

As Ford racing program's
right arm, they might
have invented the cliché:

Speed Merchants . . .

HOLMAN

&

MOODY

BY STEPHEN F. WILDER



Hidden, but hardly muffled at all, by a boxy fiberglass cover, two Holman and Moody marine conversions of the Fairlane V-8 throbbed energetically in the stern of the 25-foot Bartram cruiser. At 3,000 rpm, they were driving it at 30 knots, as fast as a trans-Atlantic liner, and as smoothly, too. But at the helm, John Holman was seeking rough water. It being a windless day and Lake Catawba being the narrow north-south result of damming the trans-Carolina river of the same name, there was hardly a ripple to be seen. So when a 16-foot runabout came in sight, its 75-horse outboard somewhat checked by a near-overload of passengers, John eyed its wake with enthusiasm. Though the other boat passed within 30 yards, he overlooked the usual courtesy and didn't ease the paired throttles closed, and when we reached its wake the Bartram jumped and splashed like a jolly porpoise. John grinned with delight, cut the deep-dish wheel hard to port and pushed the throttles wide open. The other boat might as well have been in reverse as we jumped its other half-wake with even more vivacity and came even with them. Perhaps we can get them to race, I thought, but the answer was that they lay dead in the water, their motor idling. John completed an elongated circle about them without comment and continued up the

lake into North Carolina. His soul was evidently a little happier for the maneuver but it was his daughter Jolana who put it into words. Though her father won't let her drive the Bartram yet, he does let her take out their (single-) small-engined runabout and she laughingly admits great pleasure in enticing young male contemporaries with their hot outboards into informal races, adding "It's fun to beat them."

John Clarence Holman was born in Nashville, Tennessee, two days before the Armistice was signed. When he was six, his family moved to California, one of the first to take the Great American Trek. In 1934, his father died. Family finances forced the 15-year-old John to finish his graduation requirements with part-time work. His first job was as a painter's helper in a body and fender shop and his burly build today still testifies to acres of sheet metal sanded. Next he was a mechanic's helper, occasionally brightening the days (and evenings) by working on the late Lou Fageol's racing boats and cars. Then he discovered free enterprise.

Having observed a price differential of noticeable proportions between salvage yards in Texas and those in California, he acquired a truck and a California bank account. In Texas, he'd scour a yard for choice

merchandise, write a check, and high-tail it for California. In Wall Street parlance he was undercapitalized; he had to get his load to California, sell it, and get the proceeds into his bank before his check arrived. In those halcyon days, banks used trains and it took three days for a check passed in Texas to clear in California's Imperial Valley. John Holman, by driving the 1700-mile race with the train on as little as 11 hours sleep, always managed to keep ahead of his hurrying checks. But it wasn't easy. Once, on a nine-mile, rock-strewn detour in northern New Mexico, he had seven flat tires. The truck was way overloaded, of course, because that was the only way he had of increasing business volume per trip, and he had the tires pumped up as hard as bricks. But the sharp rocks kept cutting the cords and he just kept stopping and changing them. He always kept a bunch of spare tires on board and on this trip he had exactly seven to start with. "After I mounted the last one," he says, "I really tip-toed till I got back on pavement." He still had hundreds of miles to go but he made it, as he always did.

John has a well-developed merchandising instinct. It's a simple enough principle, to buy something cheaply here that you *know* you can sell dear there; it's quite another

thing to do this consistently. John does, even today, and he enjoys it yet. But perhaps in those days his main satisfaction was the challenge of driving the truck. He had that locomotive to beat, he had one tired old truck or another to keep running—he's still an expert at predicting transmission life merely by listening to the gear whine—and, perhaps most fun of all, there were the other trucks to race. The thought of kids racing trucks across the West is not one to cheer the National Safety Council, but John survived, as did most of us, and today does his racing on the water, as informally as ever. There are no scars but there is an afternoonful of anecdotes. Such as the time he raced down a grade to pass the truck ahead (in order to lead *him* up the next grade) and was just even with him when they both went by one of those strange desert characters who pedal across the countryside on a bicycle laden with pots and pans tied on with bits of string and who-knows-what. Neither of them hit the poor guy, but their slipstreams did. There was a bit of a racket, and when John looked back, "there was this big heap in the middle of the road with a fist shaking up out of it."

Or the time when he went out with a pickup truck he'd rigged so he could bring back a whole car, wrecker-style, and found two irresistible bargains. One, a '39 Graham Hollywood, the one with the Cord body panels, he let his wife Zona drive back while he towed the other on the pick-up. "The Hudson, or whatever it was, managed to punch a hole in the pickup's gas tank, so I was going even faster than usual, trying to get to gas stations before it emptied itself. All Zona had to do was follow me, but the Graham didn't have any windshield in it at all and she was bundled up to here with sweaters and jackets and scarves, and scared to tears at how fast I was going through the turns."

Life was not always epic; when John ran out of money there were jobs working for others. And lessons. Facing a bankruptcy court armed only with a boxful of receipts and notes taught him the importance of keeping sharp paperwork.

When the war started in Europe, the defense business in California boomed and hustled and Holman apprenticed himself into the tool and die trade at the Harvey Machinery Co., now known as Harvey Aluminum. He worked at various shipyards and job shops throughout the war. Afterwards he went trucking some more and between trips as-

sembled a Mack truck in his front yard. South Gate must have adored him. In 1952, Clay Smith was the factory-selected head of the Lincoln team in the Mexican road race (which was to win the sedan class three years running) and he hired John to, of all things, drive the parts truck. "It was just like what I'd been doing, even to going to Texas, except instead of being old iron, the parts back there were all lovely and new." Too, he and the drivers of the other parts trucks had their own nightly races as they rushed to stay ahead of the racers. Things went well and after the race he went to work full-time for Clay in Long Beach, primarily as a parts man but also as a fill-in mechanic. He was 35 at that time, and just about ready to bloom. Says he, "I poked my nose into everything there. Come to think of it, I've got people working for me today that are just like that."

"Clay was a brilliant man, sharp as a tack. I've never met anyone in our kind of business as sharp as he was." Clay Smith died in 1954 and Bill Stroppe, his partner, took over the firm (and today is again working for Lincoln-Mercury Division's program). In 1956, John asked Pete De Paolo for a position in the then-thriving Ford stock-car racing team, and got one, as manager of the Charlotte, North Carolina, operation.

The first thing I found was that there weren't enough tools, so I went out and bought three Snap-On cabinets at about \$500 each, the big red stand-up chests on casters. The bills weren't going to come in till the end of the month and by then I hoped we'd have won some races. Ralph Moody was already here, one of Ford's string of driver-mechanics. He's one of the best, you know; he has a certain ability to translate track behaviour into mechanical changes that ought to be made. Well, as a matter of fact, Ralph won the very first race we went to, right on the last lap."

And the shop has been a going concern ever since. In 1957 when the AMA resolution took all the factory teams out of racing, it looked like curtains—but Holman had some savings and Moody had a credit rating that impressed. (He'd had three speed shops of his own before, two in New England where he got his start racing midgets and more recently in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.) So they went to a Charlotte bank, told their story, got a business loan, and bought the whole Midland Avenue package from Ford Motor Company. As it turned out, it was a real bargain, but the men's history

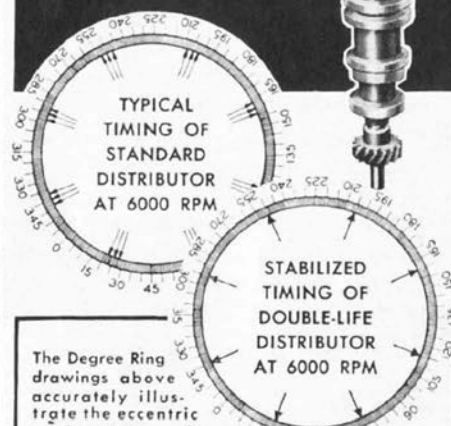
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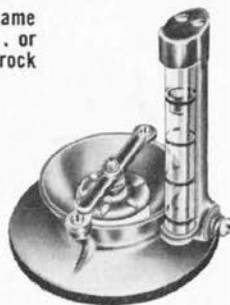
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HOLMAN & MOODY CONTINUED

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The next year they moved out of town to the airport—the rent is lower, there are a number of buildings available to them for expansion, and there is a happy combination of relative isolation from the curious plus convenience to the air transportation that Holman, Moody, and their customers were increasingly to use in racing's affluent Sixties.

But back in '56, less than a dozen employees would stick with them (out of 40), and at \$75 a week, who could blame the others? Today the payroll is over \$7,000 a week for the employees; a corner definitely has been turned.

Holman and Moody is still basically a 51-49 partnership though a small amount of stock has been purchased by certain key employees. Ford does not own any of it but is obviously the number one customer. The doors are still open to anyone else, although in the midst of the racing season you may have to wait a while for them to get around to your job.

Ford picked H-M to spearhead the stock-car side of the Total Performance "demonstrations" because of H-M's own tradition of total performance. The firm's trust was not misplaced. The team's first driver, Fred Lorenzen, has won over \$100,000 already in NASCAR races this year, a record; a vast majority of the other top drivers have followed his lead and now drive Fords (GM's precipitous withdrawal from speed events spurred them on). Several of Ford's victories were not H-M entries but Lorenzen didn't make all that money playing Scrabble with the PTA.

As John Holman says, "Our organization is not perfect, but it's pretty hard to beat." Elaborating on what it takes, he adds, "I'm not a racing driver—my one try at that was at Lime Rock in the Little Le Mans and I turned the car upside down—what I am is an administrator. When you build any organization, it's pretty evident that you've got to have expert management of the different divisions. It takes time to find people qualified in these different areas, and it takes even more time to get them working together harmoniously.

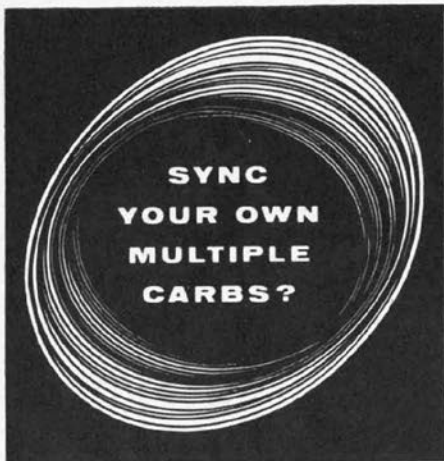
"Our achievements are based on the thinking of a lot of people. No

one man can do everything in this kind of business, and I find it difficult now to pay as much attention to detail myself as I used to. For instance, all those Galaxies that we've sent to Europe, we don't have any major problems with the cars we send over, but trying to think of all the details to supply them, that's different. Just the other day I got a \$50 phone call (prepaid, don't worry) from England because this owner wanted a new clutch throw-out bearing. I don't know why he wanted one, we've never had trouble with them, but anyway he can't seem to get one out of the London distributor so he calls me."

In this friendly, worldwide-neighborhood Ford racing parts department, John Holman is clearly boss and he is very glad indeed that he held out for 51% of the stock when he put up his cash in 1957. It is evident that he and Ralph Moody are not close personally yet it is even clearer that they need each other to keep going. And they both intend to keep going.

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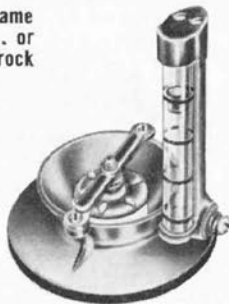
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HOLMAN & MOODY *CONTINUED*

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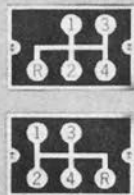
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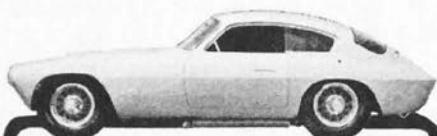
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HOLMAN & MOODY CONTINUED

branches throughout the South, has H-M overhaul all their Ford engines. They get fully twice the engine durability this way, so they are willing when the pressure of racing forces them to be patient. Perhaps Detroit is overlooking an untapped market for super-quality, even though this is similar to the Diesel situation, where immensely high first cost is overbalanced by, among other things, the economy of long life.

The Holman-Moody shops are divided basically in two; engines, and everything else from chassis preparation to the warehousing of such disparate parts as racing springs and windshield glass. Ford Motor Co. has its own warehouse in Charlotte—that's the main reason Pete De Paolo was located here in the Fifties—but H-M's warehouse (it's really just another of those frame buildings that surround most airports) is world headquarters for Ford racing parts.

Independently of their work with Ford, H-M seems to be the only source in steel for those extraordinarily wide-rim wheels that have suddenly dominated racing on both tracks and roads. Holman-Moody, far from threatening Kelsey-Hayes who supply Detroit, buys three wheels from them for every pair they sell. The secret is this: shop superintendent Lujie Lesovsky's crew chuck the standard wheel in a giant lathe and cut it neatly but asymmetrically in two. By cutting half of them off-center to one side and half to the other, they end up with material for Heliarc welding together sets of extra-wide and extra-narrow wheels. Half the extra-narrow bits are thrown away, for by varying the position of the split they claim to make two wheels out of three. For drag-racing, that's all there is to it, but for track use, a second disc or spider is welded in to discourage wheel lugs from pulling through. The quantities involved, while large enough to supply the entire racing world (or at least this nation) are insufficient to justify tooling by Kelsey-Hayes. Besides, H-M can give you any rim width with any reasonable offset and any ditto bolt pattern. Not one to rest in contentment, John Holman has gotten his merchandise into the Sears, Roebuck catalog (it's page 972 in mine). Says he, "It's a nice business. They give us ten days to ship an order from the time it hits my desk, so we can work them in around our more demanding racing

schedule." The prices? Wheels range from \$24.95 to \$34.95 and roll bar kits—"some welding required"—are \$124.95, actually being roll cages of the type that frighten the English. H-M also merchandises racing camshaft and valve train kits through Sears with prices ranging from \$74.95 to \$129.95, but the claim here that "components are proven on the track . . . not just on the drawing board," a reminder that NASCAR's Grand National rules permit any cam and valve springs, as long as the tappets are flat-topped, neither mushroom nor roller.

John Holman gets most of his kicks out of doing something for the first time and he is usually more interested in creating new areas of business than in exploiting the last nickel out of existing ones. Although he claims, "We are so busy now, any more work would break our backs," two major areas are being explored. One is marine conversions of Ford engines. This suits his long-time love of big, fast boats—his early employer, Lou Fageol, was even more active in Gold Cup competition than with racing cars—and John also notes that no one so far seems to have merchandised marine conversions with much success. He obviously hopes he'll be the one.

Holman, who aspires to be to Ford what Abarth is to Fiat, had a talented design team working on a monocoque coupe for the 1964 Indianapolis race. Plans were to build a Grand Touring version of it after the race, using the same suspension and rear engine set-up for a variety of gearboxes, possibly covering the range from six-speed to automatic. The project got as far as a search for a sponsor, and then got scrubbed in late October. Ford decided to entrust their racing engines to Mickey Thompson instead, at least to the extent that Ford can produce more engines than Lotus can use at Indy.

Perhaps (and this is highly conjectural) it's better that way. Despite the fact that we'll all have to forego the pleasure of seeing—and perhaps owning—GT cars with the Holman and Moody nameplate on them, we can at least be assured of the continuing pleasure of watching the thundering stockers that H-M specialize in. And with Holman's growing experience in, and commitment to, the European Rallying scene, perhaps we can even dream of days when the painfully-learned improvements necessary for that grueling sport will filter up-stream from Charlotte, North Carolina, and become available direct from Dearborn. If Holman and Moody have anything to do with it, we will. **cjo**

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