



Mike Lee checks a part just off his new Ganesh KSL-5210K turning center.

Rearin' To Go!

How a Young Entrepreneur Turned His Racing Hobby into a Profitable Business.

Story and photos by C. H. Bush, editor

A 1993 black GMC Typhoon SUV pulls to a stop at a signal. Seconds later, a sleek red Ferrari pulls alongside and stops, too. The driver in the Typhoon looks at the Ferrari driver, grins and stomps the gas pedal twice. Vroom! Vroom! It's the signal he wants to street drag. The Ferrari driver laughs. "Yeah, right. You gotta be kidding," he's thinking. The signal light turns green. The two drivers punch their accelerators simultaneously. The Typhoon rockets away from the Ferrari, hitting 70 miles an hour in less than 2 seconds, leaving its opponent stunned.

"That scenario gets them every time," says Mike Lee, the young founder-president of Chatsworth, CA's Race Proven Motors, Inc. "The driver in the other car is astonished, of course, but what he doesn't know is he's just been beaten by an older GMC truck with a 1200-horsepower, turbo-charged Chevy V6 engine. It blows their minds."

The fact that Lee's "Ghettosled," (his nickname for the SUV), left the Ferrari behind in a trail of blue rubber smoke was no accident. Instead, it was a testimony to his skill and

expertise in "suping" up cars, his passion since he was a boy helping his father tinker with his cars.

"My dad was a gearhead, too," Lee says, "so I guess that's where I developed my own passion for the industry."

True Entrepreneur

At 31, Lee has proven himself to be a true entrepreneur by turning his love of fast cars into a growing business.

"I've always loved fast cars and speed," he says. "When I was a teenager, I had an '89 Mustang GT. It had a 600-horsepower Ford racing engine in it. That was pretty quick for a sixteen-year-old. It was pretty much a drag-race-only vehicle. It was street legal, but my dad didn't want me to take it out on the street, so I only took it to the track. It would do a quarter mile in the low 10 seconds, and achieve speeds of 130-135 miles per hour."

Lee says the car was "naturally" aspirated.

"That means it didn't have a super-charger or nitrous oxide to boost it. It was a basic engine. I put in higher

Mike Lee, Race Proven Motors president, left, and CNC-machinist-programmer Ammar Abukurah, discuss a part recently machined on the Ganesh CNC-2818 mill.

compression pistons, ported and polished the cylinder heads, replaced the crankshaft, and made everything really strong. Since I didn't have much money, it took a lot of late night working and hanging around high-performance shops. Luckily, I had some friends whose parents were racers, so they helped me put it together."

Did Lee do any racing with the car?

"Oh, yes," he says. "It wasn't anything like professional racing, but I used to go the track and race on 'Grudge Night.' Grudge night was when amateurs got to race each other. It was really exciting to see how well your car did."

Lee says all of his work with cars was just a hobby back then, but it was one that occupied his mind and heart.

"When time came to go to college, I decided to come to California, because I wanted to go to a school close to the ocean," he recalls. "I had been surfing all my life, so I picked Pepperdine University. When I graduated, I went to work as a financial planner for a large company selling insurance, mutual funds, that type of thing. Although I was very successful, I just didn't like it at all."

Lee's escape hatch from a job he didn't like turned out to be his hobby.

From Hobby to Business

In the year 2000, at about the same time he went to work for the insurance company, Lee formed a company, Race Proven Motors, Inc.

"I wasn't sure what I was going to do with it," he says, "but while I was in college, and while I worked for the insurance company, I was buying and selling unique automotive parts on the side. I didn't have a shop. It was all out of my garage. I hooked up with companies like Dale Earnhardt, Inc. and all the big NASCAR teams back east. They had a lot of old parts they didn't need, so I bought them, repaired them, cleaned them up and made them fit different applications. Most of them were pretty hard parts to find back then. I sold them over the internet on Ebay or by connecting with the forums catering to people interested in similar cars. That side



business actually took off and people were relying on me more and more for these unique parts. So, decided it was time to go for it."

Lee's fledgling business sold engines, blocks, cylinder heads, pistons and other hard-to-find components.

Lee: "It wasn't high volume, but I was making money. A couple of engines here and there, you know. Basically, what I did was what the industry calls 'freshen up' the parts, make them as good as new for a fraction the cost. I established business relationships with a few machine shops in the San Fernando Valley to get the kinds of work done I couldn't do myself. Things like welding, sheet metal work and machining. I modified many of the parts to work in other applications."

Lee got some of the shops to give him discounts to cut his costs.

"Even so," he says, "it was pretty tough to make much profit, because of the high costs. I knew I had to do something different, if I wanted to make the business go, so I finally quit my day job and then, in late 2002, I moved into a 1000-square-foot shop, a hole in the wall. I stayed there for about a year or so, then in 2004, I moved into a 2000-square-foot building. Today, we have three employees, and we're in 5,000 square feet."

Developed His Own Brand

With more and more people depending on him for parts, Lee decided to develop his own brand of products.

"In order to cut costs, I started buying machinery and equipment," he says. "Nothing special, but I was able to start prototyping parts and fabricating things. And that was pretty much the start to developing my own brand."

Mike Lee's "Ghettosled," a 1993 GMC Typhoon blasting off. A 1200-hp, turbocharged engine lifts the nose off the ground. This car can hit 130 mph in an 8th of a mile. The Typhoon and the Syclone form the market for most of Lee's business. This car, before modifications, outperforms a Ferrari.



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Race Proven Motors employee Ammar Abukurah examines a Race Proven part produced on a year-old Ganesh VMC-2818 mill.

At present, Lee's markets consist mainly of making parts for two GMC vehicles.

"Basically, we have a speciality market which is GM Syclone and Typhoon pickup trucks," he says. "They were limited production vehicles that were manufactured by General Motors from 1991 through 1993. The funny thing is they were a cross between a hotrod and a utility truck. They made about 5,000 Typhoons and about 2,500 Syclones. People who love speed love them. I've owned, bought and sold about a dozen of them over the years. Right now I own one of each."

Lee bought one when he was still a kid, he says.

"I bought a '93 and started modifying it, and when people saw what I was doing to the truck and how fast I was able to make it, they wanted my assistance and guidance to make theirs go, too. They wanted to make it look like mine and go as fast as mine did. Those trucks are really the foundation of our business, less than 10,000 trucks. We have a good website and we sell to people all over the world. It's pretty amazing, but even in this economic slowdown, we're really busy."

CNC Equipment

A year ago, still with limited budget, Lee decided that he needed a way to speed up prototyping of his designs.

"I found Ganesh only a couple of miles from my shop," he says, "so a year ago I bought a VMC-2818 3-axis mill from them with an 8,000-rpm spindle and 16-tool turret. Problem was I didn't know a thing about CNC. When I bought the machine, I told them I have no idea how to program this thing. If you want me to buy this machine, you'll have to babysit me, and they did. Harvender Singh, president of Ganesh, and their trainer, Gary, really helped us a lot. They understood

and gave us all the service we needed. They made our switch to CNC about as easy as it can get. Early this year I bought a KSL-5210T turning center from them. It turned out their machines, which have Fanuc controls, are really easy to learn."

None of Lee's parts are high volume.

"The main benefit of the Ganesh machines for us is that they're very accurate and they're fast," he says. "We can machine a part on the mill and quickly see what it's going to look like in 3D form. We'll put pictures of the part on the internet, and if people bite, it becomes a product. The Ganesh machines have really helped our productivity."

The Ganesh machines have helped Lee's profits, too.

"We are now able to design, prototype, and produce parts faster than ever, which cuts cost and turnaround time," he says. "We are now making parts for other applications, as well as machining products for other speed shops worldwide. Those machines help us stay alive and grow."

Where to from here?

"I don't know yet," he says. "I want to grow, but I want to keep the business personal, too. Just because it's a business doesn't mean I don't have to enjoy it." ■



Variety of parts produced on the Ganesh mill and lathe.

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