NO TIME FOR TUNE-UPS

USAC's gimlet eye made the Mobilgas Run a rare interpretation of "strictly stock"

BY BILL COREY

BECAUSE actual miles per gallon determined class winners for the first time and because of the presence of America's new compact cars, this year's Mobilgas Economy Run was more important than ever before. Jointly sponsored by the General Petroleum Corporation and the United States Automobile Club and sanctioned by the Fédération Internationale de L'Automobile, the 1959 Run had a larger-than-ever entry list and the toughest course in history.

When Duke Wirth of General Petroleum asked me to drive in this year's run, my choice of cars was practically unlimited. However, the Studebaker Lark models were the newest new cars available and their size and concept seemed most interesting to Road & Track readers. At the time, I wouldn't have given two cents for my chances to win in class, or, for that matter, even to beat the Big Three cars. The prime reason was that my first contact with Duke was early in February of this year, and in Economy Run circles this is practically a year late and a dollar short.

If that sounds suspicious, let me assure every reader that USAC tolerates absolutely nothing phony in the Run. From intimate personal experience starting on the first day all cars were impounded, I can state that not a wrench was turned or a mile driven except under the direct observation of a USAC representative. Absolutely no deviation from stock status is permitted, and the interpretation of this is that the car must not only be "as cataloged," but as actually delivered to 50% of retail purchasers. This means that such "stock" items as optional gear ratios or carburetors, which are permitted in sports car racing, are out unless the manufacturer can prove that 50% of his production is so delivered. There would be some new faces and some new marques in our events if our clubs were as strict!

Still, the Run is big business to automobile manufacturers, and most do their best within the framework of the rules. It is not at all unusual for a single maker to spend upwards of $50,000, starting nearly a year before the actual Run date. How is this money spent? First of all, some manufacturers go to great lengths to hire a complete team of nationally known drivers and personalities. These drivers start practicing months in advance, covering thousands of miles over all sorts of roads and keeping complete logs of results. Great numbers of combinations of the various allowable options are the subject of experimentation, enabling the final entry to be the model most likely to win. Later, the drivers start practicing for more thousands of miles over the route they suspect the Run is most likely to take.

Bill Corey and the buffeted Studebaker.

At the beginning, we had no money except what our time was worth and no support except that which Pasadena Studebaker - Mercedes dealer Lloyd Pearson so kindly offered. Lloyd bought and paid for the actual Run car, which was selected at random from a San Bernardino dealer by USAC, and he furnished us with an identical sister car for two months of practice. Without his constant optimism, I don't think we would have had the courage to face the big boys so all alone!

Most other entrants selected the lightest two-door model for competition, but we felt that the four-door sedan is the model most people are interested in and accepted the weight penalty. We also chose the 6-cylinder Lark instead of the V-8 as more nearly competitive in displacement with many imported makes. I telephoned Mike DeBlumenthal, Studebaker's chief development engineer in South Bend, for engineering information about the car. To say that our entry shocked him is the understatement of the year. All the factory people were so happily keeping up with demand for Larks that they had completely forgotten about the Run!

Perhaps one of the reasons why the independents hang on so tenaciously is their flexibility. Forty-eight hours after I talked to Mike, he was in California helping us. Hours later, Don Hosford, the man who has helped Studebaker win more sweepstakes than any other manufacturer, was called out of retirement and was on an airplane bound for Pasadena. Studebaker engineers were a bit disappointed that we had chosen the 6 for our effort, as they felt that the V-8 was more economical at higher road speeds and over difficult mountainous terrain. The 6-cylinder engine had been specifically designed for top economy when equipped with standard transmission and overdrive, and it was more in its element in urban service. But all cars in the Run were to have automatic drive, and we had to make up our mind to live with an unfavorable engine/gear ratio combination. Besides, Bill Danyluk, Glendale Studebaker dealer, had entered a V-8 to be driven by former sweepstakes winner Dick Griffith.

Co-driver Jim Peterson and I spent so many sleepless hours in both the sister car and the Run car that memory of routes and places dims. Including the 1898.4 miles of the Run, we drove the two 6-cylinder Larks well over 10,000 miles in less than two months at altitudes ranging from sea level to 12,000 feet and in temperatures from below zero to 110°. While break-in with the Run car was restricted to paved highways and to maximum legal speeds, the twin traversed every type of terrain from "no road" to expressway, at speeds up to 90 miles per hour. We had to crowd nearly a year's driving into the space of weeks.

We found out how the Lark handles traveling down hill on mountain curves faster than anyone should drive; we found out how comfortable it is after 16 to 18 continuous hours behind the wheel; we found out what kind of a beating it can take when driven without mercy.

With all these miles behind us, let's go back to the March road test and see how our conclusions compare. Seating comfort in the front seat can only be classified as excellent. Seldom have I driven any automobile in which I could spend as many hours behind the wheel with less fatigue. With the Firestone tires on our test cars inflated to 28 pounds per square inch all around, tire squeal was practically nonexistent.

While I emphatically disagree that there is a feeling of mushiness on S bends, there is an odd feeling of steering stickiness which gives the impression of alternate over- and understeer.

In March, our testers were less than pleased with fuel economy, but later production cars incorporate carburetion changes. The Lark 6 still doesn't measure up to imports in its price class, to be sure, but the Run figures prove that no domestic four-door sedan will obtain significantly better mileage. With automatic drive, the best that can be expected under the most favorable conditions is about 25 mpg, yet the car can be cruised wide open and still obtain 17.5 mpg. The car uses no oil, will take thousands of miles of tough driving with little maintenance.

Performance of the 6 is marginal with automatic. Perhaps, if the engine were as smooth as it is mechanically quiet, one wouldn't mind the lack of sparkle. Particularly with the Borg-Warner transmission (excellent in itself), the engine tends to throb upon acceleration.

Brakes on Economy Run cars are purposely adjusted to the lowest possible pedal to eliminate any chance of fuel-consuming drag. In most cases, this means that very severe action results. Not so with the Lark. Even with low pedal, action remains smooth and progressive with full feel.

Many of our trials were made with various ignition timing settings to arrive at the best for economy within the framework of the 5° additional advance over stock permitted by USAC. Near disaster was our fate as we bucked a strong head wind climbing the Whitewater Grade near Indio, Calif., with timing on the very edge. Severe detonation began to set in and, within seconds, the engine began to freeze up, probably because high piston crown temperature caused the pistons to expand rapidly. We coasted to a halt, but when the engine was restarted the damage had been done. This had to happen 36 hours before the close of preliminary runs and in spite of our pleas, USAC chief steward Art Pillsbury was adamant. Our only choice was to install a complete new engine, picked at random from the assembly line by USAC, or to take a chance and make the run with our sticking pistons and scored walls. There was no time left for break-in, so we decided to sweat out Kansas City. Climbing for miles up vicious Baker Grade in the heart of the California desert at 95°F., it was necessary to let off the throttle, then accelerate as the engine began to protest its hurt pistons and walls. Using this trick to get extra oil to the cylinders, we struggled across the Rockies, over 12,000-foot Loveland pass and held our breath through the rolling plains of the Midwest. Economy suffered, of course. Every time we had to let up, then accelerate, that extra fuel came directly from our hearts. We would have been happy just to make Kansas City and finish the Run, so we were delighted to take third over all.