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We Were The Ramchargers

Inside Drag Racing’s Legendary Team

Dave Rockwell
To those who drive American
Ramchargers Members
1958–2004

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My hat goes off to Dave Rockwell for even contemplating undertaking such an enormous project to record the thrilling times the Ramchargers provided drag racing fans and to set the record straight. And set it straight he does. Rockwell chronicles real events as they evolved and provides a vivid account of the cast of characters as they were. And through all of it, he didn’t attempt to twist the historical facts. Rather, Rockwell takes us on an inside journey behind the scenes. Chapter by chapter, his musings break down the walls that shuttered us all from what really took place with the Ramchargers, Chrysler, NASCAR, the NHRA, and the men behind it all.

Whether you loved them or envied their race-track prowess, the Ramchargers defined racing history with success that has never been duplicated by any other group. As drag racing has evolved with the industry surrounding the sport, it’s doubtful that anyone will ever find similar results. From an outsider’s perspective, it looked as though the Ramchargers had all they could ever want: factory support, cars, engines and a warehouse full of parts. However, the truth was that the accomplishments of the Ramchargers were clandestine at best and job-threatening at worst. The team built early-day drag cars that would change the course of organized factory-car drag racing, ignoring the lack of job security and little help from Chrysler. Along the way, they never lost sight of would-be buyers for these cars.

Eventually, the very cars the Ramchargers created were made available in Chrysler dealerships across the nation and to everyday drag racers. They even introduced the “new” Hemi engine into fuel dragster racing, which became standard fare for the breed. The rest is a history lesson, as the Ramchargers set the tone for any kid in America to go out on a weekend and win the Eliminator, or take home a class trophy—and that is exactly what happened. Starting with only a kiss on the cheek and a few “PR” cars, the initial makings of what would become the most memorable muscle cars ever built took shape. The impact of these cars on the market not only moved Chrysler’s sales needle, but the cars have also found a place in automotive history.

Through untiring efforts, winning ways, and a few believing Chrysler execs, the Ramchargers almost single-handedly moved a kicking-and-screaming Chrysler Motors out from under its “everyone should buy a four-door” philosophy. Ending the slugfest in 2004, the Ramchargers left behind a beautiful legacy that began in 1958 and underscored the American Dream.

Be ready to sit down and spend time—lots of time—devouring the well-chronicled life, loose organization, growth, acceptance and ultimate glory times of a strongly banded group of smart-minded young men bent on the eventuality of taking on well-funded factory teams—and winning.

Dave Rockwell digests the facts and details about the engines and the cars themselves, as well as the behind-the-scenes-shenanigans. He then thoughtfully arranges them in a manuscript that tells it like it is. Thankfully, he also laces it all with never-before-published photographs from vast personal collections that are invaluable in their own right. Former Ramcharger leader Tom Hoover summed up the Ramchargers’ success the best: “There were a few critical things that allowed us to accomplish much more with much less money than our competition, the most critical of which was the fact we loved it.”

—John Dianna, President of Buckaroo Communications and former editor and publisher of Hot Rod Magazine, Car Craft, and Motor Trend.
Life’s circumstances can double as a parts bin for its best stories. This story is about several newly minted and highly competitive engineers hitting the doors of Chrysler Institute at mid-twentieth century and finding an aging automaker oblivious to an exuberant youth market. Seizing the neglected engineering potential around them, they risked their jobs by forming a clandestine and engineering-driven hot rod club known as the Ramchargers.\(^1\) Inexorably, a mission was launched to resurrect the Chrysler they expected to find, while struggling to be the men they hoped to become. When combined with the virginal sport of drag racing, a nucleus emerged for one of drag racing’s most successful teams and a progenitor of modern race programs. Launched by the dynamic Walter P. Chrysler and the Dodge Brothers, the story takes flight with the XIV-2200 16-cylinder Hemi\(^*\), culminating with the formation of the Ramchargers and the development of the legendary 426 Hemi.\(^2\) Supported by an unprecedented level of disclosure of corporate and personal files in tandem with extensive interviews, *We Were The Ramchargers: Inside Drag Racing’s Legendary Team* takes you behind the curtain of factory secrecy, which, until now, has shrouded one of motorsports’ best stories.

\(^1\) The word “Ramchargers” is used with permission from its owner, David Clabuesh.

\(^2\) “Hemi\(^*\)” when used as a proper adjective as in “Hemi engine” or “Hemi head,” is a registered trademark of Chrysler Holding LLC.
After a badly butchered version of Ramchargers history was offered during our induction into the Michigan Motorsports Hall of Fame, Dan “the Nose” Mancini proclaimed, “Somebody ought to write a book.” On the drive home, my wife Mary suggested, “You can write pretty well. Why don’t you do it?” If she had to do it over again, she probably would’ve just turned up the radio, but the cat was out of the bag. A little more than a decade later, Dan’s idea has become a reality in this book, and a number of people helped make it happen.

First, as always, there have been my Ramchargers teammates. It’s sometimes said, “You can’t go back,” but hundreds of hours of interviews and collaborations recalled how we used to get things done and why we enjoyed it so much. Congratulations to everyone on pushing this project through, even if it didn’t have wheels.

Then there were people like A.B. Shuman, the former naval aviator, humorist, drag racer, editor of Hot Rod magazine, and all-around good guy. With a copy of his and his brother’s great book, Cool Cars and Square Roll Bars, came the following dedication: “David… You too can do this at home with hand tools.” I kept his words close, and they helped.

Steve Collison, who sadly didn’t make it to the end of our project, graciously opened the files of Drag Racing Monthly and Super Stock magazines simply from his love for drag racing and because we were fellow drag racers. Steve’s art director and magazine creator extraordinaire, Todd Westover, saw to it that we found what we needed and provided more support than we could have hoped for. Other California “brothers” who stepped up with help from their archives were Jerry Foss from National Dragster newspaper and Jerry Pitt of Hot Rod magazine. One purpose of this book is to see that history is not forgotten, and there is no need to worry when it comes to these guys.

Then there is our hometown hero and partner, Brandt Rosenbush, who directs the Chrysler Archives. Suffice to say that there is not an authoritative book written about Chrysler today in which Brandt hasn’t had a hand. In addition, key photos were provided by former Chrysler Engineering associate Jerry Dodson and photographer extraordinaire Marc Rozman. Patrice of the National Automotive Archives also welcomed us into the circle of automotive authors while providing research support. And for a computer-challenged father, Christopher Rockwell provided lifesaving Photoshop maneuvers while younger brother Jeffrey kept all our spirits up.

In the course of this project, we have learned a lot, including that books don’t get published without a publishing manager. Many thanks to Martha Swiss of SAE International, our intrepid guide for getting things from A to B.

Finally, thanks to Dave Aldrich, close personal friend, great car guy, and our unsolicited volunteer legal council. Dave tragically lost his life in a traffic accident, but we followed his suggestion, “Put in lots of pictures.”