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Shop Stop: Classics Plus

Low-key business turns out high-quality rods and restorations

■ By Brian Earnest

Mike Freund didn't need any career counseling to help him figure out what job was right for him. He knew from a young age that he wasn't going to play quarterback in the NFL or pitch for the Yankees. But he knew he could do something just as fun — fix and build cars. And he's been doing it his whole adult life as the owner and head hot rod honcho at Classics Plus in North Fond du Lac, Wis.

"I would have to say it started I was 10 years old," chuckled Freund. "My dad had been into cars since day one. He was always a car guy, and when I was

10 years old, I remember they took me to the Street Rod Nationals in St. Paul, Minn., and I just kind of was hooked on cars. I saw cars I really liked and wondered how they worked and what they were about, and then my dad had purchased a '40 Chevy coupe and we brought it in the garage and we tore it apart. Then halfway through that project, a buddy brought in a '55 Chevy that was for sale and my dad wound up buying the '55.

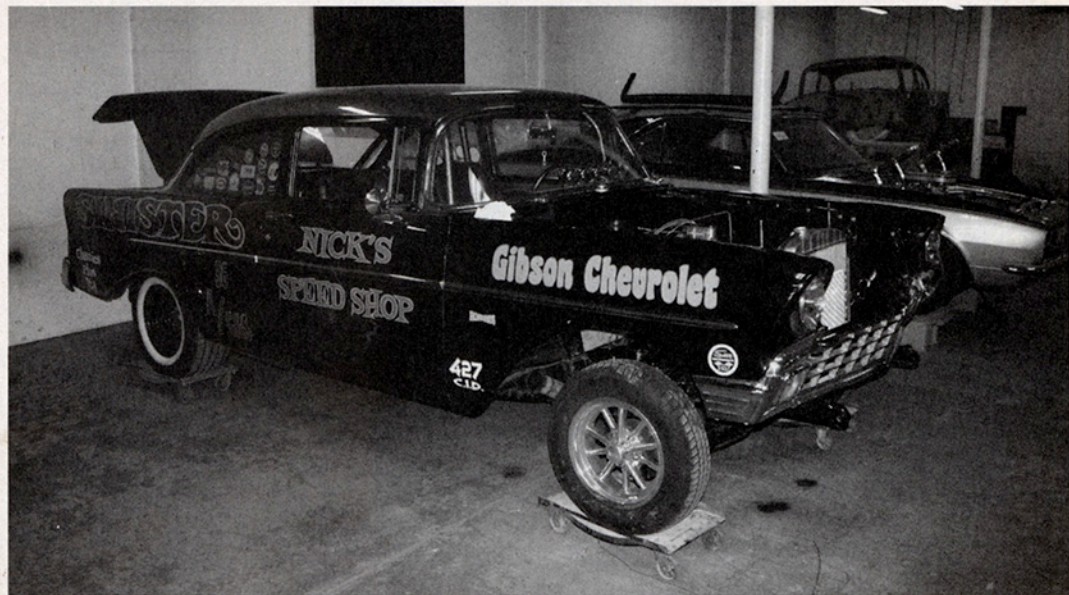
"From age 10 until we got that '55 done when I was probably 13 years old, I knew this was my deal. I love old

cars. I love building cars for people. I was never any good at any sports. I tried baseball, I tried basketball, I tried football, and it was just not my deal. I'm a gear head. I've got oil in my blood and I just really, really get a kick out of building cars for people. It's a lot of blood sweat and tears, and I just love it."

Freund and his father Dick started the business back in 1988, and today Mike and his son Nick run their restoration and car-building business in the same unassuming shop on the outskirts of town. The building borders a railroad yard where train signals ding away all



Mike (left) and Nick Freund are the talented father-son team at Classics Plus, a restoration and hot rod shop in North Fond du Lac, Wis.



Nick Freund's lettered and race-ready 1956 Chevy sedan is one of countless Tri-Five Chevys that have been in the Classics Plus shop in the past 20 years.



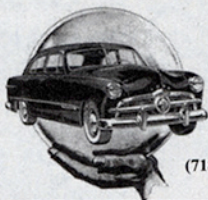
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A 1969 El Camino SS has been given a bright new orange paint job as part of a total restoration. It's almost ready to roll out the door.

day, but the Friends are oblivious to it. They are in the business of restoring and re-constructing cars — usually from the ground up — and sinking their heart and soul into every machine that comes in.

The shop specializes in “Tri-Five” Chevys. Mike has done more of them than he can count, including that first ’55 that started the family business. Dick, who is now “mostly retired,” according to Mike, still has that first Chevy, and there were many more that followed. “I really love the Tri-Fives. I just love the Tri-Fives, and I’ve done a lot of them,” Mike said. “I really think, in all honesty, and I don’t mean to sound like I have a big head or nothin,” but I think you could take a two-door ’55 Chevy, a sedan... I think you could take that car all apart, disassemble everything, and I personally think I could take that car and put that car back together. I’ve gotten to know those parts so good I know



The owners' 1955 (right) and 1956 Chevy sedans parked out front are “daily drivers” at Classics Plus.

them by feel, I'm not kidding.

"I will do anything, and years ago I did a Muntz Jet. There's not that many people that when you mention one even know what you're talking about. I did one a few years ago for a gentleman out in New York, and I am always try to learn. Every day you need to learn something, and I don't mind taking on projects where I can learn. I would say 98 percent of the cars I've done are street rods or modified, but I've done factory-spec stockers already and original cars. When you are taking ripples and stuff out of a body, whether it's factory spec or custom, that stuff kind of stays the same."

Though there is a decided "old school" feel to the shop, the types of builds run the gamut at Classics Plus, from grass-roots gassers, to ultra-modern pro-touring muscle cars and everything in between. Recently, the Freunds were bouncing between a Chevy II build, finishing a slick El Camino and beginning a factory-spec Model A restoration. Nearly all of the projects are of the start-from-scratch variety. Mike didn't plan it that way, but beginning from square one on any car is the way he prefers it.

"Most customers that come in, I'd say

99 percent of them, it's full-blown restorations," he said. "Whether it's going original spec or modified, it's a total disassembly. It's start from the beginning."

There are usually a few muscle cars on hand, often getting modern updates. Although the 1955-'57 Chevys have become the shop's calling card, it was actually a muscle machine that got the business off the ground.

"I had a '67 Chevelle that was my own car that I just played around with and did on my own after work, and people saw it and it was winning awards," Freund said. "I never cared about awards. It means a lot more to me to hear someone walk up and say, 'Hey, I like your car,' or 'Thanks for letting me see your car,'

than it is to win any awards. But I had the Chevelle and it was winning awards and I drove it constantly. It was my daily driver, even in the rain and everything. It was my car and I was going to have fun with it. Well, a gentleman from Milwaukee had seen that car and asked me if I'd be interested in doing his car. Well, at that time I didn't have a place to work on a car, so I looked around and wound up renting a place to do business and built him his car.... It was myself and my dad that got the business going."

These days it's just Mike and son Nick in the shop most of the time. The two share similar tastes and cars and the same passion for turning out high-quality work. So far, they haven't needed or

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ple who have come from out of state, I really think that's cool and you wonder how it happens," he said. "Hopefully, you get that reputation for quality, and it just spreads through word of mouth... I advertise a little bit for stainless and steering wheel restoration stuff, and every once in a while I'll have a car [at a show], and I'm a people person and I always wind up talking to people whether they are a 90-year-old man or 90-year-old lady or a 4-year-old kid. I always talk to everybody and give them my full attention."

Ground-up projects can last from a few weeks to several months, and Classics Plus has customers waiting to get their cars done. Freund is careful not to promise a specific delivery date and make too many other guarantees when a car comes in, however. The only thing he knows for sure is that his standards are very high and he will turn out the best product he can.

"If customers can have the tolerance to wait for their car, I will give them a quality car to the absolute best of my ability. I always say I want that car to outlast that customer."

Freund's philosophy with his business and his hobby are clearly in lock-step with his outlook on life. He is obviously a perfectionist when it comes to work, but he balances it with a heavy dose of perspective.

"I always strive for the best, but money to me is a tool," he says. "You pay your bills, you live your life. You're put on earth to be happy, not miserable. I enjoy doing what I do. I love doing the cars. If I can pay my bills doing the cars,

that's more important to me that getting them in, get 'em out and get that almighty dollar that gets you nowhere in life.

"I'd rather live humble and have millions of friends than live rich and have nobody to share it with." ■

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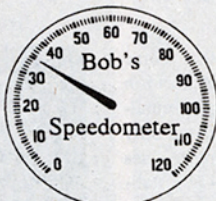
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wanted any outside help, and that's not likely to change.

"It's always been my dad, myself, and my son," Mike said. "We've got a great relationship, all three of us, and everything just works. Lately [Dick is] retired so he comes out here once in a while to help out if we're really busy. But I don't want to go big. The bigger you are the

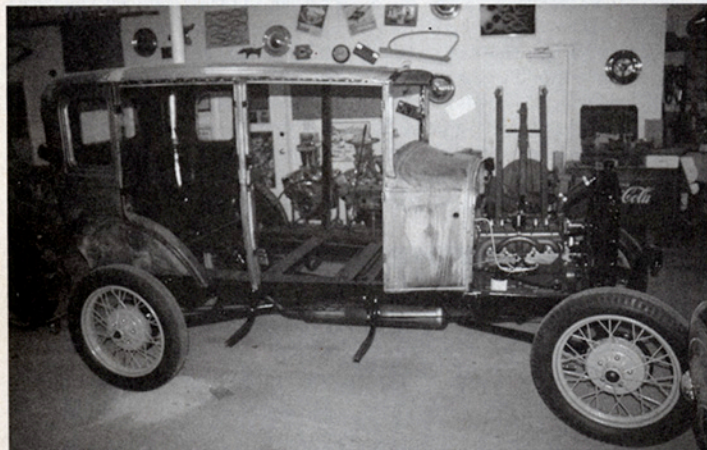
more headaches you have. I like keeping it small and I keep control of the quality that's going out. There is a lot of stuff you can hide on a car and there are a lot of dishonest people out there, and that's not my style, so I keep it small."

The idea of a big fancy shop with more room and visibility just doesn't seem to fit Freund's personality. A big-

ger facility would simply mean more distractions, he figures, and give him less time to actually build cars. "To me the image, that's not me. It's the final product that's the most important," says. "There are a lot of big names that build cars, and they are still this way, where you say, 'I did not expect something like this to come out of a shop like this.' But it's the quality that's important. It's not how I look, but it's what I do that's important to me.

"Sure, I'd like to have a real nice building some day, but if it doesn't [happen] it's not going to matter, because my work isn't going to change. It doesn't matter if I'm in a little shack or a million-dollar building somewhere, the only difference is the headaches in paying the overhead. And that overhead you just pass on to the customer, and that's just not going to be my way of doing it."

Despite being located in the most inconspicuous of places, and doing very little advertising, Freund has seen his customer base spread far beyond his expectations. He gets calls and visitors from all points on the map — often to his own amazement. Somehow, people keep finding him. "The number of peo-



Proving that they are prepared to tackle almost anything on four wheels, the Freund's are preparing to do a complete restoration on this Model A Ford.



Typical of many cars that come in, this Chevy II is getting fitted with modern running gear and a stealthy black paint job.