

# Venomous Snake

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"Cobra" and "racing" are an easy match in the realm of free association. Look through any one of a number of history books, and you can see images of a taut-jawed Ken Miles attacking the esses at Riverside, Bob Bondurant howling down the pre-neutered Mulsanne Straight at Le Mans, or Bob Holbert sweeping through the high banks in his Daytona coupe. Another name, Gus Zuidema, is virtually never mentioned as an icon in the Shelby cathedral.

Yet Zuidema, a service supervisor at a New England Ford dealership, rightly deserves a place of honor in Cobra racing history. Back in 1966, he shattered records in the NHRA's A/ Sports Production class with a Shelby Cobra specifically prepped for drag racing and given the apropos title of "Dragonsnake." Four Dragonsnakes were built by Shelby with the 260-cu.in. V-8 or the high-performance 289-cu.in. small-block, but Zuidema's was the sole example ever built with the 427-cu.in. side-oiler V-8.

This thoroughly unique 427 Cobra was originally something of an afterthought at Shelby-American in Los Angeles, where the Cobra assembly facility was located. By 1966, Carroll Shelby and his cars were firmly on the map of global motorsports. In 1964, Cobras had swept international sports car racing at Daytona, Sebring, and had scored the GT-class victory at Le Mans. In 1965, Shelby would capture the World GT Manufacturer's Championship. Yet there was a quiet, but persistent, tugging at the sleeves for drag-specific Cobras that Shelby-American finally addressed in 1966.

This specific Dragonsnake was special ordered by **Harr Ford** in Worcester, Massachusetts, where Zuidema worked as performance service manager during the great Sixties high-performance glory years. Though only nominally different, from a structural standpoint, from street or road-racing Cobras, the Dragonsnakes required close to 30 specific modifications in order for them to undertake quarter-mile duty. Among them were a complete new rear-axle assembly with 4.86 gears and a Traction-Lok differential, a factory installed scattershield

enclosing the flywheel and clutch, drag-specification Koni shock absorbers and a quick-shifting linkage beneath the otherwise stock, forward-angled shift lever.



The engine was a 427 side-oiler with a 12.5:1 compression ratio, specially outfitted with a high-rise aluminum intake manifold, an 850 cfm Holley four-barrel carburetor, RotoFaze magneto ignition and straight, short headers. Estimated output was an NHRA class eliminator-conservative 505hp. Zuidema, a master machinist, fabricated an aluminum air box that used weatherstripping to seal the induction system to the bottom of the Dragonsnake's functional hood scoop for a vastly improved ram-air effect. Naturally, given its potential, the car was fitted with a roll bar, but otherwise, it was largely standard-issue 427 Cobra, with all-aluminum bodywork. The rear wheel openings were slightly radiused to clear its original, 11-inch M&H drag slicks, and a Berry fiberglass roof was fitted. Most of the dashboard fittings and instruments are Shelby-issue. Bearing Shelby-American chassis number CSX 3198, the 427 Dragonsnake's as-delivered price was just under \$14,000.

It's a fair bet that not even Zuidema was prepared for the sheer brutality of this car. The car was delivered to **Harr Ford** in April 1966, and the following month, on the 427 Dragonsnake's maiden outing, Zuidema annihilated the existing NHRA A/SP national records at Island Dragway in Great Meadows, New Jersey, thundering to an 11.48/127-mph timing slip on what, literally, was one of the Cobra's initial passes. In June, he knocked down his own record at Sanford, Maine, stopping the clocks at 11.15 and 127 mph. In July, he again lowered his own record, setting the e.t. half of the record with a 10.87 at

Madison, New Jersey, and getting the top-speed portion done at nearly 128 mph at York U.S. 30 Dragway in central Pennsylvania.

With "National Record Holder" added to its C-pillar and Harr's own Candy Apple Red on the aluminum bodywork, Harr placed the 427 Dragonsnake on the market at the end of the 1966 racing season. By that time, Zuidema had won A/SP at every race he entered including the Winternationals and U.S. Nationals, and had a 50 percent win rate in the Street Eliminator bracket when he wasn't racing in his usual NHRA class. Clearly, Zuidema, who died in early 2004 and is remembered today as one of New England's great four-speed drag racers, had learned to tame the unruly short-wheelbase, 2,200-pound sports car.



From 1967 on, the 427 bounced among several owners in Massachusetts and Connecticut, where it was raced on occasion. From there, it landed in Florida in the early Eighties, in the hands of another succession of owners, and by 1987, it was in the Phoenix, Arizona, area. In more recent years, Matt Milbrandt of Cincinnati, Ohio, has had custody of the Dragonsnake's care and maintenance. The car had only 500 miles on its odometer when **Harr Ford** sold it in 1966, and it's still driven only minimally today. In large part, that's due to the fact that the Cobra is still shod with Goodyear Blue Streak drag slicks, which are difficult to locate today.

That notwithstanding, as Milbrandt explained to us, getting a valid driving impression of the Dragonsnake only needs an eyeblink's worth of eternity. "It's exactly what you'd expect," he said. "It's a beast."