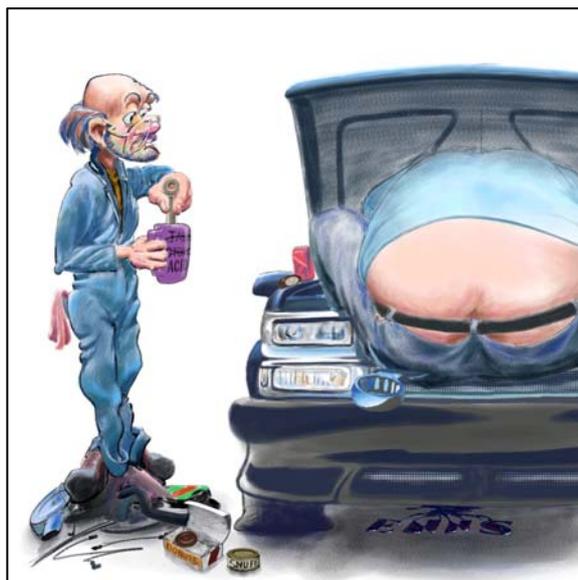


A Harmonious Choice

In auto repair, as in the culinary arts, the closest ingredient isn't always the right ingredient.

By Rick Cogbill
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On a good day I can still walk and chew gum at the same time, so I thought nothing of sucking back some coffee while reaching for a phone that was ringing off the wall. What a mistake. The receiver crashed to the floor as I sprayed hot java all over my computer screen.



“Beanie!” I gasped. “What did you put in this coffee?!”

The Bean stuck his head through the office doorway. “Double cream, double sugar – just the way you like it, boss.” He paused. “We’re out of sugar cubes, though, so I used a couple of those white packets lying on the coffee table.”

“That wasn’t sugar,” I grumbled as I mopped the monitor with a rag. “That was salt left over from Tooner’s take-out meal.”

His jaw dropped. “Oops! New cup, coming right up!”

I suddenly remembered the telephone, mostly because it was calling my name. I picked up the receiver, the taste of salted coffee still on my tongue. “Hello?”

“Slim! Slim, are you there?” The tinny voice sounded desperate.

“Yeah...who’s this?”

It was Re-man Riley, a machinist who works over at Block Busters Engine Rebuilders. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Listen, Slim, I need a favor...I just put an engine into a truck, and now it won’t start. Can you help me out?”

Riley was a buddy, so I didn’t mind the S.O.S. call. “Tell me what you’ve got,” I said.

It turns out Riley was working on a 1996 Suburban with a 5.7 V8 Vortec engine. “It belongs to one of my boss’s fishing buddies.” I could hear the panic rising in his voice. “An’ I’m supposed to have this thing done today ‘cuz there’s a big fishing derby on this weekend!”

“Well, calm down,” I said. “What have you checked so far? Is there spark, fuel, and compression?”

“Yes, yes, and yes. I’ve checked all that, but still...oh! Gotta go...the boss is coming!” The phone line went dead, and I had a hunch that if Riley didn’t solve his no-start problem soon, the boss and his fishing buddies would be using him for bait.

I grabbed a jacket just as Beanie arrived with fresh coffee. “Sorry, gotta run,” I called over my shoulder as I ran out the door, relieved that I’d escaped Beanie’s second attempt at employer poisoning.

I’m constantly amazed whenever I walk into Block Busters. They produce some solid engines, but the mess and clutter on the floor is unbelievable. In fact, their mobile engine crane has studded tires on it, just to get through the debris.

Riley was perched up in the engine compartment of the Suburban, his legs straddling the fan shroud as he stared forlornly at the shiny new motor in front of him.

“It just pops and sputters, Slim,” he groaned. “I’m doomed!”

We rechecked all the basics, like timing and firing order, but I found nothing wrong. “Say, Riley, you didn’t happen to... I mean, you know those timing chains...they can...”

“Nope; that ain’t the problem,” Riley said confidently. “I took the timing cover off and checked, just to make sure the gears and chain were properly lined up.”

I took a look around his work area while I wracked my brain for more ideas. “How do you find anything around here?” I asked. “Don’t engine parts ever get lost?”

Riley shrugged. “Don’t seem to.” He climbed down from the truck. “I got a system. Here, let me show you.”

He went over to a workbench. “I disassemble the blocks here,” he said, pointing to the left. “Then I put all the big chunks in that bin. The internal stuff goes over here...” He rambled on for a few minutes while I stared at the pile of greasy engine parts.

“But Riley,” I said, pointing at the bench. “You’ve got Chevy parts and Ford parts on top of Dodge parts. Don’t you ever get them mixed up?”

He looked at me like I was pulling his leg. “Slim, don’t ya think I know what fits a Ford and what fits a GM? Sheesh!”

I fished around in his big chunks bin and pulled out a harmonic balancer. “Okay,” I said. “Prove it. What does this fit?”

Riley squinted in the dim light. “Well, that’s from a Chevy V6 that blew apart. We just junked the block and...” Suddenly he stopped talking, and sank down onto a crate with a moan. I took a closer look at the part in my hand. Written in big letters with yellow chalk were the words “5.7 Vortec V8”. I left Riley to his misery and tiptoed quietly out to my truck.

Back at my shop, I found Basil reading a magazine in the coffee room, so I told him what had happened. He chuckled. “Ole’ Riley grabbed the wrong harmonic balancer, did he?”

“Yep,” I said, as I dabbed some litmus paper into the mug of coffee Beanie had just given me. “He used one from a V6, and of course it didn’t have the right number of trigger points for the crank sensor. It’s no wonder the V8 engine wouldn’t run.”

Basil looked up to see what I was doing with my coffee. “Is everything alright?”

I grimaced. The litmus paper revealed nothing; I’d have to resort to a taste test. “I hope so,” I said, eyeballing a jar of white cleaning powder that was sitting ominously on the window ledge nearby. “You just never know when somebody’s going to grab the first thing lying around, and use it on you.”