

PREVIEW

# Dogfight

Fur Will Fly In The Hammer-Down, Flat-Out '88 Escort Series

BY MAC DeMERE



**F**or 1988, the SCCA Escort Endurance Championship will have a drastically new appearance and, in many respects, substance. Gone are the Chevrolet Corvettes, retired (along with the Porsche 944 Turbos and the SS class) by rulesmakers after three undefeated seasons. This year, the battle for the overall—and GT class—win will be a multiple-way manufacturers' dogfight among pre-season favorites Ford Saleen Mustang, Chevrolet Camaro and Nissan 300ZX Turbo, with darkhorse prospects from the Porsche 944S, Pontiac Firebird, BMW M3 and Audi 5000CS Turbo Quattro.

Another change: The races in the Escort Radar Warning Receiver-backed series will be considerably shorter, with six of eight races running four hours or less. Drivers and teams held little back in the six-hour races that made up a majority of last year's schedule, so it's certain these races will be hammer-down, flat-out trophy dashes. [Some competitors aren't particularly enamored of the shorter races: "If they want a sprint series, they should call it the Escort Sprint Championship," said defending SSB Champion Bill Pate. "I mean, even MGs can go three hours."]

Though the Escort tire wars will be at least as fierce as previous years, there will be fewer warriors in '88. Only Goodyear, General and Michelin [which doesn't plan active participation] have joined the SCCA Tire Manufacturer Council and thus be-



*With the Corvette retired (undefeated) from the Escort series by rulesmakers, the car most likely to fill the void is its bow-tie stablemate, the Chevrolet Camaro. And if two-time champion Bakeracing doesn't show, the top Camaro team will be 1985 Escort SSGT Champ Morrison-Cook's. In late March, the latter was still hard at work preparing its second car (LEFT). How stock are these cars? The sticker is still on the window. . . .*

come eligible to compete in the series. However, BFGoodrich, Toyo and Firestone are reported to be giving serious consideration to joining the fray.

There are quite a few new passages in the technical portion of the rulebook, as well. Previous Showroom Stock-based rules permitted—but didn't actually condone—selective assembly (where engine builders would weigh 30,000 or so pistons and connecting rods to find the lightest and most-equally matched set). This year, engine builders have to find only one light (but not lighter than the minimum factory tolerance!) piston and con rod, and are then permitted to machine the others to match. Crankshafts, harmonic balancers, flywheels and clutches can now (legally) be balanced. Also, roll cages can be welded (rather than bolted) to the frame and extend through the dash.

However, the most important technical change is SCCA's effort to equalize cars through varying minimum weights, something the SCCA Pro department has done quite successfully in the Trans-Am series. Some Escort cars will be required to carry ballast, while others will be allowed to remove items to reduce weight—both prohibited practices in previous years.

"Instead of allowing 'alternate equipment'—which opens a real Pandora's Box—we want to handicap the cars by weight and keep to standard equipment as much as possible," said SCCA Technical Manager Bruce Ferguson.

Pit stops will be different, too. In the past, speed was not a significant factor in most Escort pit stops as top teams could swap drivers, change tires and replace brake pads before a full tank of gas could trickle through an unleaded-size nozzle. At least in the four-hour races, there will be quite a few more "splash and go" stops, as many cars will be able to run nearly two hours on a tankful—while others will be able to go more than two hours on full load. (By the way, though the rules don't specifically mandate pit stops, the book does require driver changes and, thus it is assumed, pit stops.)

## GT: FORD VS. CHEVY

The battle for the GT win this year could often be a classic Ford Mustang/Chevy Camaro battle, though the Nissan 300ZX Turbo has a real chance of blowing both away. On one side of the fence in this shootout is defending champion Saleen



Saleen Autosport is armed with a three-car team and all-star drivers for its title defense.



Wrightwood Racing is planning a partial season in the 944S.



Prodigious power is 300ZX Turbo's asset.

Autosport, with its Ford Saleen Mustangs. On the other side will be '85 GT champ Morrison-Cook, which has swapped its Corvettes for Camaros. If plans can be finalized, two-time Escort SS Champion Bakeracing will also be in the Chevy Camaro camp. The main challenge to American supremacy will come from the American Instruments Racing Nissan 300ZX Turbo.

"I don't think the Camaro can possibly lose...except to another Camaro," said Bakeracing team leader Tim Baker. "We tested at Sears Point recently. With nothing more than a basic setup and S-compound Goodyears, we went as fast as Saleen qualified last year. Fully prepped, we went another four seconds faster. And when Chevy comes out with its special package for the car (which includes a bigger gas tank, two-piston aluminum brake calipers and bigger rotors) we should be only a couple of seconds off last year's pace for the Corvette." For comparison, a time two seconds off the 1987 SS pole at Sears would comfortably beat the 1986 SS pole time. Should Bakeracing actually enter the fray, its drivers will be two-time Escort champs Tommy and Bobby Archer, with Mitch Wright helping for the long races. By the way, Bakeracing has won 10 of the 19 Escort/Playboy races.

A .526 batting average is Hall of Fame material in any league.

"It's going to take a better effort than we had last year to win again," said Saleen Autosport's Steve Saleen. "The competition is pretty evenly matched, so it'll be up to the teams and drivers." Saleen Autosport will field three cars (for Saleen and Scott Pruett, Pete Halsmer or George Follmer; Desire Wilson and Lisa Caceres and Rick Titus and Ford SVO head Michael Kranefuss) with backing from General Tire, Montgomery Ward/Autoexpress and Champion Battery. Team manager will be Howard Comstock, who ran Saleen's truck program last year.

"I'm looking forward to a new challenge," said Tommy Morrison, leader of the team that has scored six overall Escort wins in the past three years. "Whether the races are 45 minutes or 24 hours, it takes similar preparation. Besides, the six-hour races have been sprint races anyway." Morrison-Cook will field two Goodyear-shod cars at all of the races (for Bob McConnell and Club racer Kandice Elsebusch and John Heinrich and Stu Hayner, with Don Knowles, Bobby Carradine and Morrison occasionally taking the wheel) and a third car at some races.

"It's going to take a well-prepared car and a cast of recognized ace drivers to win GT!"

BFGOODRICH TEAM T/A  
STANDS BEHIND A  
\$375,000 PURSE WITH SOLID  
**FACTORY  
SUPPORT**



Enroll now. And let our Team T/A™ Staff help you across the finish line first.

For 1988, we're designating prize money and awards for top Team T/A™ finishers in:

- SCCA Showroom Stock Racing
- SCCA Improved Touring
- Pro Solo
- Solo II

Competing for cash is always easier when you've got experts to back you up. And once again, Team T/A™ is offering its best factory support ever. From engineering expertise to monthly newsletters. From car preparation to tire preparation. Plus: membership discounts on Comp T/A® R1 tires. All this while you go for your share of our \$375,000 purse!

**Be a winner  
CALL 1-800-RACE-BFG**  
in Ohio... (216) 374-2324



**BFGOODRICH T/A®**  
WE MAKE OUR FRIENDS FASTER™



## SEASON PREVIEW

### DOGFIGHT

CONTINUED

said Wade Hampton, leader of the American Instrument Racing team. Hampton will have some top guns behind the wheel of his Harvey's Hotel-backed Nissan, a car which showed prodigious power last year and grabbed the pole in three of the four races it started. Sports 2000 driver Ron Nelson

will share the car with either three-time IMSA champion Don Devendorf or Indy Car driver Dominic Dobson, who will drive the Goodyear-shod car when Devendorf has schedule conflicts.

On paper, both the Porsche 944S and Pontiac Firebird look like GT contenders. The 944S won two races last year, and its 22-gallon gas tank should allow it to run with one stop in the four-hour races while the V-8s and Nissan will likely have to stop twice. However, neither 944S teams that have announced plans to run the series



Experience, power and two-hour fuel range makes Pombo's Nissan the favorite.

## At Home And Honkin'

For fledgling racers and those who are still dreaming of taking the plunge, the Escort series is arguably the most accessible of all SCCA Pro racing series. The two top reasons: Rental rides are readily available—especially for the two long races—and it's extremely easy to make an off-the-dealer's-showroom street car Escort-eligible.

Especially in the Escort series, rental rides aren't one-price items, as are refrigerators at Montgomery Ward. Prices vary according to the team, the car and your driving—and negotiating—ability. We've heard of prices as low as \$500 per race for a talented driver in an uncompetitive car to more than \$5,000 per race for a front-runner. (It's likely that class-winners aren't available at any price to mediocre drivers.) With six of this year's eight races so short that third and fourth drivers aren't needed, expect inflation to hit the Escort rental market.

On the other hand, if you want to run your own car in the Escort series, all you really need is a roll cage, safety harness and fire extinguisher. Toss out the spare tire, pop off the hub caps and, Bubba, you're racin'. You, however, will have as little chance for success as Lyndon LaRouche's presidential campaign. Though Escort cars are very close to stock and many retain such niceties as electric windows and mirrors and cut pile carpeting, the front-

runners are real prepared-for-competition race cars. An example: It's rumored that the top Camaros will be getting more than 330hp (on unleaded!) from Chevy's five-liter engine, one that makes a bit more than 200hp in stock form. The gap between SCCA Showroom Stock and dealer's-showroom stock was always great, but, for this year's Escort series, it rivals the Royal Gorge. And the level of driving ability, says defending GT Class Champion Rick Titus, "is at least the equal to Trans-Am. Nobody is going to wait around for you." Instead, they're likely to push you out of the way.

Possibly more important to those who are dreaming about racing but have yet to take the plunge: You'll almost certainly feel more at home in an Escort car—or a Club racing Showroom Stocker—than in a formula car. The controls will feel familiar, the cars still lean way over on their suspensions and, though they're generating quite a bit more than 1g cornering force, the radial tires still squeal. And the horns still honk—it's a good way to tell a slower car you're comin' through.

—Mac DeMere

Aspiring Escort drivers can get more information on the series from the SCCA Pro Racing department, (303) 694-7223.

(Motorsport International, with drivers Bob Bogan, Paul Brand and Allan Freed, and Wrightwood Racing, for Firehawk champ Jon Milledge and Sports 2000 driver Charlie Spira) will run a full-season effort. It seems that the Firebird could be nearly as competitive as its GM F-Body sister, the Camaro, but no one has indicated plans to run one—though Razzberry Racing is trying to put together a deal.

An interesting GT entry is the T.C. Kline Racing BMW M3 (for Kline, winner of last year's Road Atlanta SSB race, and drag racer R.J. Gottlieb). However, the 2.3-liter, four-cylinder BMW must weigh within 200 pounds of the five-liter Camaros and Mustangs.

The Audi 5000 CS Turbo Quattro, a car which won the final three SSA races of 1987, is another question mark. An Audi spokesman said the company has "no firm plans" to enter a car—but don't be surprised if that changes before the Sears Point opener.

Two Mustang GT teams will join the series when it swings east: Dilligaf Racing, with drivers Jim Mueller, Jack Deep, Richard Myhre and Jerry Draga, and Birchwood Racing, with drivers Mike Mavrigian, Rich Ashley and Kip May.

#### A: NISSAN VS. THE REST

With the factory-backed Dodge Shelby ('85/'86 champs) and Mitsubishi ('87 champs) teams not returning to the series, the pre-season favorite in what may be a rather under-subscribed Class A (don't call it Showroom Stock anymore, says the Pro dept.) has to be Pombo Racing's naturally aspirated Nissan 300ZX. Pepe Pombo's crew finished second in the team standings last year with one win, and the General Tire/Montgomery Ward/Champion Battery-sponsored 300ZX's 19-gallon gas tank should allow it to run the four-hour races on one stop. Joining defending SSA National Champion Pombo on the team will be Scott Hendricks and, for the long races, Ron Johnson and two-time National Champion Scott Sharp.

In addition to an M3 in GT, T.C. Kline will enter a BMW 325is in A for Club racers Tom Pabst and Andy Evans. At the end of four hours, the Goodyear-shod 325is could be right on the Nissan's heels as it can also run more than two hours on a tankful. SCCA Board of Directors member Clint deWitt and Ken McGraw are others trying to put together a 325is effort.

Autosport South, which ran impressively in last year's Firehawk series in an Acura, will field a General-shod Acura Legend Coupe as part of a three-car team (that will also include two Honda CRX Sis in B) for drivers Jerry Lustig, Rich Lee, Stuart Lasser and 1985 Formula Ford National Champion Jackson Yonge.

Team Van der Jagt Racing will run an ex-factory Dodge Shelby Turbo for 19-year-old kart racer Todd Van der Jagt and Club racer



Autosports South will campaign an Acura Legend Coupe in A and two Honda CRX Sis in B.

## The Thrill of Victory without the Agony of the Feet.



With the revolutionary **CENTERFORCE™** clutch (U.S. PAT. #4425991) from Midway Industries, you can be confident that you are converting *all* of your underhood horsepower into ground-churning, go-power—*without* spraining your "clutch leg" in the process.

At the heart of CENTERFORCE performance is an ingeniously designed system of centrifugal weights that actually increases the clamping power of the pressure-tuned diaphragm fingers as engine speed increases. It's as if the CENTERFORCE actually "turbocharges" clutch performance, by using a sophisticated centrifugal energy system to harness the power of each engine revolution. There's no other clutch available that can deliver so much clamp strength at the flywheel and still require only light pedal pressure to engage.

For the ultimate in clutch performance—and comfortable pedal pressure—install a CENTERFORCE diaphragm clutch, available for virtually all domestic and import cars and trucks.

Available by mail: For Mazda RX-7, includes clutch plate, disc and bearing \$221.95. Catalog \$3.00. (Prices include S&H.) Use MasterCard, VISA or certified check. CA residents add 6% sales tax. Send to Midway, Inc., 15116 Adams St., Midway City, CA 92655.

A DIVISION OF  MIDWAY INDUSTRIES



Leading the Class B battle will be the four-car team of defending champion Phoenix Racing.



Top Class B challenger will likely be the Team GRR Honda CRX Si of Stewart and Cunningham.



Other challengers include Petdorf's CRX Si...



...the Jeff Jordan Racing Mazda 323 GT...



...and Frank Leary's Nissan Pulsar.

## SEASON PREVIEW

### DOGFIGHT

CONTINUED

Jim Heule. AMW Motorsports is also planning a full season with a Mazda RX-7 for drivers Brad McAllister and Steve Pfeifer.

Like GT, A has quite a few question marks. If a strong team showed up with a Shelby CSX (a car which could put out well over 200hp in Escort trim), a Mitsubishi Starion, Mazda RX-7, or Audi 90 Quattro, the odds would certainly change.

### B: A HORDE OF HONDAS

It appears that Honda is very serious about regaining the Manufacturers Championship it won in '85 and '86, but lost to Volkswagen last year. There will be more than a half dozen of the new (and, reportedly, lightning fast) CRX SIs at all the races, with the count possibly climbing to double digits at some events. Volkswagen, however, is far from sitting idly by, and will return with a two-car effort from defending champ Phoenix Racing.

"There'll be times B will look damn-near

like the Honda Cup," said Team GRR's John Torok. "Ain't nobody gonna run away with B and there'll never be a dull moment." Torok will field a General Tire/Montgomery Ward/Champion Battery-backed, Jackson Racing-prepared two-CRX Si team for himself, '86 Escort and National SSB Champion Lance Stewart, Peter Cunningham and Ed Conner.

Other Honda teams include the aforementioned two-CRX Si Autosport South team, a one- or, possibly, two-car Carmichael Honda-sponsored Rancourt Racing entry for Norris Rancourt and John Green and yet another '88 CRX Si for Petdorf Racing drivers Bill Yearwood, John Sherk and Daniel Veilleux.

Returning for the Goodyear-shod Phoenix team, which won three races last year and swept the team, drivers and manufacturers championships, will be Bill and Phil Pate, Peter Schwartzott and Alistair Oag. Cars will be Volkswagen Golf GTI 16Vs. Interestingly, the Volkswagen might have the edge over the Hondas in cruising range as Pate says the GTIs could run nearly three hours on a tankful "if we had to."

Several cars are capable of breaking up

the Honda-Volkswagen fight. Former National Champion and Trans-Am competitor Frank Leary will co-drive a Nissan Pulsar with Dave Dodds in at least the first two races, while a group of Mazda employees led by Jim Jordan will enter one and, possibly, two turbocharged Mazda 323 GTs under the Concours Motors/Jeff Jordan Racing banner. The Mazda team will start with a two-wheel drive, four-door 323 GT for Jordan and Richard Crites and hopes to add a four-wheel drive, two-door 323 GT for Carl and Lee Wuestoff. For the long races, it's possible rally ace Rod Millen, off-roader Glen Harris and Steve Syson will join the team. Other teams running in B include Bjerke Motorsports with a Volkswagen Golf GTI and SMC Motorsport with a Nissan 200SX Turbo, neither of which listed drivers.

Though no one has indicated plans to enter any of these cars, the Chevy Cavalier Z-24, Isuzu Impulse RS, Peugeot 505 or Pontiac Fiero GT could tangle with the B leaders as well.

So there you have it—a lot more questions than answers. However, most of those questions will be answered by 10 p.m. on April 25. □