won out and they went into a somewhat limited pro-

1969 M-CODE MAGAZINE PROJECT CAR LIVES!



Photos: Rob Wolf

Story: Randy Holden

Photographed @ Mopars with Big Daddy



THE DART ACHIEVED SOME MEASURE OF IMMORTALITY FOR FIRST APPEARING IN THE MAY 1969 ISSUE OF CAR CRAFT MAGAZINE AS ONE OF THEIR FAMED PROJECT CARS. HAD DODGE NOT DISCONTINUED THE 440 DART SO QUICKLY, WE'VE NO DOUBT CAR CRAFT WOULD'VE CONTINUED TINKERING WITH THIS CAR WELL INTO THE COMING YEAR.





duction. This led to the 1968 Dart GTS with a 383 being listed as an optional power plant, but still, the factory didn't push this combination and very few were sold. Once again, Norm Kraus stepped in and wanted fifty '68 Dart GTS's with the 440 Magnum engine in them. The factory refused to build them, but they did consent to sending fifty would-be 383 Dart GTS's over to Hurst-Campbell for conversion and installation of the 440 engines, which gave them an "M" engine code. These fifty cars were sold only through Mr. Norm's and were designated Dart GSS's. All of which set the stage for 1969, where the factory, reluctantly, bowed to pressure from dealerships coast-to-coast who also wanted access to these 383 and 440 motivated Dart GTS hardtops. So, for one year, 1969, the tiny Dodge Dart left the factory assembly line with the big 375 horsepower 440 Magnum

between the fenders. With sales only totaling 640 units, Dodge quickly slammed the door on this optional package, especially since they had been so hesitant to build them to begin with.

The reason for Dodge's reluctance to stuff the 440 into the Dart platform has been debated ever since the cars were built, but the reasons are (and were) multifaceted. Putting the big motor into the small car wasn't an easy task and it slowed down assembly time. It also meant maintenance and work on these cars at dealerships would take longer, meaning warranty work would involve more man hours. Furthermore, the Dart had never been designed to support that much weight on its nose, and factory engineers repeatedly warned the execs that such a creation would be ill-handling and wouldn't net any serious speed benefits because the chassis

wouldn't be capable of handling the torque delivered by the 440 – all of which turned out to be legitimate concerns. From day one, the 440 Darts proved themselves to be excellent at incinerating rear tires and making huge smoky burnouts, but that was their only strong suit. For all the torque and horsepower they packed, placing that power onto the ground proved a serious challenge and there are countless instances where the 340 four-speed Swinger could outrun a 440 Dart GTS simply because the little 340 was able to get the car moving instead of just frying the tires. Likewise, the 340 cars were much cheaper, much easier to work on, and you could get a wider variety of options with them, so the general public was, obviously, much more attracted to those cars. All of which leaves the 440 Dart GTS as a rather unique machine in the grand scheme of Mopar muscle cars; it's highly prized today, but when they were new, the engineers were right – the general public wasn't crazy about them.



This little green Dart obtained instant celebrity status, however (perhaps because of its green-on-green color combo), when Saddleback Dodge sold the car to Peterson Publishing, who shuffled it over to Car Craft magazine where it became a test mule project car. Car Craft installed a number of bolt-on aftermarket parts, installed some Keystone mags and fatter tires, and the Dart appeared in their May 1969 issue in an article entitled, "440 Dart; Evolution of a Winner." Basically, Car Craft took some basic add-ons, such as fender well Hooker headers, an aluminum intake, a cam, a set of 4.30 gears, and with fatter tires, they demonstrated how this pocket rocket could be transformed into a dynamite over-the-counter street/strip drag car. Their results were impressive, with the car knocking down times in the high twelves, but this "how to" article was rapidly forgotten as the horsepower wars shifted into maximum overdrive for the next year-and-a-half. Had it not been for the winged cars, the lift-off hood 440+6 Road Runners and Super Bees, the SS454 Chevilles, the W-30 442s, and the big block Mach I's, the 440 Dart might've had a shot at greatness. As it turned out, the potential of this combo was never appreciated because it was immediately eclipsed by the light speed changes in new performance cars. And with the extremely short lifespan of the 440 Dart GTS, Car Craft's "how to" article fell by the wayside as well because so few people actually had one of these cars.

All of this automotive philosophy aside, the Car Craft project Dart enjoyed its brief moment in the limelight and was seen throughout the summer of 1969 at the drag strip in Pomona. The short-term fate of the Dart is cloudy these days at best, as it was apparently used around the Car Craft offices as a continuing test bed and was perhaps driven by a magazine exec when it wasn't on the track. With the

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demise of the 440 Dart GTS, keeping the car and continuing to do tech and experimentation on a car that wasn't being built any longer naturally didn't make sense to Car Craft, so the Dodge was sold in early 1970 to a gentleman in San Diego.

The second owner (or first real owner depending on how you look at it), reportedly used this hotly modified A-body as a street/strip weekend shootout machine, rolling up a few thousand miles on the odometer, sometimes taking short trips in the car or using it for fair weather transportation. However, with the 4.30 gears and the numerous other modifications the car had, it was no longer a comfy driver and thus ended up sitting in his garage for decades. When muscle car values started heating up, the owner had Galen Govier inspect the 440 Dart while he had it torn apart. Galen certified it as being what it was supposed to be, and what had been intended to be a restoration remained as nothing more than a rather disorganized pile of parts for a few more years before the disassembled Dart was sold to an anxious A-body fanatic in Texas.

Once the Dart landed in San Antonio, the new owner decided he wanted go back to factory-original concours-quali-

ty nuts with the car's restoration, so he hired the crew over at Jeff's Resurrections in Tyler, Texas to handle the job. Working on the project off-and-on as money and time would allow, it took about five years to transform the pile of parts into the gleaming green machine shown here. The restoration was finished in 2011, but since the car turned out so nice, it never really got driven and sat tucked away with just 7,600 original miles on the odometer! As often happens, after a couple years of looking at the expensive car sit and gather dust, the decision was made to sell due to real world financial concerns, and that's when Richard Gottlieb entered the picture. Richard picked the amazing little Dart up in October 2013 from a broker, and it was only when he was negotiating the deal that he found out this immaculately restored Dart was the very same car he'd read about when he was a teenager, back in the summer of '69. Needless to say, that cemented his desire to place this one in the garage, so negotiations didn't take long.

Since the restoration was still relatively fresh and the Dart hadn't been driven much when Richard picked up the GTS, there were the proverbial bugs to be worked out and a fair amount of minor detailing

that needed to be done – you tend to look over minor things when looking at the big picture initially. Once he had the Dart home, Richard maxed out detailing everything to absolute OEM condition. Equipped with the basic AM radio, a heater, and very little else, this one is typical of the 440 GTS's built in '69, but since it was Car Craft's project car, it will forever remain unique in the very small field of surviving 440 Magnum Darts.

As of this writing, the coming summer looks like it should be a whirlwind of activity for Richard and his GTS. He's planning to attend several large concours events with the Dodge and tells us it should be at the Mopar Nationals in 2014, where he's hoping to get this one into the OEM judging. The car's coming out party, so-to-speak, was the 2013 Mopars With Big Daddy event in Ocala, Florida, where the GTS easily won Best A-Body and received rave reviews by everyone in attendance. Since this one's been out of sight, literally, since its magazine days of 1969, the little green machine is long overdue for some more attention, and having had a good look at it ourselves, this little green monster should prove to be a giant killer on the show circuit during the next couple of years. ✖

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