

FAST ENOUGH

Daniel D. Smith



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The fluorescent lights reflected off the shiny, red 1964 Pontiac GTO hood. Isky lovingly rubbed the polishing cloth along the body lines of the car. Tonight, his mind wasn't building cars but building a better relationship with his 15-year-old son, Zack.

Isky looked at his reflection in the glass reflection in the driver's side window of the pristine Pontiac. In his late forties, he saw a six-foot-tall, rangy-bodied man dressed in well-worn and faded mechanic's coveralls. More than one person had remarked to Isky that he resembled Don Garlits, the professional drag racer.

He noted the black and white tile flooring installed around the garage to represent the checkered finishing flag used in most auto racing events. There were two large stocked rolling tool chests, a high-end air compressor, and an airlift in one of the three bays. Isky's wife, Sara, an RN at the local hospital, drove the new Chevrolet Blazer SUV parked in the end bay of the garage.

He tossed his polishing cloth on a workbench and studied the 1965 Ford Mustang parked over the airlift in the other end bay of the three-car garage. The fastback's body was rough, but the original Ford Hi-Performance 289 engine was decent enough to salvage.

Hoping to restore it with Zack, Isky had bought it two months ago. So far, Zack has shown no interest in it.

Fearing he would lose his dream of sharing his passion for automobiles with his son, Isky forced Zack to go with him tonight to view the town's street rod scene.

After cleaning up, Isky returned to the garage, slipping behind the steering wheel of the GTO. With a half turn of the ignition switch, the finely tuned engine roared to life.

He sat and fixed his ear on the GTO's engine sounds. Revving the engine a few times, he enjoyed the sound of the triple carburetors kicking in and the deep popping of the dual exhausts. The Mustang will sound just as good when finished, thought Isky.

Isky watched through the garage door as tall and husky Zack passed through the kitchen, saying goodbye to his mom. Zack climbed into the car with Isky.

"We're going to enjoy tonight, son."

"Yeah, sure, Dad."

With one last glance at the Mustang, Isky backed out of the garage and headed for the mall parking lot.

Zack had seen his dad glance at the Mustang. He knew his dad had bought it for him, but he couldn't care less about it. Zack didn't care for racing or high-performance cars.

He thought he might like a mini-truck, but his dad didn't like trucks. When Zack had once mentioned a pickup truck, Isky had said a truck's only function was to tow race cars.

He wished his dad would stop trying to make a racer out of him.

"We'll see some nice cars tonight, son."

"Can I window shop at the mall?" asked Zack.

"No," replied Isky. "We're going to look at some fast cars. These guys have put lots of time and work in their machines. You can enjoy yourself and learn something at the same time."

"Right," said Zack, looking out the side window of the GTO.

The night was hot and humid. Two mall employees used jumper cables to pump life into a shopper's dead battery. A motorized sweeper with bright lights mounted on its body was sucking up trash from the darkest reaches of the parking lot. Two dozen high-performance cars were parked next to the main boulevard, looking like an impromptu auto show.

As Isky drove up, the GTO's splitter exhaust pipes rumbled, and the car owners, primarily teenagers, waved to him. He backed in under a large street light. A veteran street racer, Charlie Lane, approached the GTO as Isky and Zack stepped out.

"Hi, Isky, Zack," said Charlie, holding a Shoney's drink cup. "You did a great job restoring the Goat."

"Thanks, Charlie," said Isky.

"Remember how I used to pull Zack around the race track pit area in an old toy wagon while you worked on the engines?" asked Charlie.

"That's been ten or twelve years," said Isky.

"Doesn't seem that long," said Charlie. "Have you seen Corky Langston's Nova since the engine swap?"

"Heard about it," Isky said.

"I've ridden in it," said Charlie. "Corky tested it out on Airport Road. It really moves. Having a dad who owns a wrecking yard helped Corky get some cheap car parts."

"Yeah, but he's a good help to his dad, too," said Isky, glancing at Zack.

"You built anything lately?" Isky asked Charlie.

"No, my two girls could care less. It's not the same anymore. Now, I look at the cars and remember past races."

Isky and Charlie looked at Zack. He was staring at an airplane in its final approach to the nearby airport, acting as if he hadn't heard their exchange.

The three of them turned as a powerful-sounding car approached. Corky Langston, an overweight young man wearing an Honest Charley Speed Shop t-shirt, blue jeans, and beat-up loafers with no socks, parked his '73 Chevrolet Nova next to the Goat.

As Corky and his friend, Mike Howard, a cocky-looking teenager, climbed out of the car, Isky said, "Corky, Mike, this is my son, Zack."

The two boys nodded, as did Zack.

"How about poppin' the hood?" asked Isky. Charlie walked around to the other side of the engine compartment as Corky obligingly opened the hood of the Nova.

"Clean-looking engine swap, Corky," said Isky.

"I really appreciate that coming from you, Isky," said Corky.

A heavily modified 1932 Ford coupe was cruising past on Brainard Road, and the driver honked and waved at the impromptu car show in the parking lot.

Isky felt this would be an excellent time to teach Zack about engine swaps. He spent a few minutes explaining to Zack why the Grand National was such a powerful engine. Noticing that few changes were made in the Nova's original suspension system, he pointed this out to Zack.

Isky noticed the other drivers, a couple with girlfriends, had gathered around the Nova. Corky's friend, Mike, was boasting to a girl in a blue t-shirt about how fast the Nova was. "This sucker is seriously fast! I read in an auto magazine that the Grand National is the fastest-production engine in America. It'll even outrun the Chevy Corvette!"

Isky had seen the article. He thought the Buick's inter-cooled fuel-injected engine

was a better design than the Vette's cross-fire injected engine, but the Vette' was a more thoroughly designed car.

"Git outta here!" said a redheaded youth. "The Vette's been America's fastest production car since '57."

"Not anymore," said Mike to an unbelieving crowd.

A classic Plymouth Road Runner pulled onto the lot, and most of the crowd strayed over to where it parked.

Isky watched Zack walk toward the Plymouth, but he stopped to look at a mini-truck instead.

Isky, Corky, and Mike turned to look at the Goat.

"My dad says you got your nickname from an old racing camshaft," said Corky.

"That's right," Isky smiled. "I built several street machines in the 60s and early 70s. I always used Iskadian racing cams. I guess the nickname just stayed with me."

"How's the Goat runnin'?" asked Corky. "Did you restore the engine, too?"

"It's runnin' good. I just rebuilt the carburetors. I had already done a lot of the engine work."

"Dad says you are probably the best engine builder in town," said Corky.

This aroused Mike's interest. "I didn't know that," he said.

"Tell your dad thanks," said Isky. "He knows me from the old dirt track days."

Corky glanced at the Nova. "Do you think my car would outrun a fuel-injected 'Vette?"

"On a straight course, it stands a chance," said Isky.

Corky hitched his belt up, "I don't know," he mumbled.

"It'll outrun anything!" Mike said. "Come on, let's look at the Road Runner."

"See ya, Isky," said Corky over his shoulder.

"Okay," said Isky, glancing at Zack, who was still by the mini-truck.

As the crowd stood around the Road Runner, Dale Beeler, a former high school star athlete, and his studious-looking sidekick, Larry Johnson, drove onto the parking lot.

Dale was driving a black '87 Corvette. After parking, he and Larry got out, nodded to Isky, and walked over to look at Corky's Nova. The car's hood still yawned open.

"Looks like it's been shoehorned in there," Larry said.

"Pretty hot engine, though," said Dale.

Isky watched Dale and Larry. This must be Dale's third or fourth 'Vette, thought Isky. He was a good street racer, but I have not seen him around much since he went away to college.

The crowd drifted back over to the Nova after pausing to glance at the Corvette. Isky walked over to the outer edge of the crowd. Zack lingered by a silver Chevy S-10 pickup truck.

Feeling that Corky wouldn't brag about his car, Mike said, "Here's the hottest car in town now, guys!"

"That so?" asked Dale.

"Eats Corvettes for breakfast!" spouted Mike.

"Cool it, Mike," said Corky.

"You wanna' race this junker?" challenged Dale.

All eyes and ears turned toward Corky.

Corky tugged at his pants, "Not tonight; I haven't got all the bugs worked out of it

yet."

Dale looked pleased, "That's what I thought," he said.

"Come on, Corky, race him," pleaded Mike.

"Maybe if you made it interesting," suggested Larry.

"Yeah," said Dale. "I'll bet you three hundred bucks my Corvette can outrun this heap."

"Great, Corky, you could get that set of B. F. Goodrich tires you've been wanting," said Mike.

"I've only got a couple hundred," muttered Corky.

"I just got paid; I'll lend you a hundred," said Mike. "Besides, you won't need it. You'll get his three hundred."

"Where you wanna' race?" asked Corky.

"Bonny Oaks Drive," said Dale.

Isky's mind flashed back to the King's Delight drive-in restaurant in 1962. He envisioned the then-new red '406' Ford convertible and new white '409' Chevy hardtop.

Then he thought about Bonny Oaks Drive. It ran straight for half a mile, then went into a gentle "S" curve through a slope-sided railroad underpass.

Bonny Oaks was where street drags were held years ago when the cars were not as fast as today. Most street racing has occurred on the airport's North side access road for the last ten years.

"I don't know," said Corky. "I've never raced on Bonny Oaks."

"Here we go again," said Dale as Zack joined the crowd.

"Come on, Corky," said Mike.

"Alright," said Corky.

"Who's gonna hold the bet?" asked Dale. "How about Isky?" said Larry.

"Not tonight," said Isky, who usually held the race money for the crowd. "I don't particularly like this race."

Zack felt relieved that his dad wouldn't hold the money; he hoped they would leave.

"You're losin' it, Isky," said Larry. "Charlie can hold the money."

Both drivers handed their money to Charlie Lane.

The drivers jumped into their cars, and ten powerful engines roared to life as they prepared to caravan to Bonny Oaks Drive.

Zack hoped his dad would drive home.

Isky wanted Zack to see a street race. He hadn't counted on a race on Bonny Oaks Drive. He felt the urge to drive home, but the Corvette and the Nova, with its new engine, was a good match-up for a drag race. He pulled into the end of the line of cars.

"Can we go home now?" Zack asked.

"No, son, I want you to see how exciting a race can be. We should be home in half an hour."

"Dad, I don't care about racing!" said Zack, slumping down in his seat.

"Watch just one with me, Zack; perhaps you'll change your mind."

With the Corvette leading, the caravan, headlights shooting funnels of light into the darkness, drove through the late evening to Bonny Oaks Drive. Dale and Corky stopped about a half mile from the railroad underpass. Months ago, someone had marked off a quarter-mile drag strip with white paint. The starting line and tire rubber could still be faintly seen.

There were no street lights in this part of town. The caravan passed the long-closed site of a war-era Army ammunition plant. Due to high humidity and a light rainstorm that morning, a few patches of mist were scattered on either side of the dry road.

A few of the following cars pulled off the road behind the two stopped racers.

Charlie ran up to act as a starter. Isky, arriving last, stopped beside the Nova, shouting to Corky, "Shut it down at the finish line!"

Corky half nodded.

The other cars continued toward the barely visible finish line. Not wanting the rest of the crowd to be leaning or sitting on the Goat's fresh paint job, Isky drove past the crowd. He pulled off into the roadside grass halfway between the finish line and the "S" curve. Isky told Zack to watch from the grass beside the Goat.

Looking back down the dark road at the small headlights of the race cars, Isky visualized the start of the race. Zack swatted at the heavy mosquito population.

Charlie looked in the direction of the finish line. Then, looking at Corky, he pointed a finger at him. Corky gave a ready nod. Charlie pointed at Dale. Dale nodded.

The headlights of the race cars stabbed into the darkness of the empty two-lane road. The noise from the revved-up engines shattered the nighttime silence. Charlie raised both arms straight up. The driver concentrated on his arms. Suddenly and swiftly, Charlie lowered both arms. The two drivers floored their gas pedal and popped their clutch.

In both cars, the driver and passenger were violently pressed backward in their seats.

The Corvette jumped off the starting line a half car length ahead of the Nova. The Nova pulled even with the Corvette at the halfway mark. Corky felt the acceleration from the transplanted engine straining the Nova's engine mounts. Dale's Corvette nosed ahead at the three-quarter mark. The Grand National engine, designed to produce maximum horsepower at this range, helped Corky pull even with the Corvette as they roared past the crowd's parked cars.

Corky could feel the Nova pulling ahead. With all his concentration on the Corvette, he didn't pay any attention to the finish line. In the Corvette, Dale wasn't letting up either.

As they passed, Isky could tell from the sound of the cars' engines that they weren't letting up. In another 50 yards, they would be in serious trouble. Isky estimated the two vehicles were traveling at around 110 MPH. Isky felt the Corvette, with its better suspension and lower center of gravity, could take the curve. He felt the Nova couldn't.

"Shut it down, shut it down!" yelled Mike. Corky jammed on the brakes, but the Nova's suspension and brakes were not up to the job. The Nova started to fishtail.

Dale hit the brakes in the Corvette as he shot past the Nova. With its massive tires and excellent four-wheel disk brakes, the Corvette quickly started slowing.

Corky almost controlled Nova's fishtailing as it entered the "S" curve. Catching up with the quickly slowing Corvette, the Nova bounced off the 'Vette's left front fender.

After getting clipped by the Nova, Dale's Corvette did a 180-degree spin and then lurched to a stop at the entrance to the "S" curve. The crowd started running toward the Corvette.

Standing on the brakes and having slowed to 60 MPH, with Nova's tires screaming and smoking in protest, Corky was still sliding toward the left side of the underpass. He had enough driving skills to take some pressure off the brakes and steer in the direction of the slide. The Nova started straightening, then slid onto the shoulder into loose gravel and dirt. The Nova rode up the side of the underpass with the car's momentum, shooting it out the

far side. Turning in midair, it landed on its side in the middle of the road. It flipped side over side several times, finally bouncing to a dusty halt in someone's front yard.

The crowd had reached the Corvette while the Nova was still flying. It looked like a stunt car from an old TV show to those watching. Isky looked back at Zack, who hadn't moved from beside the GTO. He returned to get him as a few others ran toward the twisted Nova.

It took the rescue squad and ambulance workers two hours to cut up the Nova and pull the boys from the wreckage.

The police were taking statements from the crowd and Dale and Larry. It would be days before there would be statements from Corky and Mike.

Few original race watchers had hung around after the horrific race ended.

A white-haired man who lived where the Nova had stopped stood next to Isky, Zack, and a couple of other spectators. He had been watching the rescue crew use the "jaws--of--life" on the car.

The white-haired man told no one in particular, "I moved here in '60. This was a smaller road then; the underpass merged into a one-lane tunnel. We had one heck of a wreck on the other side of the underpass in '62. Two kids were racing, and neither would back off at the merge point. They had to scrape one off each side of the entrance to the tunnel."

Isky remembered. His best friend, Billy Turner, had just received a new '62 Chevrolet "409" as a graduation gift. Another teenager, who had graduated a year before, had bought a new '62 Ford "406". A race was inevitable, and Isky was part of the crowd who drove along to watch. It had been a spectacular crash that left strong memories on the young minds that had witnessed that race.

During his racing career, Isky had witnessed many wrecks, but the 1962 Bonny Oaks Drive tunnel wreck was the one he could never completely get out of his mind.

He put his arm around Zack's shoulder. "Let's go, son," he said.

A couple of blocks from the house, Isky spotted a blue 1970 Chevy Chevelle sitting at a gas station. It had the SS 454 emblem in its grill. "Very nice," Isky thought. The Chevelle might be a model to consider for my next project.

Zack saw his dad glancing at the shiny blue car. He also thought about the events of that evening.

As they pulled into their driveway, Zack said, "Dad, I saw a mini-truck I liked tonight. I wouldn't mind driving one of those to school. I'd even like you to show me how to paint one."

Isky looked at the Mustang sitting in the open garage. He had never liked trucks but quietly said, "We'll sell the Mustang and get the money for a mini-truck, son. I want to help you paint one." Isky also thought back to the events of the evening.

Surprising himself, Isky continued, "It'll go fast enough."