

MY INNER

KEN BLOCK

FORD RACING SCHOOL'S NEW ST OCTANE ACADEMY

TEACHES RALLY CRAFT, KEN BLOCK-STYLE.

WE GO THERE, GRASPING THE FLYAWAY

HANDBRAKE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF A

FRESH TYPE OF MOTORSPORTS.

BY RONALD AHRENS |

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW YEADON

KEN BLOCK STANDS SEVEN FEET TALL,

kicks a skateboard along the level road at 47 mph, and could not be tempted away from his daily breakfast of rare lamb shanks by all the vegan food in Portland, Oregon. His middle name, I have learned, is Bunyan. But he's no brute. His Ford Fiesta ST rallycross car gives off baby-blue oxides of nitrogen, and when subjected to gas chromatography and mass spectrometry, it registers scent compounds closely matching those of the wild *Gladiolus orchidiflorus*.

OK, I made up all that. The fact is, before going to ST Octane Academy—Ford Racing School's new program at Miller Motorsports Park—I knew diddly about Block or professional rallycross. I'd only become aware of him two years ago at Las Vegas Motor Speedway. As it turned out, the large crowd that Saturday night couldn't have cared less about the NASCAR trucks I was watching. They waited patiently during course construction for the twin bill's second offering, a Global Rallycross show with leaping, slithering Subarus, Hyundais, and Fords.

Two months later, at the 2012 Los Angeles Auto Show, there was Block again, now using up his 650-hp Fiesta's tires doing burnouts and donuts on a parking deck. This was Ford's idea of a press conference. A hip friend at my side mentioned the video "Gymkhana Five: Ultimate Urban Playground, San Francisco," and I realized I had encountered a phenomenon. Block is a poster boy for ten-year-olds, the way Mario Andretti was long ago.

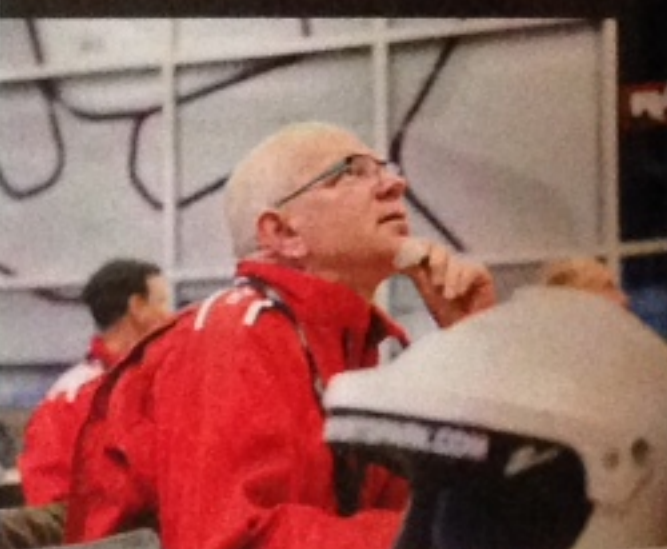
Here in Utah, I would learn to drive like Block. I used to dream of a 225-mph lap

around Indianapolis Motor Speedway, but in so many ways that kind of racing is passé—not entertaining enough. Block and his cohort of barnstorming rallycross drivers have established a new definition for racing aces, who combine the familiar and the absurd, incorporating Hollywood stunts and action sports. Just as important as a stout right foot is a hard yank on the wheel and a timely tug on the flyaway handbrake. Their racing even has a unique lingo, appropriated from Australian slang: Block straps in and hoons. "Hooning is not a crime," his decal proclaims. To find a precedent for a racer who exerted such a strong cultural sway, we may have to go back 110 years to mile-a-minute man and movie actor Barney Oldfield. From under the flat brim, Block's sullen stare misleads: he cannily controls the narrative, telling tall tales of adventure and conquest.

Corporate culture has responded avidly to the storytelling. Even stodgy old Ford—and now Volkswagen: flying Beetles!—has picked up on rallycross. More than just sponsoring cars in the X Games and Global Rallycross, Ford extends to Fiesta ST and Focus ST purchasers the opportunity of a free driving school. The ST Octane Academy is, first of all, an amazing value. Ford invited me to join two other reporters and three actual customers, who assembled the night of April 1 for a reception at Block's Hoonigan Racing Division shop in Park City, Utah. (No personal appearance by Block, though.)

The next morning at the track, we watched a video opener with Block extending benedictions before chief instructor Mark Claussner took over, smiling like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* and discoursing about the importance of maintaining contact patches. Under a steely gray sky that sometimes emitted frozen pellets, we shuttled to the skid pad, climbed into Focus ST school cars shod with Michelin Pilot Sport tires, and practiced maneuvers that suggested a few cases of moonshine were onboard. Toughest for me was the forward 180. The idea is to accelerate to about 20 mph, yank the wheel hard left, and pull the flyaway handbrake. With the rear wheels locking up, the car pivots and is ready to accelerate away in the parallel lane. My tentative actions produced poor results and growing frustration, and my inner WRC driver was appalled. I tried to ease up on myself, remembering Pip's resolution in *Great Expectations*: "But

Chief instructor Mark Claussner, who raced ARCA stock cars, talks strategy (below) and vision (lower left) Fiesta ST and Focus ST buyers attend the ST Octane Academy for free



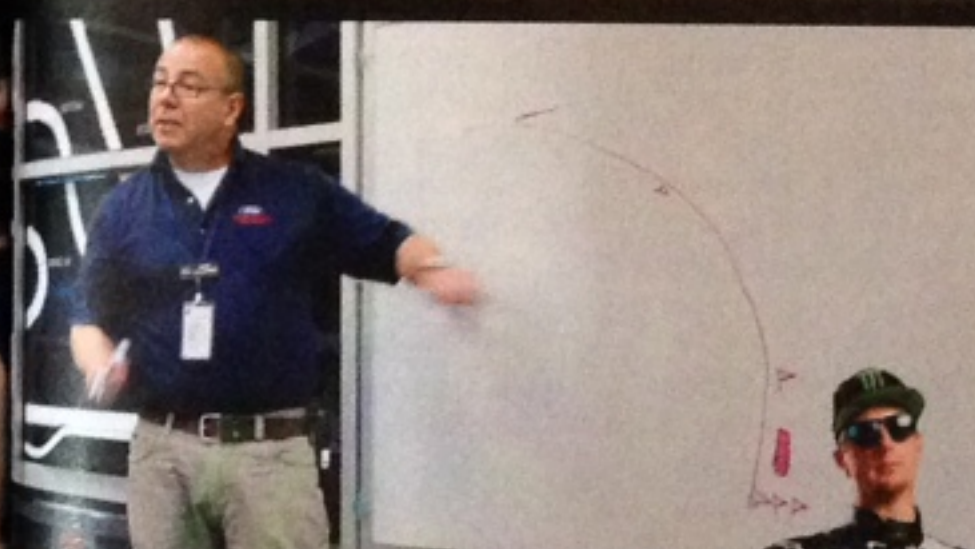
how could I, a poor dazed village lad, avoid that wonderful inconsistency into which the best and wisest of men fall every day?"

Greg Chambers displayed a better attitude and achieved better success. Chambers, 51, owns pizza restaurants in and around Logan, Utah, and is a Focus ST owner. He had never driven on a track, nor had he heard of Ken Block or rallycross. "A lot of these maneuvers are going to be new," he said before going out to the skid pad. "Whatever they tell me, I'm going to try to do my best." And in fact, Chambers excelled in the drill, bringing the rear of his car around as if he were tossing dough.

The 90-degree turn and slide into the parking box was easier. After a few reps on this drill, we switched to the Fiesta ST (on BFGoodrich Comp-2 rubber) for the re-



"THE ST IS THE GATEWAY DRUG FOR RACING."



KEN BLOCK IS THE MAN

A soft-spoken skateboarder from Long Beach, California, Block found success as a cofounder of DC Shoes, which led him into rallycross and the X Games. His skateboarder's athleticism and marketing savvy helped him visualize fast driving as stunts, not just speed, and this vision resulted in a series of videos, notably "Gymkhana Five," which has 63 million views on YouTube. The forty-six-year-old now drives a 650-hp Ford Fiesta ST in Red Bull Global Rallycross.

63M VIEWS



verse 180. Backing over the wet pavement at 20 mph, we were to crank the wheel, depress the clutch pedal, and pull the handbrake. Doing so resulted in the car impudently snapping around in an about-face before being shifted into first and slinking away. The stunt will be nice to have in the repertoire next time a passenger (I know some dreary people) wants to talk about IIHS crash ratings.

Like Chambers, Matt Anderson was not one of the tens of millions of *Gymkhana* series viewers. As far as he knew, Block does taxes. But an acquaintance recommended the Focus ST last October when Anderson was moving out of a Volvo S40. "When I tried it, I fell in love," he said. The thirty-five-year-old coordinator of West Virginia University's master's in education program soon joined the Sports Car Club of America and had even competed in an autocross before coming to Utah. "The ST is the gateway drug for racing," he said. "This car has made me really enjoy driving and left me wanting to learn more. So going to the school was a no-brainer."

Everybody had plenty of laps on Miller's 2.2-mile east track in both cars (the Fiesta ST strongly impressed), but the day's highlight was the UrbanCross course. Wacky and colorful, this string of slaloms,

ATALE OF TWO STS

Refined and well-balanced, the 2014 Ford Fiesta ST is endowed with enough power to be entertaining on the 2.2-mile east course at Miller Motorsports Park. But the rally car built by Olsbergs MSE and supplied to several factory teams (but not Ken Block's) is a supercar, with a weight-to-power ratio of 5.12 lb/hp (slightly bettering that of the Lamborghini Huracán) and bountiful torque available at the engine's midrange firing the car from 0 to 60 mph in 1.9 seconds.



2014 OLSBERGS MSE FORD FIESTA ST

POWERTRAIN ENGINE: 16-valve DOHC turbocharged and intercooled I-4; custom intake manifold, cylinder head, ECU, and exhaust
DISPLACEMENT: 2030 cc (124 cu in)
HORSEPOWER: 560 hp @ 6400 rpm
TORQUE: 620 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm
TRANSMISSION: 5- or 6-speed sequential manual
DRIVE: 4-wheel

MEASUREMENTS L x W x H: 155.9 x 72.3 x 49.0 in
WHEELBASE: 98.0 in
WEIGHT: 2866 lb (minimum with driver)
0-60 MPH: 1.9 sec

2014 FORD FIESTA ST

POWERTRAIN ENGINE: 16-valve DOHC turbocharged and intercooled I-4
DISPLACEMENT: 1596 cc (97 cu in)
POWER: 197 hp @ 6350 rpm
TORQUE: 202 lb-ft @ 4200 rpm
TRANSMISSION: 6-speed manual
DRIVE: Front-wheel

MEASUREMENTS L x W x H: 160.1 x 67.8 x 57.2 in
WHEELBASE: 98.0 in
WEIGHT: 2742 lb (sans driver and passengers)
0-60 MPH: 6.4 sec

ST OCTANE ACADEMY



chicanes, and hard turns incorporates a forward 180 and wraps up with a 90-degree right into a parking box. We set out to show what we'd learned. My lap in the Focus ST was tidy but slow. Anderson gobbled up and mutilated two cones: one is now at home on his trophy shelf. "I actually brought it back on the airplane," he said later. "It serves as a reminder. One thing I learned is: it's really about patience." Meanwhile, the novice Chambers placed third

overall behind another owner and a reporter from *Autoblog*, both experienced autocrossers. A week later, when I called the pizzeria, he couldn't help but giggle. "I don't know how I got lucky," he said, admitting that he now eyeballs the parking lot across from his house, thinking of practicing the drills. "Maybe next time it rains," he said. "It won't be so hard on my tires."

While proving infectious, ST Octane Academy didn't teach us a couple of im-

portant steps as we emulated our new hero Block. First, we need to learn to scowl. Then, we start adding Twitter followers. As the Red Bull Global Rallycross competitor Scott Speed, formerly of Formula 1 and NASCAR, said at a recent promotional appearance, it's not only about being on TV but on tablets. Winning in Brazil in April brought him five million hits, which roughly equals what Block's *Gymkhana* videos do in the hours after launch. "These days," Speed said, "a driver is measured by his social reach, not the number of people watching a race broadcast."

As the horizon draws closer for super-sports cars and traditional racing leagues, video games, half-pipe tricks, and movie chase stunts are converging, as Speed put it, "wherever there's a flat piece of pavement." I now understand the new process for creating enthusiasts and for expanding upon legends. In fact, Block and the others are disproving the maxim of novelist Thomas Wolfe: You can go hoon again. **AM**



Q&A

TIM REED

SENIOR DIRECTOR OF X GAMES
CONTENT STRATEGY

When Tim Reed spoke to us on the phone, he was making final preparations for X Games Austin, during which ESPN would take over Circuit of the Americas for four days in June. Reed, 39, was responsible for setting the stage so that participating skaters, BMXers, motocrossers, and drivers could provide the thrills. Since starting at ESPN as an intern in 1997, he has developed and grown with the X Games, masterminding the addition of rally cars along the way. Reed starts with a mentality that is part skater, part snowboarder. "And I definitely would qualify as a traditional sports fan—plus, a little bit of a TV nerd," he said. A good example of his thinking comes from one discussion he remembered: "Maybe we should try to jump cars over gaps—like Dukes of Hazzard meets Fast & Furious." He compared the overall approach to "digging in the sandbox with cars as a kid. It's kind of that simple."

HOW DID YOU GET INTERESTED IN RALLYCROSS FOR THE X GAMES?

It initiated when we looked at the Rally America property and stage rallying and the fact that [X Games motocross champion] Travis Pastrana had jumped into a rally car. So we started considering how to include Travis and rallying. Our first year [2006], we actually did a stage rally event in Gorman, California. The final stage ran into the Home Depot Center. That was a cool way to bring rally to the X Games. And then it changed into Rally Car Racing, our two-car, mirror-track version that we ran at Home Depot Center. Then it morphed into a Super Rally event that we did at the L.A. Coliseum. Then it morphed yet again into Rallycross—that's what we're doing now.

WHAT HAS RALLYING DONE FOR THE X GAMES?

It has helped us diversify the content. We've had skateboard, BMX, some motorsports. Motocross has been a big piece of it. It was great to add four wheels for a new audience. Our style—the type of racing that we wanted to portray, with jumping cars on mixed surfaces, dirt and pavement—fit the young, enthusiastic audience that X Games has attracted and fit our overall brand. It almost looks like a video game. They are not standard tracks, we always try to make them unique. It's like playing with your Hot Wheels and creatively doing fun stuff. That's the inspiration.

HOW BIG IS HAVING KEN BLOCK IN THE X GAMES?

We've done a great job of attracting the best athletes across all the different disciplines. It's great having Ken. Obviously, his videos, his own accomplishments—he's created his own audience. So his being part of the X Games is great. He brings excitement and his fans.

WHY HAS RALLYCROSS BECOME A DESTINATION SERIES IN THE SAME WAY AS NASCAR AND INDY RACING?

My sense, it's fun. That's the bottom line. We want to keep making sure there's that fun factor to all of the X Games events. So I don't think it's like your normal day out driving. Ideally, we're building an experience that [spectators and viewers] don't get every day. It's unique. That's been part of the attraction.

WHO DESIGNS THE COURSES?

We work with the Global Rallycross team. They're our sport organizer for the event. We have sport organizers for each of our events. For rallycross, they're the ones we contract with to come in and do the job.

WHAT ABOUT THE BIG RACING SERIES? WHAT DO THEY NEED?

I can just talk about what we do, which is to try to create a fun and entertaining environment for our spectators. We try to provide a mix between all the different sports and make it a

fan-friendly event. We'll have a lot of music, interactive elements for kids to play on, and really make it more of an all-day entertainment destination and festival. That's what we go after. And also, we've hung our hat onto unique stuff, things that people haven't seen all that much. We have the ability to change and evolve and move quickly year in and year out, which is something that we love doing. It's clear, in our twentieth year, that the sports and overall content mix has evolved quite a bit and will continue to do so. That's what allows us to stay fresh and relevant to the young audience out there.

WHAT AMBITIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR THE X GAMES AND RALLYCROSS?

We're always looking to continue to evolve it. We're having Robby Gordon's stadium trucks this year, it's going to be cool to get the trucks involved. I see us working to create new and cool things so kids will be stoked about what cars can do. I don't know what the formats and events will end up becoming, but we'll continually take a fresh look at how we do cool things with four wheels, two wheels, skateboard, BMX, all kinds of different stuff.

WHAT'S YOUR IMPRESSION AFTER RIDING ALONG IN A RALLYCROSS CAR?

It's amazing! It sold me. I wish I could drive the cars. My commute to and from work, that's all I get.