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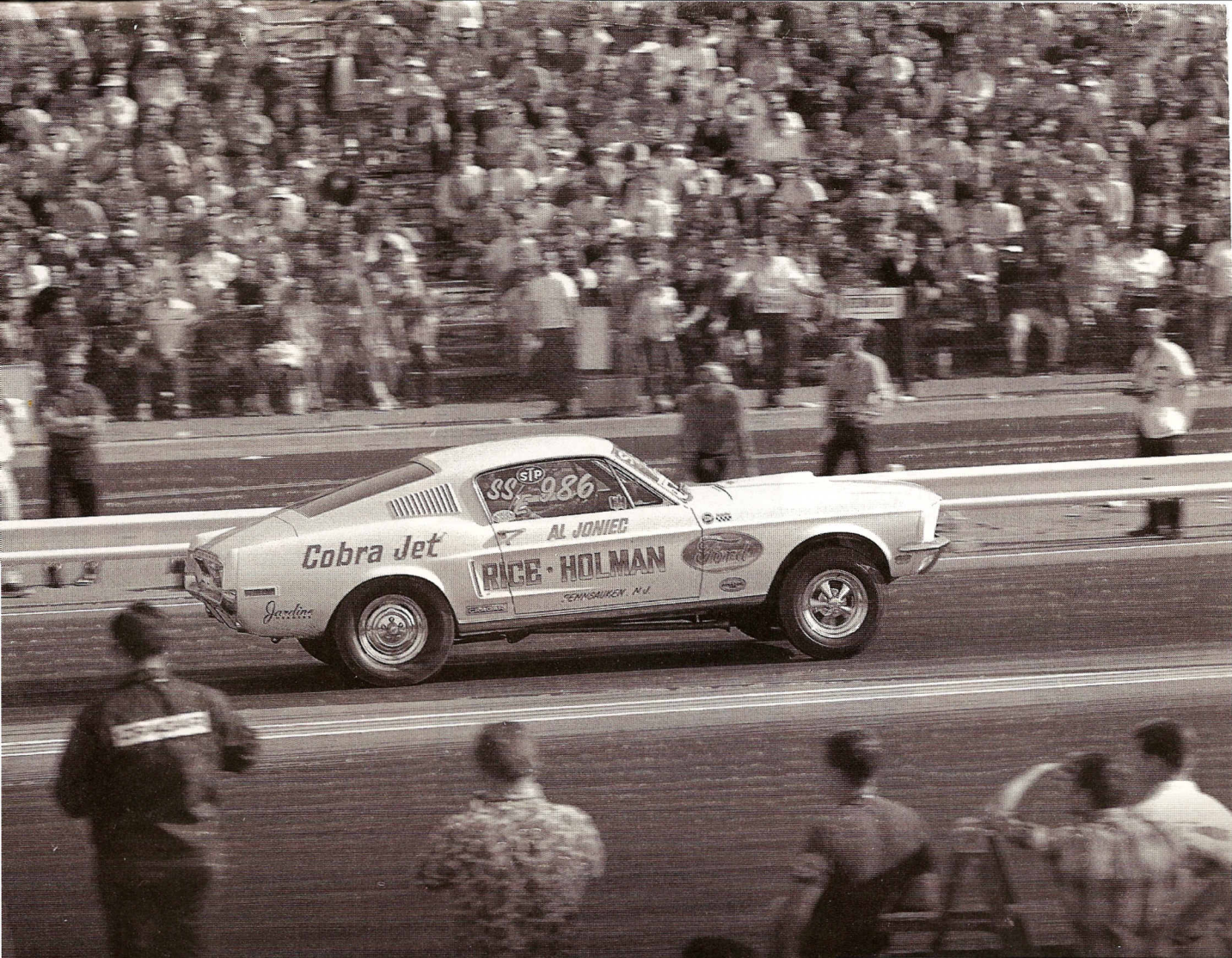
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> Al Joniec, NHRA Winternationals, Pomona, California, 1968

41 Years After
the Legendary
Winternationals
Debut of the Cobra
Jet Mustangs,
Ford Returns With
the **New FR500CJ**
and Wins Again.

By Rob Kinnan
Photography: Rob Kinnan
and the HOT ROD Archives

RETURN OF THE COBRA JETS

“I first saw a Cobra Jet Mustang race at the Supernationals at Ontario [CA] in the early '70s and realized that a Cobra Jet was a very competitive car,” John Calvert said.

What the owner of Calvert Racing discovered firsthand is what many racers and hot rodders had first discovered back in 1968 after Ford's competition debut of the 428 Cobra Jet Mustangs at the '68 NHRA Winternationals in Pomona, California, a showing that legitimized the hottest Mustang of the muscle car era. They won on Sunday and sold like hotcakes on Monday, and the memory of Al Joniec's win behind the wheel of the Rice-Holman Ford-sponsored CJ still brings a smile to the face of any diehard Ford fan.

Calvert got his own '68 Cobra Jet in 1974 (for—get ready to hate him—\$1,550!) and has had much success racing it in NHRA's Stock Eliminator category, including wins at the Winternationals in 1995 and 1996 and a Division 7 championship in 1991. Perhaps Calvert's most significant win, however, was the '09 Winters behind the wheel of the next generation Cobra Jet, Ford Racing's '08 Mustang FR500CJ, 41 years after Joniec's victory.

As you probably already know, Ford Racing built 50 '08 Cobra Jet Mustangs, turnkey race cars meant for NHRA Stock class competition. The first batch was handed over to the new owners, the most dominant being Ford collector Brent Hajek, who bought 10 of them and also purchased the prototype at Barrett-Jackson, in late December. You may remember Hajek as the force behind the Danny Thompson effort at Bonneville last summer, which appeared on our Dec. '08 cover.

“I am so proud of this group and I hope the legends from '68—Al Joniec, Gas Ronda, Hubert Platt, and Randy Ritchey—are proud of us.” —Brent Hajek

Hajek sent two of the cars to Calvert's shop in Lancaster, California, and the other two to Holzman Race Cars in Wichita, Kansas, for conversion to automatic transmissions. Along with Randy Ritchie at Performance Associates (San Dimas, California), the teams absolutely thrashed for the next month getting the cars prepped and tested for their Winternationals debut in early February and dressed them up with vintage lettering to mimic the original '68 Cobra Jets. Though the names on the doors were the same as the original guys (mostly), the drivers were all current, seasoned Stock racers and champions, including Calvert, Jimmy Ronzello, Gary Stinnett, and Jim Waldo.

The HOT ROD staff was there with the Ford brass, including Director of Ford North America Motorsports Brian Wolfe (himself a

former drag racer and hard-core grassroots racing supporter), to witness the cars make their first hits during qualifying, and all four of them ran 10.0s and 10-teens. Then the rains came and washed out Friday. One round of racing was finished on Saturday, and two of the CJs, including Calvert's (which was lettered up like Joniec's '68 car), advanced to the second round. The final rounds didn't come until the weather cleared on Wednesday, and when it was all over, Calvert had won the Wally. Better to be lucky than good, Calvert won because of four redlights by competitors, a DQ, and a bye, eerily similar to Joniec's '68 win over Dick Landy then Dave Wren in the final, both of whom redlighted.

“I couldn't be happier for Brent Hajek and John Calvert, who have taken the car that we



> John Calvert, NHRA Winternationals, Pomona, California, 2009

RETURN OF THE COBRA JETS

> There were actually six '08 Cobra Jets at the track, but only four of them were race-ready. The Hajek/Calvert compound also featured John's original '68 Cobra Jet race car (far right).

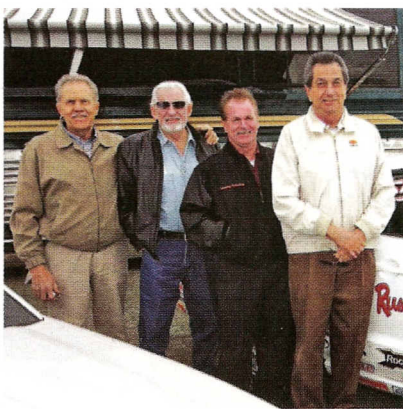


designed and created a championship race car in just six weeks," Wolfe said. "I am especially happy that John was able to drive the Al Joniec tribute car that won in 1968 to a victory in 2009. It is an unbelievable debut for the Cobra Jet. I couldn't be prouder of the team who got the car together, and a lot of credit needs to go to the group at Ford Racing who developed the Cobra Jet and once again developed a race car that, like the Mustang FR500C, won in its initial outing."

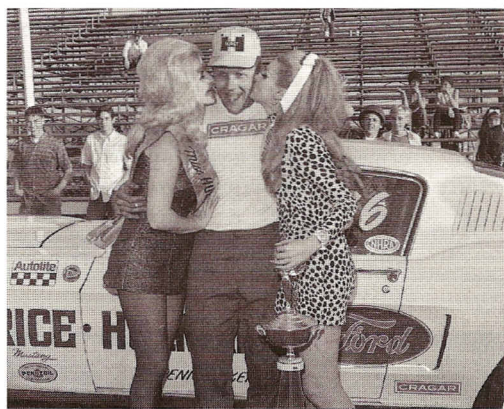
True to his form, Hajek was equally exuberant, saying, "How cool is this? It was like a storybook ending that was meant to be. It's our first time entering a national event and we won! This program was always about paying tribute and respect to the drivers from '68 who started the legend of the Cobra Jet. This was about upholding their honor, and everyone involved with this project deserves a great deal of credit. The people at Ford Racing did an awesome job building these cars and my guys deserve credit for getting the CJs race-ready in an unbelievably short amount of time. And credit also goes to the drivers, especially John Calvert, who brought this all the way home."

For his part, Calvert was excited but exhausted. "We got the cars on December 28 and had no days off," he said. "We were either testing, transporting, or working on them and we were worn out by the time we got to Pomona. It was quite an experience, and I'm really excited at the result."

What happens to the cars now is uncertain. Some will go into hibernation in Hajek's museum in Oklahoma while some will continue to be raced, and we're sure after their auspicious debut that many more Cobra Jets will be lining the staging lanes of NHRA events this year.



> The original Cobra Jet drivers were brought in to see the new cars, painted in the original livery and with their names on the doors. From left to right are Al Joniec, Hubert Platt, Randy Ritchie (standing in for his late father, Les), and Gas Ronda.

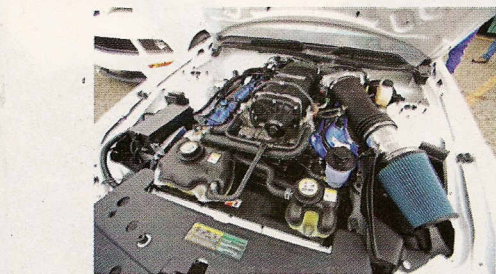


> Here is Joniec enjoying the thrill of victory in 1968. That's Linda Vaughn on the left and Miss Winternationals on the right.





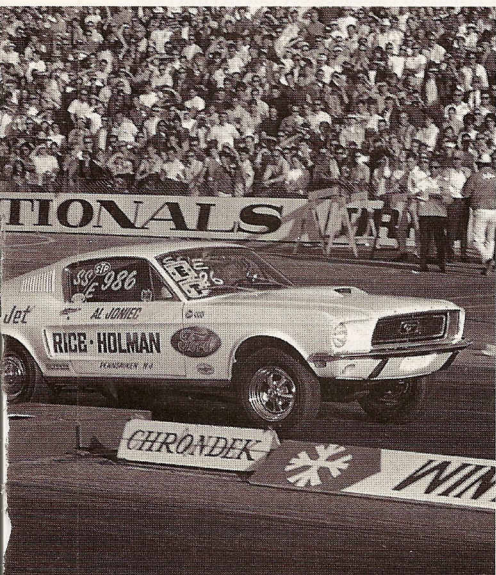
> Gary Stinnett made the first official pass in competition with one of the new Cobra Jets. He ran a 10.183 at 101.84 mph. Think he lifted?



> This photo is actually from the '68 NHRA World Finals in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but it shows another Cobra Jet, Ed Skelton's, taking on the Sox & Martin Plymouth.

> The CJ engines are 5.4L DOHC models with a big Ford Racing TVS supercharger. NHRA rates them at 400 hp, which has to be very conservative.

> Below: The final round of the '68 Winters featured Joniec's Cobra Jet (*far lane*) taking on Dave Wren's 63 Plymouth SS/DA car. Wren had the quicker car but redlighted.



THE HOT ROD BALLOT

The Cobra Jet Mustang's existence can be at least partly attributed to HOT ROD magazine. In the Nov. '67 issue, Eric Dahlquist wrote a story about how Bob Tasca of Tasca Ford in Providence, Rhode Island, built a '68 428 Mustang package using all factory parts (he called it the KR-8) then presented it to Henry Ford II and the top brass at Ford as the performance Mustang they should be selling. Henry was interested, but the typical OE bureaucracy [funny how things don't change] made it seem like the car would never happen. The Ford people were so drunk with back-to-back victories at Le Mans that they refused to believe the 390 Mustang was the pooh that Tasca told them it was.

To help show them the error of their marketing scheme, Dahlquist made the lead page of his story a ballot, with instructions to fill it out and send it directly to Henry Ford II's office. Two thousand HOT ROD readers did, convincing Ford execs that maybe it was a good idea to build a real performance Mustang. In an amazingly quick [especially by today's standards] time frame, HOT ROD tested the first prototype 428 CJ Mustang five months later, in the Mar. '68 issue. Dahlquist did that story, too, and remarked, "The C.J. will be the utter delight of every Ford lover and the bane of all the rest because, quite frankly, it is probably the fastest regular production sedan ever built." **HRM**

