

We're unfair targets, drivers claim

When approximately 40,000 custom car enthusiasts gathered at the Markham Fairgrounds for last weekend's Darknights automotive festival, they had plenty of company.

About 75 York Regional Police officers stopped 1,800 motorists during the two-day event.

Officers wrote 756 tickets, including 43 offences under the Environmental Protection Act, 252 equipment-related charges, such as illegal modifications and 283 speeding infractions.

Bruce Lim, 19, found out the hard way as he drove his heavily modified silver Ford Escort through Markham over the weekend.

He was hit with six tickets, totalling \$2,100, for modifications, not speeding.

TONKA CARS

Owners of modified or "Tonka" cars in the region are crying foul—even going so far as to suggest police are profiling drivers.

York Regional Police Staff Sgt. Doug Hall, who heads the e-RASE (Eliminate Racing Activities on Streets Everywhere) program, has little sympathy for those who choose to soup up their cars.

"To some extent there's profiling going on. It's like walking down the street nude, you're going to get attention," he said.

"If you're going to say, 'Look at me!' You can't complain. You want attention, you got attention," he said.

He noted an Acura stopped on McCowan Road last weekend was clocked at double the 70 km/h limit.

Firas Esso, a 19-year-old construction worker from Vaughan, paid \$2,500 for his 1990 Acura Integra.

Piece by piece, he added a fibre-glass skirt kit, rims and tires and custom lime green paint job.

And for that \$7,000 in modifications, his car isn't any faster.

"We don't speed, it's all for show," Mr. Esso said at a parking lot in a popular doughnut shop on Hwy. 7 in Woodbridge. It's one of the popular hangouts, along with the Colossus movie theatre and big box power centre parking lots.

Regardless, Mr. Esso received three tickets, amounting to several hundred dollars, earlier this month for non-speed-related offenses.

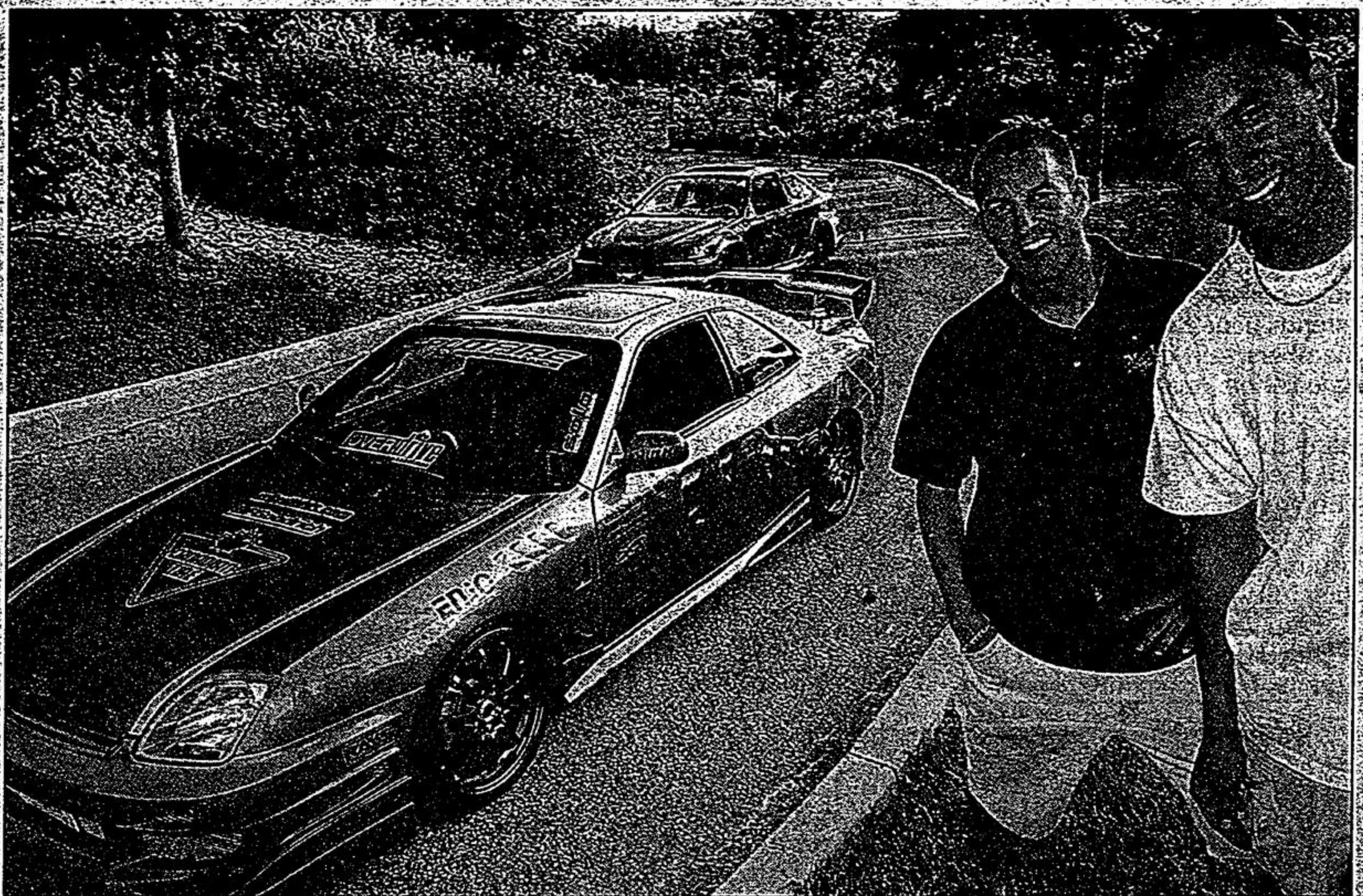
His battery was loose, his exhaust too loud and his body kit too low to the ground.

Police can ticket car enthusiasts for breaching the Highway Traffic Act, the Environmental Protection Act or guidelines set under the Ontario Ministry of Transportation.

But areas such as tinted windows, ground clearance and noise are often left to the discretion of officers.

"I think there's an education process that has to happen for enthusiasts. But police need knowledge too on parts and specs," said David Brewda. He's a 28-year-old Aurora man whose 1998 Honda Prelude sports an in-dash video screen, custom paint job, 18-inch wheels and after-market, finely tuned, 2.2-litre, four-cylinder engine, capable of producing a mind-boggling 350 horsepower.

"It's frustrating when police



STAFF PHOTO/JOERD WITTEVEEN

Dave Brewda (left) and Benson Pedoniouott spend a lot of time and cash to hype up, or modify, their highly personalized sports or Tonka cars. These enthusiasts draw the eye of passersby—and York Regional Police officers.

aren't familiar (with the law) when they're enforcing the Highway Traffic Act. You don't have the right to victimize people when you don't know what you're talking about," Mr. Brewda said.

Staff Sgt. Hall admitted ticketing modified car owners can be subjective.

"A lot is really a judgment by the police. But ultimately, it will be determined by a justice of the peace," he said.

Anyone hoping to clarify what does and does not constitute a street legal vehicle, need only refer to the legislation on the Internet, Staff Sgt. Hall said.

Mr. Brewda's friend, Benson Pedoniouott of Newmarket, has a 1.6-litre Honda Civic that can reach nearly 300 km/h with 300 horsepower under the hood.

But both men insist their need for speed rarely goes beyond the race track.

As many modified car owners explain, this trend is defined more by the individuality of the cars than the horsepower under the hood.

"I don't want to look like everybody else," Mr. Brewda said. "I want to drive down the street and have people say, 'Hey, there goes Dave's Prelude.'"

Modifying a car is often a reflection of the driver, he said.

"It's an expression of self. It's also a crossover of art." Such self-expres-

sion does not come cheaply, however.

Mr. Brewda and Mr. Pedoniouott estimate the combined value of their vehicles at approximately \$250,000.

However, both are in the rare position of sustaining their automotive habit through corporate sponsorship.

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Canadian Tire and Meguiar's, specializing in car-care products, have their logos emblazoned on the bright vehicles, which contain more fibreglass and lightweight composite materials than metal.

The idea behind sponsorship is the vehicles serve as mobile billboards for anyone interested in customizing their car.

Mr. Brewda and Mr. Pedoniouott's cars boast some of the best after-market products and rarely pay for the goodies.

For instance, Mr. Brewda has a rare set of titanium rims valued at \$10,000 and an after-market engine imported from Japan.

It's not simply a free ride, though.

The two attend about 25 shows each year to promote their sponsors, answer questions, offer advice, pose for pictures and even sign the odd autograph.

"The No. 1 question people ask us is how they can get sponsored," Mr. Pedoniouott said.

It's no wonder, as both men agreed the sky is the limit in terms of what one can do to a vehicle.

If attendance at auto shows and the success of movies such as 2 Fast 2 Furious are any indication, automotive modification or "mods" continue their ascent into mainstream culture.

The disproportionately large rear spoilers, body lowering kits and after-market tail lights, once thought to only be available at high performance shops in York's industrial areas, can now be found at Canadian Tire.

SPECIALTY SHOPS

But municipalities in south end of the region still boast many performance specialty shops.

Mr. Lim pours nearly all of the proceeds from his jobs as a construction worker and bartender into his automotive creation, which now has approximately \$37,000 in modifications.

"(Modifying cars) became an interest, then it became a hobby. It has turned into an obsession."

Police look for mufflers, heavy tinting on altered cars

OPP Sgt. Cam Woolley said officers have the authority under the Highway Traffic Act to stop and inspect vehicles suspected of unsafe modifications.

Here are some guidelines for anyone thinking of modifying his vehicle or buying a car that has been altered.

Tinted or covered tail lights are illegal.

Windows cannot be tinted to the point where vision inside and outside the vehicle is impaired.

Headlights must be white or amber. Blue lamps are not permitted unless they part of the car's original equipment, as with some European cars.

Tail lights must be red only. Popular after-market tail lights with clear housings are permitted so long as the bulbs are red.

Vehicles lowered to the point where any part of the undercarriage drags on the road are deemed unsafe. Owners can be ticketed or have their vehicle impounded.

It's illegal for vehicle's wheels to rub against the frame.

Tires deemed to be too small for a vehicle are not permitted.

Every vehicle must be equipped with a muffler, which may not make excessive or unusual noise.

After-market seats and seat belts must be properly installed in the vehicle and display a mark of approval from the SAE (Society of Automotive Engineers) and:

TV monitors are forbidden in the front seat of a vehicle.

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