

# SMORGASBORD

Stirring in the right factory ingredients would get you one saucy Volvo 142 GT



WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE

**T**he folks from Gothenburg didn't exactly set the motoring world on its ear when they unveiled their new 140 series for 1967. Volvo had finally broken away from the round-fender aesthetic of the 122 and 544, but what they replaced it with was a boxy silhouette that was handsome, but hardly daring. Surprising no one, Volvo carried over the pushrod four and other mechanical bits straight from the indestructible 122. *Road & Track* took one look and called it "pretty much what we expected."

Volvo's ads played up the car's safety, durability and comfort. This, they said, was a sensible car for sensible people, the kind of people who'd rather stay at home with a good book on a Friday night than dance until dawn in some nightclub. The thrill the 140 offered was the kind you'd get by driving the car long after it had been paid for.

And yet, there was this little voice. "Psst," it said. "It might not look it, but if you put some heavy-duty suspension

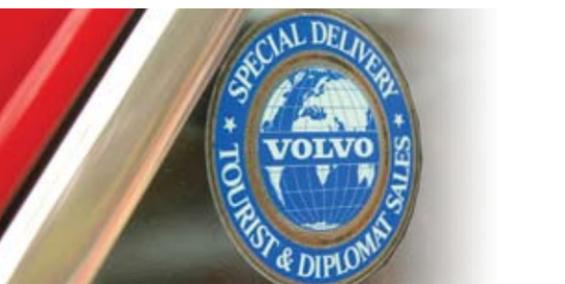
bits underneath, and toss in a roll cage, you could go racing in this. Get a little experience, spend a little more on modifying the engine, and you could even start winning some races. You know you want to. Oh, go on. *Go on!*"

Welcome to Volvo's dark side.

The speed demon among the accountants and the actuaries was Volvo Competition Service, a small operation formed in 1971 in Gothenburg and headed up by rally hero Gunnar Andersson. It was a new name for what had been known as the Competition Department, the division that had successfully campaigned the 544 and 122 models in mid-Sixties European rallies. Having noticed all of the motorsports activity going on in Southern California, Volvo in 1973 established a U.S. branch of its Competition Service at Volvo Western Distributing in Torrance, California.



The twin Solex carburetors dominate the engine compartment. A tubular header, lightened lifters, a modified head, a performance cam and more help the B20 four make an estimated 140hp.



The owner added tinted glass, new for 1971, and a period sticker from a delivery program.



When an online sale fell through, the owner was offered the rare factory louvers for \$75.



The alloy trunk finisher was on a dealer's shelf; the tray and jerry can were other options.

“The idea was to make a replica of a 1971 E car, red with a black interior. And then it became obsessive.”

Volvo Competition Service stocked just about anything you wanted to make your Volvo perform better. Engine tuning kits, suspension pieces, rally instrumentation, fiberglass body panels, skid plates and more filled the pages of its thick catalog, which you could thumb through at the parts counter of your local Volvo dealer. Anything from a tape stripe to a screamer of an engine that came alive at 6,000 RPM was just a phone call away.

Today, to get a good idea of what was offered, you could just take a long look at Dave Burnham's 1971 Volvo 142 GT. Dave, of Bradford, New Hampshire, has filled the car up to the headliner with original Volvo accessory and Competition Service bits, some of which are unspeakably rare, and many of which involved long searches and international phone calls. One glance is enough to induce palpitations among Volvo freaks. So many of these pieces are unobtainable, in fact, that it's a wonder the Swedish government hasn't declared the car a national treasure and demanded that it be repatriated.

The genesis of Dave's car does require a little explanation. Volvo's idea for building GTs originated with the 120 series, when

the factory produced a number of 123 GTs with high-compression engines, tachometers, sports steering wheels and other performance pieces. When the 140 series was introduced, the GT lived on, but as a collection of accessories that included GT stripes, a three-spoke steering wheel, alloy wheels, driving lamps, gauge clusters, bumper bars, GT badges and much more. It's pretty safe to say that no two GTs were exactly alike. No one knows how many were built, but few survive; Dave is aware of just three. (Confusingly, there was also a different 142 GT for the Canadian market, a factory-produced special equipped with a tachometer, console tray and other dress-up items.)

Though it resembles in nearly all aspects a 1971 142 GT, Dave's car didn't start out that way. It was originally a plain-Jane, light blue 1969 142S automatic, which he found in a Dover, New Hampshire, alley back in 1983. Being a lifelong New Englander, Dave instantly recognized the value of the West Virginia car's rust-free shell, and paid \$250 for the car, despite its decrepit interior and inoperative brakes.

Dave had long been a Volvo 140 fan. He had been introduced to the car's charms in 1979, when he bought a 150,000-mile

144 as a replacement for the 1973 Nova SS that a friend had totaled. The seller, Dave's former high school principal, sold the navy blue sedan to him for \$650 and a promise that Dave, who had left school after his junior year out of sheer boredom, would get his GED. "I drove that car to 490,000 miles, year round, in New Hampshire. For nine years I drove that car. It cost me \$2,200 for everything—the purchase price, everything down to oil changes and tires. The only thing that doesn't include is the gasoline," he said. "Twenty-two hundred dollars to drive one of these cars for nine years. I was hooked."

What he had in mind for the light blue car was creating a replica of yet another Volvo, a bright red 142E that a friend had owned. The 142E was that rare sort of Volvo, a sports sedan that invited comparisons with BMWs and Alfa Romeos. Equipped with Bosch fuel injection and stuffed with black leather upholstery, the E made an impression on Dave. "I absolutely loved the looks of that car," he said. His dream car proved impossible to find, because, for some reason, Volvo had reserved all of its #46 red 142Es for the West Coast. So Dave decided to make his own. He stripped out his light blue

## Treasure Hunt

Dave Burnham's one-of-a-kind 142 GT features the following equipment:

### Volvo Competition Service Accessories

- Grille with driving lamps
- Center console with lamp switches
- Solex carburetor setup
- Special Competition Service fuel pump
- Tuned header
- Alloy rocker cover
- DeCarbon shock absorbers
- Progressive rate coil springs
- Chromed, balanced crankshaft pulley

### Volvo Accessories

- GT steering wheel
- GT emblem kit (1971-'72)
- GT rear emblem (1967-'70, Canadian)
- GT gauge cluster
- GT Dunlop wheels
- Fuse box cover with clock
- Lower dashboard shelf
- Ashtray light
- Center folding armrest
- Front bumper overrider
- Rear bumper underriders
- Rear window louver
- B-pillar trim
- Stainless tailpipe tip
- Trunk lamp
- Emergency wheel well gas can
- Emergency two-gallon gas can
- Luggage compartment basket
- Locking gas cap
- Sun visors with registration pocket and vanity mirror
- Rubber floor mats



The steering wheel, a scarce part, was among six boxes of assorted Volvo parts bought for \$400. The gauge cluster is a modified GT accessory, while the upholstery is stock 1968 Volvo.

a genuine Competition Service Stage II head would have resulted in a compression ratio of 11.7:1, which Dave felt was too high for pump gas, and so he created his own, ported, polished, cc'd and stuffed with big valves. The twin Solex two-barrel carburetors are the same pieces offered by Competition Service, as is the tubular exhaust header. There's also a genuine Rally Exhaust System, made by Abarth but not labeled as such. Even the alloy rocker cover is a highly rare Performance Service part, not the more common aftermarket piece sold by Oregon Volvo specialist ipd.

The progressive coil springs and De Carbon shock absorbers—more unobtainable parts—are Competition Service items, though Dave opted to go with ipd's thicker

anti-roll bars, front and rear. The wheels are Dunlop alloys, made just for Volvo and used on the 140 and the 1800E. Normally alloy with a steel rim of 5 or 5½ inches, and prone to electrolytic corrosion, Dave's were rebuilt by Eric Vaughn of Moravia, California, and now feature 6-inch alloy rims welded to the hub.

The interior is a mix of standard 142 and genuine period accessories. There's a set of GT gauges taking the place of the usual ribbon speedometer, all easily viewed through the three-spoke GT wheel. The center console with its built-in switches for the driving lamps is another rare Competition Service part, while the courtesy shelf, under-dash shelves, fuse box cover with clock, center folding armrest and rubber floor mats

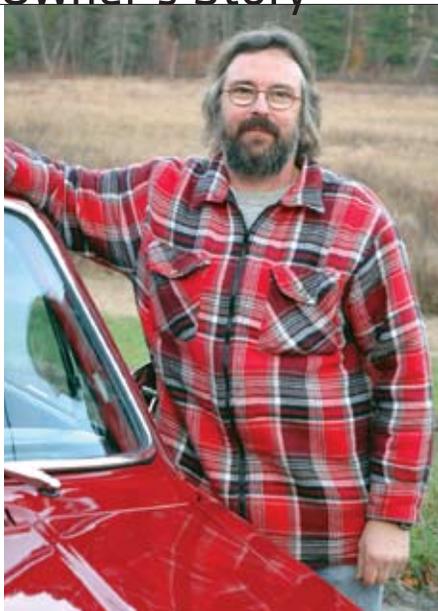
142 and brought the shell to Motorsports Plus in Conway, New Hampshire, for a coat of scarlet.

"The idea was to make a replica of a 1971 E car, red with a black interior. And then it became obsessive," Dave laughed. He had been gathering genuine Volvo 140 accessories and Competition Service parts for two decades at this point, and it occurred to him that the new car could be a rolling showcase for his collection. The cornerstone would be a Competition Service grille, incorporating Bosch driving lamps, which Dave had acquired when he bought yet another 140, a 1970 station wagon. The grille was correct for 1971-'72, which set the standard for—nearly—everything that followed.

The engine is a 1,990cc, all-iron push-rod B20 four, which Dave has modified to Volvo's Stage II specifications. Using



## 1971 Volvo 142 GT Owner's Story



**T**his car was meant to be, and I don't think a second one of these was meant to be built. People think I'm absolutely off my rocker, but I love using this car. The thing sticks to the road like glue and it handles flat as a board. I love the car's handling, performance, dependability and sheer excitement on crooked mountain roads.

There was a meet in Plattsburgh, New York, a few years back, and it was close enough to the house that I decided to drive there. There was a stretch of road beginning where you come into the Lake Placid area that was through a national park. There were no houses, and the road followed the contour of the mountain. And it must have had 15 switchbacks, one right after the other. It kind of reminded me of a bobsled run. That was so fun, I had to go back and come through it again, really going for it. I started back at the beginning and came through it at about 100 MPH. It's an absolute blast to drive.

—Dave Burnham

are all Volvo accessories. The upholstery is standard-issue vinyl and cloth; reproduction leather seat covers, like those used in the 142E, were not available at the time.

To drive this car is to realize how big a chunk Volvo could have carved out of BMW territory if it only had offered a factory performance version of the 140. Beautifully balanced—according to Dave, the 140 has a perfect 25-percent-per-wheel weight distribution—nimble and powerful, this is a car that would have given the 2002tii fits.

"I've driven quite a few 140s, but I've never driven a race-prepared 140. And I know this is not one of those, because I built it to be able to drive it on the street; you can't have both," Dave said. "But, for street prepared 140 Volvos, this one is definitely in the top of its class." The competition suspension keeps the car firmly planted on the road, and the engine makes its power in highly linear form, meaning that not a single bit of its 140 horsepower is wasted. There's enough on tap to let the car hold its speed on the steepest highway stretches through New Hampshire's White Mountains, even with the overdrive engaged. Anyone who's ever driven a 140 series Volvo will understand why the stock steering needed no modification—it's light and quick, with excellent feedback.

The rest is pure Seventies Volvo: Comfortable seats, excellent visibility, and a tank-like solidity that gives a palpable aura of invincibility. Critics might have complained about the trunk's high lip, but it does add measurably to the car's torsional rigidity. The mile-long shift lever provides a rewardingly direct action with the four-speed gearbox, and the four-wheel discs, another reflection of Volvo's focus on safety, provide plenty of grip.

This GT gives a tantalizing look at how much performance could be built into that sensible, practical 140-series platform. The strength built into every Volvo served not only families, but also racers and rallyists, who wouldn't have to blow their budgets on strengthening a flimsy body shell. In one of its performance brochures, Volvo offered



**Volvo Competition Service offered both engine tuning kits and complete, modified engines.**

**VOLVO**  
Competition Service

up the 142 as "one of the least expensive cars to prepare for competition." Turns out that durable engines and gearboxes were as good for racers as they were for moms and dads on a budget.

Maybe the speed demons and the actuaries weren't so far apart, after all. 🌐

## What to Pay

### 1971 VOLVO 142 GT

Low	\$1,000
Average	\$3,500
High	\$9,500

(Prices for 142/142S; GTs are NA)

## Club Scene

### Volvo Club of America

P.O. Box 16  
Afton, New York 13730  
www.vcoa.org  
Dues: \$45/year; Membership: 4,000

### Svenska Volvo 140-klubben

c/o Robert Scherman  
Björnssongsgatan 138  
S-168 44 Bromma  
Sweden  
www.140-klubben.org/  
Dues: \$38.50

## Pros & Cons

### Pros

- Willing engine
- Sticky suspension
- Aggressive good looks

### Cons

- You can't build one
- You can't find one
- Sweden might want it back

