

Chris Alston's Chassisworks

To put Chris Alston's career in perspective, consider that straight axles and leaf springs were just going out of style when he began building door cars at his home in Sacramento, Calif. More than three decades and 25,000 chassis kits later, the only thing that hasn't changed is Alston's insistence on designing and building his own components.

"In the early 1970s, chassis builders didn't have much choice," Alston explained. "Most of what we needed, we couldn't buy." An installer for a telephone company by day, Alston was moonlighting to help support not only two young children but also his big-block Vega. "I was fabricating ladder bars and ladder-bar crossmembers for my customers. As word spread, I started selling to local speed shops.

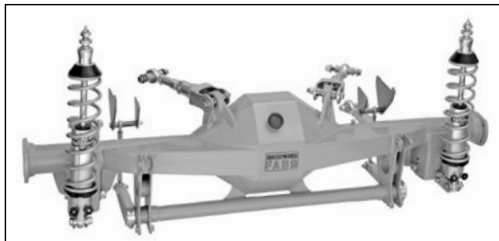
"NHRA chassis rules for class cars were still based on Super Stock and Modified Production cars," he continued. "They were stuck with factory-type suspensions, and we weren't allowed to cut out floors. About all we could do was bend up a two-by-three-inch

subframe to fit under the stock floor and install ladder bars and wheel tubs."

His family's need for regular paychecks and medical benefits deferred the dream of self-employment until several unrelated events occurred, nearly simultaneously, in the mid-1970s: NHRA relaxed requirements for stock front suspensions; E.T. brackets eclipsed traditional trophy classes in popularity; Pro Stock frames evolved into tube-frame, all-aftermarket chassis; heads-up, 9.50-indexed Pro Gas racing was born in Alston's backyard (at Redding Dragstrip); and three of his brothers offered business backing.



Four-fifths of the management team that operates Chassisworks and two sister companies, VariShock and Total Control Products, from right, Chris Alston, Chris Alston Jr., Steve Collins, Stephanie Collins, are surrounded by a Mazak Palatech system with horizontal machining center. Not pictured is General Manager Patti Rieger, now in her 23rd year with Chris Sr.



Complete bolt-in suspension systems enable virtually anyone to upgrade popular street cars. This FAB9-based assembly directly replaces the rear ends in Fox-body Mustangs. Chris Alston manufactures everything in-house except the VariSprings, which are specially wound for each Chassisworks application.

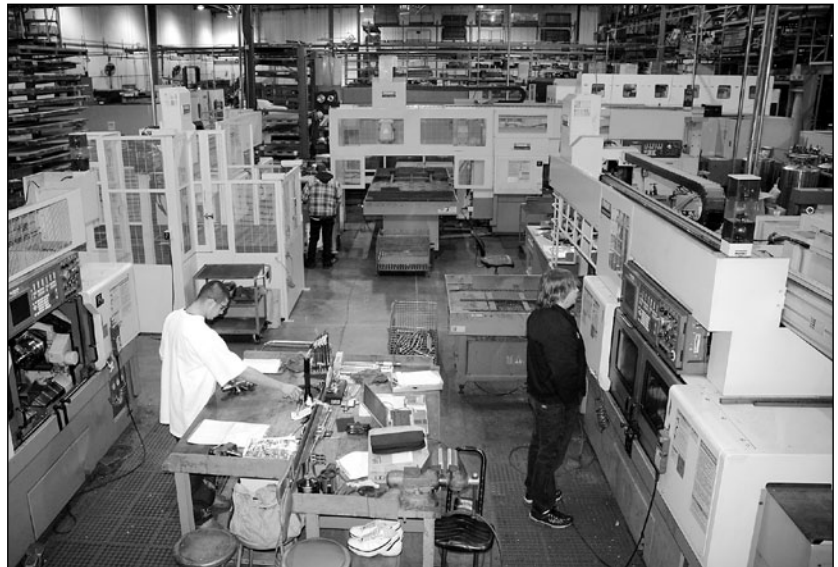
"The invention that jump-started our company was my dropped-crossmember, boxed-rear-frame kit for cut-out floors," Alston recalled. "This was a better suspension than most bracket racers had, plus it was easier to install, lighter in weight, and adjustable. I also offered tin kits and 10-point roll cages for their individual applications. Suddenly, a little guy didn't need a chassis shop to build a real race car."

Alston Race Car Engineering rapidly became the leading player in a brand-new industry category: doorslammer kit cars. Meanwhile, Alston kept

welding up complete cars. His rolling-chassis customers ranged from winning Pro Stock teams (the Yuill brothers, Warren Johnson, Reher-Morrison) and Pro Gas pioneers (Dave Riolo, Bob Bunker, Wayne Torkelson) to serious street enthusiasts (Reggie Jackson). NHRA Best Engineered statues were awarded to customers from Pro Stock to Super Gas. Ironically, during the same Winternationals weekend that the Yuills' controversial Pontiac J2000 was voted Best Engineered Car, it was banned because of Alston's removable metal body.

While the Alstons were building a multimillion-dollar business, behind the scenes, brotherly love was deteriorating into constant squabbling. Thus, Alston, the youngest sibling, departed to open his own small shop in 1987. He couldn't have imagined how Chris Alston's Chassisworks would grow and prosper over the next two decades – nor how its product line would diversify by 2007.

"Most of our customers either race '10-wide' cars or drive 'g-machines' on the street," Alston said. "We manufacture bolt-on parts that convert stock-type cars for small-tire racing, and we build bolt-on front clips that make older GM cars handle and stop like modern sports cars. I'm really enjoying this transition. My favorite cars to build have always been muscle cars.



Sophisticated machinery, raw materials, and finished inventory occupy all 55,000 square feet of shop floor in the Sacramento, Calif., building built by Chris Alston. In the foreground are the four machines that comprise a Mazak Multiplex, featuring dual-spindle, dual-turret CNC turning centers.

"We make thousands of parts in-house," he added. "Even our VariShocks start out here as aluminum billets. No one in this business has that capability because no one has as much automated machinery. That's what sets us apart. The major benefits are quality control and freedom of design. When we decide to develop a new part or improve an existing product, we just make it. That's how we've been able to convert so many fabricated parts into machined designs. Machined parts fit better, they're stronger, and they're usually too expensive for our competitors to duplicate. We can offer a machined part in the same price range as their fabricated part.

"We never go offshore. Anyone can copy anything, but if you don't know the application and how to design, it's gonna be junk. The only reason for going offshore is to save money. There is no real talent offshore, no design capability. Do you think some peasant worker knows how a coil-over shock is supposed to work? I don't think so."

Despite achieving so much so early in life, Alston displays the same competitive instincts at 55 that he did as a 20-something Pro Gas racer and Pro Stock car builder. Although he is gradually delegating management responsibilities to son Chris Jr., daughter Stephanie, and son-in-law Steve Collins, the sheer number of new products in various stages of development might indicate that Chris Alston's influence on the aftermarket industry has only just begun. **ND**



A variety of flat parts is produced quickly, in mass quantities, by this Apelio combination punch and laser. Note the automatic sheet feed and parts conveyer.