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THE QUICK AND THE BED

Dak owner gets “clubbed,” wakes up at the track.

By Al Dente
Photos by Theresa Levens

Mopar clubs are great. You have fun times as a group, exchange ideas and help each other out. But there’s a more sinister side to joining a club. It’s called peer pressure. Not everyone is infected. If you’re the type that is satisfied with your ride regardless of what’s going on around you, fine. But if seeing Joe Scronce showing up with a rare set of custom wheels makes you suddenly feel inadequate, you’ve got the bug. The treatment can be expensive—continually adding stuff to your Mopar to keep it competitive in the attention-getting dept.

That’s sorta what happened to Brian Akes. Truckin’ down to the local Dodge dealership with his dad who was picking up a used Dakota, Brian saw a blue Dak R/T that was calling to him “Buy Me.” Whether the dealer had a sneaky speaker hidden in the truck that played that phrase to prospective customers or it was just in Brian’s head, we don’t know. What matters is that he ended up buying the truck, and he loved it—stock.

Then Brian joined the Dakota R/T Club. Man, there were some cool trucks with all kinds of tricks. Suddenly “stock” just seemed old. OK, let’s pick up the performance a bit to step ahead of other stock trucks in the club. A cold air intake and shorty headers were the first items to be run up on Brian’s Gold Card. Not a bad start, and he still had some bucks left for an occasional subutility sandwich at Subway.

But the peer pressure bug was gnawing at him. The Dak was peppy but it really didn’t stand out from the pack. OK, let’s lower the sucker, and upgrade the handling in the process so Brian would have a good shot at beating the competition to the prime showfield spots. A DJM kit dropped him 2” and Helucas came through with springs and swaybars. That, combined with QA1 shocks, sharpened handling considerably.

Not bad, but some of the Daks in the club looked cooler. A ’70s-style Code shaker would turn heads in his direction. Terry DeLong made one (he’s no longer in business), and Brian got one before Terry folded up his tent. It’s a functional fresh-air unit. The Dak served as Brian’s daily driver until 2004. That’s when he really went nuts pulling the truck completely apart, powder coating the...
2001 Dakota is custom painted in original color. Brian designed the graphics that were executed by his father-in-law, who shot the 3-stage paint with 4 coats of clear. Shaker hood was made by Terry DeLong while Sniper supplied the grille and bumper. (Below) Set up for track duty, Brian clicked off a 12.1 ET @ 113 MPH on his second time out. Traction problems slowed him down.
Dak rolls on custom one-off 15” Bogart wheels wrapped with Mickey Thompson skins.

chassis and having his father in law repaint the truck in its original color but with a PPG 3-stage paint, sanding each of the 4 coats of clear. That process, says Brian, took a year as it was a one-man job (guess the guy took a lot of breaks).

Looking around at some of the other trucks in the club, Brian decided his Dak Needed “a little more.” So he spruced up the front end a bit with a Sniper grille and bumper and GSM side skirts. He shaved the tailgate and tipped it around so the handle was on the inside, and while he had his Gillette auto razor out, he shaved the antenna. He musta run outta blades before he got to the door handles.

Turning to the interior, Brian sprung for custom Katzkin leather covered Gen 2 Viper seats (made from real katz). He cobbled up a custom console and dash cover. The dash and A-pillar sport ProParts and Blackcat gauges so Brian can monitor much more information than he really needs to know. Of course other club members now feel gauge-challenged, but that’s their problem.

Well, Brian’s Dak now seemed like a pretty complete package—maybe to you Road Runner fans out there, but you don’t think like a Dakhead. Indeed, it was a pretty complete package—visually and handling.

Clean rear shows tailgate reversed to handle is on the inside and shaved of extraneous emblems.

wise, but it lacked just one more little detail. It wasn’t quick enough. That detail was handled by Southeast Performance in Tampa, Florida, for a complete 406 stroker long block. The engine builders used all the good stuff—MP forged crank, 10:1 Diamond pistons, Eagle H-beam rods, ARP studs. Up top in ported and polished Dak heads, the valvetrain is motivated by a Comp Cams bumpstick. Inside the feedbag are an MT 4-Bbl intake and 58mm throttle body. Injectors are 34 lb/hr Ford racing units. Needing a “little extra” on occasion, Brian went for a 150 HP NGC nitrous shot with 5X solenoids.

Beating the stock 4-speed automatic equipped with a 2800 stall converter and shift kit essentially was running diesel-duty components such as Kevlar clutch bands. A trans cooler keeps temps in line. Brian figured the current setup should be good for turning some good times at the track. So far he’s had it out twice, with his best chalking up

406 stroker was built by Southeast Performance in Tampa, FL. The 10:1 motor puts out a dyno’d 415 HP to the wheels plus another 150 ponies from squeeze. Intake is a 4-Bbl M-1 with 58MM throttle body. Ignition is MSD 6AL Digital. Exhaust is GSM headers and Spintech mufflers with cats deleted.
Custom Katzkin leather interior give Dak an upscale note. Props and Blackcat gauges populate the A-pillar and custom dash. Custom console houses nitrous controls and gauge while SCT programmer tunes the stock Dak PCM. Innovate datalogger is at the front of the console. Tunes are provided by a 1500-watt Alpine system.

A 12.1 ET @ 113 MPH. He was plagued by traction problems from the stock 3.92 rear. Seems his Sure-Grip wasn't sure-gripping the way it should. He now will be installing a Detroit Locker with the only-one-in-the-world 4.30 Eaton ring and pinion. Eaton offers rear gears in 4.10 and 4.56 ratios, and the Dak P/T club was interested in a 4.30 gear. Eaton cranked out 6 prototype sets. But when the club found out the cost for tooling up a limited production run, they passed (or passed out). Two of the 4.30 sets were scrapped. The third was secreted away by an Eaton employee. A friend of Brian's bought the "lunchpail" gears from the Eaton guy and Brian then bought them from his friend—for $300.

With his stock rear Brian goes through the traps at about 5500-5800 RPM. His stroker is redlined at 6200, so Brian thinks the new gearing should work out just fine. We just hope Brian's Dak isn't out-trumped by another truck in the club. And after checking what's left in his bank account, Brian hopes so too.