

DRAG RACERS

I stepped out of the car, walked over to the side of the bench, shivering; lit up a cigarette. It's around 10 pm, the lamp post lights are on, the wind is blowing and its fuckin' cold.

Riverside, a park located in La Crosse's west side is next to the Mississippi River. During the day it's full with people picnicking, walking, students doing their homework, people waiting to get on to ride the steamboats, or sitting on the bench to enjoy the breeze. But, as night falls it transforms to being the hot spot for racers. As the snow melts and the weather warms up, hibernated racers come out to play. Heaps of cars are parked on both side of the street; domestics as well as imports can be seen. Everybody forms their own circle and only talk to their friends. These car loving, night owls come down to the side of the river to show off what they have done or to talk about what they will do to their cars for this racing season.

The world of drag racing has evolved from domestic greasers to craze import fanatics during the turn of the century. Import is the name given to any car made outside of the United States, but it is usually referred to the Japanese cars, rivals of domestics, who are climbing up the ladder with their light frames and modifications to match and exceed the speed of their opponents. The love for import cars has created a new breed of hot rodders. Swarm of teenagers and young adults, have flooded the streets with cheap Hondas and Acuras and then stuffing as much power as they can into the engine and into the car's computer chip. Asians as well as Caucasians can be found in La Crosse with this infatuation of imports and the need for speed.

We parked further up the street, near the exit, so all of our cars could be right in a row. There are six cars, all Honda Civics and Acura Integras. As everyone comes out, we form a circle. Three of the guys also lit up cigarettes. The conversation was of its usual, cars and parts. Pha had red neon lights glowing from his car; Chao said that he should get it for everyone, to show that we were a group.

Can you image, five years ago, we used to be two separate groups, rivals of each other, First Class and Project R. There is no leader among the combined group now. In our group though, formerly know as Project R, a leader did rise, but because of that and the control and power that he wanted over the group, the group fell apart. There has been talk among Pha, Joe, and Chao about creating a team to represent La Crosse. We have always had enough cars, but this year, with Joe's Acura Integra Type R turbocharged and Chao's Honda Civic SI H22 turbocharged, we can actually represent because now, we have fast enough cars. Nothing has come of it yet, but names have been thrown out as suggestions like Wannabes and RiceBoys to see what the group name would be, if a team was formed. The love for imports helps bring people together, no matter what group or race. The two rivals over time have become one, and everyone is willing to help each other out.

Three white boys from down the street walked up to us.

Chao said, "What's up Reid?" (the guy he knew from the group), while he shook his hand.

He began the conversation about how their car was running. From the conversation and the story from Reid, I came to the realization that Mike, MXTuner, had fixed one of the white boys' cars and it was running really good. Reid said that they were

testing out the car after they got it back and when he stepped on it, the back had swerved.

Chia interrupted and said, “You mean it fish tailed.”

Reid answered, “Yeah.”

The probability of the car (an Acura Integra) fish tailing is far fetched, it probably was a torque steer. Fish tailing is due to a car being rear wheel drive. Since Integras are front wheel drive, the car torque steering was a more reasonable explanation. A torque steer is when the car has too much torque (power) that causes the car to be unbalance, thus causing the car to swerve.

A car sped as it came into the loop, a Mitsubishi Eclipse that belongs to Ying. Murmurs among the group said that if he didn't slow down, he was going to get caught; pointing out that there was a cop at the end of the loop. Ying came around, and instead of parking, took off chasing another car, but he came back around and parked a little up from us. While going around the circle and shaking all the guys' hands, he made a remark saying that he didn't feel like it. I get passed but receive eye contact and a nod for acknowledgement that I was there. Chao makes a statement saying, “that car was slow anyways.”

While heading out on 35, Chao taunted Pha by down shifting and revving his engine. Nothing came of it though. We past the stop lights by Burger King, and all of a sudden, Peter (in his black Integra GSR) and Vong (in his silver Integra GSR) took off after a Corolla, exiting onto I-90. The chase continued, everybody following each other, and then we exited off and stopped at Festivals to pick up some cases of beer. We again park far from the store to be able to park together as a group.

Chusa blasted his music with his passenger seat door open.

Pha yelled to him, "Turn that shit off."

Chao popped his trunk and hood, got out, grabbed some tools in the back, and fumbled with his engine.

Ying, walked over to his passenger side, opened the door, leaned over and while fumbling with his boost controller said to Chao, "What, you wanna go again, well, let me turn up my boost too then," laughingly.

Previously, when Chao and Ying raced, Chao had kicked his ass.

Chao, while advancing the ignition timing by loosening the bolt with a wrench, said to Ying, while laughing, "What you wanna to do this again, we could do it again, but no matter what, I'll still kick your ass."

He then starts to bullshit with Pha, who was also outside leaning against his car smoking, about when they were going to race each other.

Chao, lighting up a cigarette, said to him, "What bitch, you scared that I'm gonna take your balls from you?"

Pha laughed it off. He told Chao to just wait until he got his nitrous. We headed back to Mike's place on 53. All of a sudden, with no cars in front of us or around us, Chao stepped on his gas pedal and we took off. I thought that it was against Ying again, but I noticed it was Pha. We exited on Midway, while going down the loop Chao hit his hazard lights, signifying that he has won.

Although Chao, Pha, Ying, and everyone in the group are drag racers, they are not the crazy, reckless, and dangerous drivers that the public views them to be. When a race is determined on the street, the drivers do make sure that they have enough room to launch and stop. If the race is premeditated, everyone will go out to the back roads,

usually very late at night, when and where there are not much traffic. Many racers are very eager and willing to take it to the tracks as the racing season begins. The problem is that there are not many tracks in this area and they aren't open that much. For example, a track that we always go to is Rock Falls Raceway and it only holds an Import Day once a month. Also, entrance and racing fees do get quite expensive, and most of these crazy import fanatics come from a low to middle class families.

But it doesn't matter what car you drive or how fast you run at the tracks, in the end, we're all just people who love cars. And this love of imports forms a sense of bond, a sense of family, because where ever you are and who ever you are, you are welcomed.