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RETURN OF THE STRIPED TOMATO



This is the Number One hero car just after it arrived from New Jersey. Who knew there was a '74 Gran Torino around with less than 1,000 miles on it? Movie Mike laid out the stripes for both cars himself.



The Mic Rig isn't just a super-stretched Econoline, but an Academy Award-winning filmmaking tool. A shell of a car is mounted on the Mic Rig chassis so that cameras, also mounted on the rig, can shoot the actors as they appear to be doing 100s, 300s, or whatever at a normal driving altitude. In fact, it's a stuntman in the cab doing the driving. See www.exoticpursuits.com.

aluminum heads and intake weren't correct for the mid-'70s period.

The suspension on each car was rebuilt using rear springs from the station wagon version of the Torino, plus air shocks to give the cars the necessary rake. Stock power front disc and rear drum brakes do an OK job of stopping the cars. Walsh scavenged up sets of 15x8 slotted mags from various sources and had them polished and redrilled before bolting them to the Torinos. BFGoodrich Radial T/As were the obvious tire choice for this application, and the Torinos wore P235/60R15s up front and P275/60R15s out back for HOT ROD's photo shoot. However, while those tire sizes gave the correct vintage stance, the production used P235/60R15s all-around during filming to retain consistency between the hero and stunt cars.

Once the drivetrains were squared away, it was up to Premiere's staff of painters, upholsterers, and scroungers to make the cars visually identical. For the Number One car, which originally had a blue interior with a bench seat and column shifter, that involved installing practically an entirely new black interior with bucket seats and a floor shifter. For the Number Two, which already had many of those elements (though it too had a column shifter) it was more a matter of cleaning up what was already there. It was stuff like body moldings and badges that were the toughest to find. "I was the scourge of eBay Motors," says Walsh. "I was buying everything and anything for these cars that came up and ending auctions early by paying top dollar. I got things like NOS moldings

and trim from all over the country; stuff that had been sitting in dealers' stock rooms for decades. I needed to have duplicates of everything just in case something broke." And he was also building a third car—a shell, really—that had to be scrubbed clean, stripped of its drivetrain and drained of all fluids before environmental officials would allow the production to throw it into the Pacific Ocean for one scene.

Both hero cars were used extensively throughout the production. "The cars came out amazing," said director Phillips. "The cars we had built had such a unique bellowing sound that we went out to the desert with them one day and spent 8 hours recording the revving and screeching and stuff."

Both cars suffered front-end damage in separate incidents during the production while being piloted by stunt men. But Ben Suller never had any problems with either car. "We took him out to the parking lot at Hollywood Park after the cars were first done," said Walsh. "Once he got the hang of it, he was really good with the cars."

There's no denying these cars' ability to mesmerize the public. HOT ROD took the two behind a Target store in Palmdale, California, to photograph the interiors and engines, and despite being fairly well hidden from public view, they attracted a steady stream of curious onlookers and store employees. And all of them, no matter what their age, even if they couldn't tell a Gran Torino from granola, knew the cars were from *Starsky & Hutch*.

Despite being beaten up by a production that saw them as expendable commodities,

the hero cars still drive quite well. They're not perfect. The torque converter on the Number Two felt as if it were slipping on Crisco, there's a divot on Number One's hood, and both had loose interior trim in places, but they're both rattle-free and solid. And Phillips is right—they do sound great.

The Windsor V-8s in both cars were easy to love. With lots of low-end torque, plus a willingness to rev, they're almost puppy-like in their eagerness to ingratiate themselves. With a tap of the throttle, it was easy to break the tires loose on Los Angeles County Raceway's concrete pad and drift the cars with some grace. On the dragstrip, the Number One car found itself in the mid-14s and seemed to determine to stay there with HRM Technical Editor Steve Magnante doing the driving. It was tough to launch the heavy Torino without significant tire spin. Finally, with some shallow staging, Magnante knocked out an uncorrected 13.927 at 92.45. That's vastly better than stock and solid performance for a big street car weighing more than a junior high school and carrying the burden of being a cultural icon.

Now the film's done and the cars are back at Premiere awaiting what many assume will be an inevitable sequel. And the *Starsky & Hutch* fanatics are already obsessing over the new cars, noting every way in which they deviate from the originals, plotting ways to create their own versions, or saving up their pennies to try and buy one from Movie Mike. "I was already offered \$100,000 for one of them," says Walsh, "but I'm going to hang onto them for a while. At least until after the movie opens." **HR**