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Class of 2002

With His Kids On Their Way to College, Ken Blasko Raises a BMW 2002 Race Car

By Tom Heath
Photography as credited

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To say that parenthood can be challenging is an understatement of epic proportions. Those of us who are living the experience know that it isn't easy or cheap, and it seems we're always teetering between success and failure.

Despite these difficulties, it can be even harder to watch our kids become adults. Some parents struggle with loneliness and depression as their children move out of the house and into the world—mental health experts commonly refer to this condition as “empty nest syndrome.”

These experts recommend a variety of coping mechanisms to parents facing this challenge, but Ken Blasko's solution might be our favorite: He invested what could have been lonely hours of free time into a new relationship. Like parenthood, this relationship would require commitment, patience and dedication, but it also promised to be very rewarding in the long term. This time, Ken would be raising a race car.

It's a Bimmer!

As a longtime BMW fan, Ken enjoyed driving a classic 2002 on the street before he decided to become a racer. “I love the simplicity of the earlier German engineering,” he remarks, “these cars are fun and easy to work on, and great to drive.”

That casual hobby became much more after Ken rewarded himself with a trip to the VARA University for his birthday. Having his car on track for the first time opened new doors for the single father of two. “I hadn't raced anything prior to attending the VARA school,” he admits. “After getting the street car on track, I knew the speed and competition was something I wanted to do.”

Upon completing the school, Ken evaluated his lifestyle. His job as a freelance designer and marketer meant his schedule was largely under his control. On top of that, his son Kelvin had already begun attending film school, and daughter Jessica was making college plans. With no one to answer to but himself, Ken would soon be in the perfect position to build and campaign a vintage race car.

He bought the shell of a 1969 BMW 2002 from Jeff Ireland and immediately began transforming it into a vintage race car to compete in VARA's C Sedan class. Ken's friendly relationship with vintage BMW powerhouse Ireland Engineering definitely helped regarding car prep, but Ken is a hands-on guy. “Short of the suspension set-up and original engine, most of the build was done by me,” he points out. “I've [also] put together a great resource of racing vendors in the course of my work in web site design and marketing.”

Teutonic Teen

Ken spent the first year of ownership preparing both himself and the car for competition. He began attending more VARA events to research his budding project, evaluating other cars and developing a plan for his car. Seeing what worked and what broke for others provided Ken with valuable intelligence for preparing his own 2002.

Safety should come first in any racing project, and Ken started with a six-point roll cage from Groma Race Fabrications before adding the racy parts. While there's always a strong temptation to go with the latest and greatest, Ken focused on reliability and simplicity more than outright power. For example, a simple VARA C Sedan-legal single 38mm Weber carburetor mounted to a Cannon manifold provided an adequate fuel and air mix.

Another trip to the VARA University provided seat time for Ken, but he didn't have a chance to use his new race car on track. He bought an engine for the Bimmer and began rebuilding it to ensure it would be perfectly suited to C sedan competition.

Rather than build a grenade of an engine, Ken took a different route, using forged 9.5:1 pistons and a mild cam for the sake of reliability. To keep things humming along, he installed a custom high-capacity oil pan that features a slick trapdoor arrangement that prevents cavitation by keeping the oil near the pickup tube.



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FAR LEFT: VARA University graduate Ken Blasko's 1969 BMW 2002 strafes through the esses at Buttonwillow Raceway Park. **LEFT:** Although he's only been racing for a handful of years, working with a cadre of vintage veterans such as Jeff Ireland (right) has put Blasko (left) on a very fast track to success. It's even inspired him to develop his own motorsport website in order to increase availability of some of the racing parts from cottage manufacturers.



Tim Suddard photos



The jewel of this system, however, is the highly effective close-ratio four speed transmission that Ken researched and had custom built. The driveline is further enhanced thanks to a lightweight clutch and flywheel. “The light rotating mass suits my driving style, and the transmission is a great improvement,” he beams. “I can come out of a corner side by side [with another car] and have three car lengths before the next corner—it’s all about the closer gearing between second and third.”

Ken’s background in design led him to a clean and simple look for his racer. A set of vintage 13-inch MSW wheels fit under the factory fenders without needing flares. “I didn’t want to flare the wheel wells, but 13-inch tires aren’t available like they used to be,” he bemoans. “I’m starting to evaluate going to a 14-inch setup for tire availability.”

Bumpers and detail trim pieces were removed, and the whole body was sprayed in Tampico, a factory BMW shade. After completing the original build, Ken installed an Ireland Engineering front air dam to cheat the wind. Despite the addition, the car maintains a sleek profile and monochromatic visual treatment.

Graduation

Just as children grow and develop, Ken’s BMW has transformed from a simple shell into a competitive vintage machine. By the time he began wheel-to-wheel racing in the 2007 season, the car was capable of running competitively.

He’s made great progress in his relatively short racing career, chalking up his first race win with VARA at Las Vegas in 2008. “I like the Las Vegas track,” he says. “In my view, the horsepower differences are less important there. I was down about 25 horsepower from the front-runners, but with a well-set-up car and good driving, it gave me a chance.”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ken enhanced the original lines of the his BMW racer by removing the trim, rain rails, and bumpers. The finished look of his race car is as clean as a new pin. He avoided having to install fender flares by using 13-inch MSW wheels that tuck nicely behind the factory fenders. The purposeful aesthetic continues inside the car; there’s nothing superfluous to impede the driving experience. The engine compartment, on the other hand, contains an army of go-fast parts and thoughtful engineering. Camber plates and a strut tower brace from Ireland Engineering provide precise control of suspension geometry.

There’s some room to grow from Ken’s current motor; he’s developing an engine for the 2009 season which is 25 horsepower stronger and lightened significantly. The crankshaft alone lost about 13 pounds compared to his current setup.

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Ken's experience building and campaigning his 2002 has also created new opportunities for future prospects. "I've got a few friends asking about me managing the build process for another pair of cars," he explains. "I'd also like to get a few more wins with VARA, and to see more of the tracks on the West Coast racing with other vintage groups."

Using his background in Web design and marketing, Ken is also developing a way to bring together some of his preferred vendors and fabricators. "These are guys that build parts like my oil pan and transmission or offer racing-related services, who don't have the time or means to market them," he continues. "With vintagebmwracing.com, I'm working on combining their efforts and promoting them to potential customers."

Whether he's managing the build of a race car or launching a new business, Ken Blasko's determination and positive attitude are sure to generate success. After raising two children as a single parent, these challenges will seem easy. Plus, a race car won't be looking for college tuition in 18 years. 



1969 BMW 2002

Owner:	Ken Blasko, 45, marketing/Web design
Layout:	Front engine, rear-wheel drive
Engine:	1990cc SOHC 4-cylinder, lightened and knife-edged crank, Ireland H-beam rods, Ross forged 12.5:1 pistons, Schrick 304 camshaft, ported and polished cylinder head, Ireland Engineering lightweight crank pulley, Weber 38mm downdraft carburetor, Cannon intake manifold, ITG air filter, Ireland Engineering header, MagnaFlow muffler, Crane HI-6 ignition, Custom baffled trap-door oil pan
Driveline:	Custom close-ratio 4-speed manual, KBR Competition lightweight clutch, JB Racing aluminum flywheel
Interior:	Cobra Evolution S seat, Crow Enterprises 5-point harness, vintage Personal steering wheel, Auto Meter Pro-Comp gauges, Groma Race Fabrications custom 6-point roll cage, Safecraft Model LT10 fire system
Suspension:	Ireland Engineering front adjustable coil-overs with adjustable camber plates, shortened and revalved Bilstein struts / shock absorbers, RIDS rear subframe with adjustable camber and toe, reinforced trailing and control arms, Ireland Engineering adjustable sway bars, Ireland Engineering urethane bushings
Brakes:	Stock discs and drums, Hawk Blue pads front; Ferodo shoes rear, 2002ii master cylinder, Wilwood bias valve
Wheels:	13x6.0-in. vintage MSW mesh wheels
Tires:	205/60R13 Toyo Proxes RA-1
Numbers:	Approx. 150 rear-wheel horsepower
Thanks:	Jeff and Jeremy at Ireland Engineering, Dan at DEP Race Prep, Nate Jones Tire, Macs Performance, European Motorworks, Groma Fabrication, and the Blaskos.