

Heads Up With James Beattie Jr.

 Drag Racing Scene

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At 37-years old, James Charles Beattie Jr. (aka J.C.) is still pretty young. Despite that though, he's got over 25-years of experience in the transmission business.

Growing up under the tutelage of his parents Jim Sr. and Lynn (founders of ATI Performance Products, Inc), it wasn't unlikely that after being picked up from school, J.C. and his sister Candace were brought right to the shop.

"At 2:30 or so after school, we'd be at the shop until it was time to go home," he says. "On days off, we'd be here all day, so I really grew up around transmissions and the like. I can remember taking apart valve bodies and such when I was eight or nine."

In the mid-'70s before J.C. was born, his father owned two Funny Cars for a limited time before tiring of it. When J.C. turned 12, they decided to try their hand at go kart racing. Once 18, he moved further into the circle track side of things competing in a Spec Chassis Truck series, and then the ASA stock car series from 2000 to 2004.

He has since come back to the "straight line" of racing with his 2009 Dodge Challenger Drag Pak and 2012 COPO Camaro.

Earlier this year, Jim Beattie Sr. passed away leaving the business completely in J.C.'s lap. His mother Lynn is still there on a regular basis tending to the business side of things, while J.C. handles the nuts and bolts end. We sat down with him recently to discuss his role in the business, how it came about and how things might have changed since his father's passing.

Growing up in basically a drag racing background, why did you ever start circle track racing?



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We had been going to drag races since I was 6 months old, but by the time I was 12, Dad was tired of it and wanted to do something different. We had this kart that, unbeknownst to us, was indeed a racing kart and we went to one local race. The very next time, we went straight to a World Karting Association (WKA) National Event. There were people there from all over the country and we met Mr. Joe and Joey Lunati there. We hung out with them and learned the ins and outs of that style of racing. Now when I came to the shop, it was about working on the karts. We had built a dyno and by the time we had gotten rid of it, we had made over 25,000 pulls on it. Once the shop closed at night or on the weekends, either Dad or I would fire that dyno up and we'd flog parts. We ended up winning something like 35 WKA National Events and four championships on that side of the fence.

You then got into the big cars on the circle track side, why not drag racing at that point?

I don't know. Dad never really pushed me one way or the other and with our experience in the karts, we got into the Parts Pro truck that used a Turbo 350 automatic transmission, which made some sense for us. Then came the ASA circuit and we had contemplated an automatic trans but it was eventually outlawed. It became a tough road for us eventually, between the money we were spending and Dad and I at times ready to kill each other, so we gave up on it. The teams we were competing against had three or four full-time employees, they'd be practicing pit stops, and it just got to be way above us. We were always finishing in the top 20, occasionally a top ten car, but we were never going to be a top five car.



What year did you give up the circle track racing?

In '04 we just walked away from it, but I had wanted to expand on our street/strip components. We purchased a '69 Camaro which turned into a little bit of a restoration project. I worked on that, and it gave me a lot of insight into what people get into on a project like that. Finally, we got it running and started working on our street rod packages. We had a basically stock 350 engine in it and eventually stepped that up to a blower motor. We started drag racing, but we'd go to the track to test and just try to break parts to improve what we had. It was good for me working on the car and developing parts.

Then you got sort of serious with the addition of the Drag Pak Challenger you have now.

We ordered that car in October of '08, but never got it until January of '10. It took us a little bit by surprise as to just how much work needed to get it race ready, but we debuted it later that year. It was then that we started building a converter for it and finding the right combination that worked. We still had the '69 Camaro, but when the COPO Camaros came along, we sold the '69 to make room and that's where we're at today. I also purchased Chris Rini's Pro Mod car that we're going to run Top Sportsman with. It's really all in an effort to test parts and provide our customers with the best products possible.



race cars.

Now that your Dad has passed, has everything been turned over to you?

Not really. Technically I'm the COO here, but my Mom and I run it together. She's the front office person and handles the business basics. She understands the legalities of the business and does a great job keeping us up to date with any laws and our expenses. There is so much to that I can't even believe. Sometimes the amount of time and energy it takes to run a business far exceeds the fun of actually being in business. But she handles it all. As for me, I spend a lot of my time working on both new and present development projects. My focus is in the machine shop, what parts we need to improve on, what new parts we need to bring to market, and then the equipment that is needed to make it all, or test it – such as the

Your father was always an innovator. When did he start walking away a little and hand the reins to you?

He just started curtailing his time here about five years ago. It meant that instead of being here from six in the morning to at least six at night, it changed to six to four or so. But since he's gone, I never realized the amount of stuff that he did that I wasn't aware of. Things like talking to long-time customers and dealing with the machinery we make is stuff that is now falling on my desk. The converter manufacturing machinery that we sell is something that was his project, but we've got over 150 of those units around the world and now I'm taking care of that. He never really walked away though, in fact he developed our new Turbo 400 valve body in the last year or so. Start to finish, that was all his. We used the COPO as the test bed and I think in one day we swapped in and out 12 different valve body designs to see which one would be the quickest to set on the trans brake. But they had a house in Florida for the past seven years and he'd spend more time there every year. Dad has two brothers that live near Tampa, so he had a place near them. They had set the business up in trust for me so little by little, he was transitioning out.

What really has changed since his passing?

Not really a whole lot. We're fortunate to have some long-term employees here, so not much has really changed. You've got to have a group of people around that don't necessarily have to be passionate about racing, but they do have to have the passion to produce really good parts and that's what we have. We've got just under 60 employees here in several buildings and it can be inundating some days. Most days when I come to work, I have no idea where I will be needed that day. I could be working on new products, or something as simple as a T-shirt design. That's what is exciting to me. I definitely thrive on pressure and multi-tasking. Even when I'm home, I'm never really sitting around. The couch in our house is the least used piece of furniture.

You're still young but does the thought of just where your business is going crop into your mind?

I really enjoy working. If I'm not racing on the weekend, then by Sunday afternoon I'm looking forward to going back to work. As they say, "If you love your job, you will never work a day in your life". As frustrating as it can be some days, I do have a passion for what I am doing. I've got a little boy, James III, who will be three and he wakes up asking "Daddy, can we watch drag racing?" My daughter Ava will be four and she likes going to the races, but she's more of a girl and likes those kinds of things. But I'm looking forward to hopefully many years ahead in this business.

ATI is pretty strong in the damper business. How did that come about?

There's lots of stories about that, but Dad knew someone in circle track racing who told him

the stock dampers being used at the time were flying apart. Dad went out to his street car, whatever he was driving at the time, and noticed the damper was wobbling, which a stock one still does today. It was then that he started to investigate what to do and what was needed. He eventually just started with some parts and pieces which was maybe crudely based on what we still have today. But it worked, and Dad started to refine it to what we have now. That was late '80s and early '90s and damper sales have steadily increased to where we're selling roughly 15,000 pieces a year.

At some point your father purchased test equipment for dampers and placed that testing in your hands. What is it that you test for?



Around '95, we hired a company to do some Torsional Vibration Damper testing for us, but we realized we needed to have our own equipment. I was 16 and we purchased test equipment from a company called Scientific Atlanta. Basically we have a trigger wheel which connects to the damper, much like a driveshaft sensor, but it has 120 points. It's hooked to a high kilohertz Hall Effect sensor that can read up to 20,000 triggers per second. Going through an analysis computer, it registers an average rpm through each of the trigger points, plotting it all out on a graph.

Each firing pulse of the engine creates a noise and eventually a frequency. It takes into account each of the pushing and pulling of the pistons and rods as they go up and down and through the ignition cycles. The goals change according to what you're tuning for; let's say a 400-hp street engine, or a 1,500-hp race piece. We have the ability to fine tune the damper to react differently for the combination used. We do that through the use of the different durometer rubbers we use in our dampers. However, 99-percent of the applications that are on our shelf will work perfectly for the customer. The dampers that get tuned are for special applications, OEM's, NASCAR, road race engines, and very high RPM combinations.

Thanks for your time and best of luck in business and your racing ventures.

