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# NEON HISTORY

The import/tuner movement emerged in the mid 1980s, and it continues to grow today. Back then, it was the Hondas and VWs that were dominating the new front-wheel-drive tuner market. This eventually gave birth to the hugely popular sport compact phenomenon. Sport compact enthusiasts look for style, power, and handling in a car they can drive on the street and also take to the track on weekends. When Chrysler cranked out the first Neon in 1994, they found a car that had instant appeal to this demographic, but were they too late?

The Neon wasn't the first sport compact Chrysler produced. In fact, the first true front-wheel-drive subcompact car ever to be built in the US was the Dodge Omni/Plymouth Horizon. They were both peppy and economical cars, and sold nearly 200,000 units in 1978, their first year of production. They were also a dominant force in the subcompact market through 1990, when production finally came to an end.

The 1983 VW Rabbit GTi had a big influence on the sport-compact market, as did the Honda Civic. In 1984, the same year that Honda unveiled the new 1.5-liter Civic and CRX, Chrysler introduced the Omni GLH. Whereas the Mazda GLC stood for "Great Little Car," Dodge's GLH referred to "Goes Like Hell." Appropriately, the man who inspired this creation was none other than the legendary Carroll Shelby. That first year, the GLH sported a 110-hp naturally aspirated 4-cylinder powerplant. A performance camshaft was one of the reasons for the increase in power



**Even in non-turbo trim, the Dodge Omni and Charger were popular as racecars. SCCA Solo I hillclimber, Joe Foering, is seen here at the starting line for the Weatherly hillclimb. He is always in contention for the PHA Solo I ITB championship.**

over the stock Omni – this sounds like a sporty tuner car to me.

The following year, a 146-hp turbocharged 2.2-liter engine was offered as an option. As you can imagine, a turbocharged GLH could blow the doors off Honda's new Civic and CRX Si. The GLH's power, handling, cool alloy wheels, and ground effects set this Mopar performer apart from the rest of the pack. In 1986, a few hundred GLH-S models even came with Koni adjustable shocks and struts, 15-inch alloy wheels with performance Goodyear tires, and a further modified 175-hp engine.

Chrysler really seemed to be on the right track with the Omni GLH. No other sport compact was a match for that kind of power-to-weight ratio. The GLH had never received the respect it deserved, but it still has a cult following among Mopar fans. If, however, it had been produced in Japan, things would probably have been different. For some reason, in the late 1980s, if it wasn't from Japan, then it wasn't cool. That attitude changed in 1994, when Chrysler introduced a car that would capture the hearts of both Mopar and sport compact fans around the world. The first Dodge Neon made its way to showrooms in January 1994 as

*Shelby versions of Omni and Charger were big hits with the Mopar community. With 175 hp on tap, they were quick cars. (Photo courtesy Michael Carpenter)*



*Below: One of the larger Neon gatherings used to take place every year at the Belvedere assembly plant in Illinois. This little car has sparked an enthusiastic following, and this book is dedicated to all who love the Neon and SRT-4. (Photo courtesy Patrick O'Hara)*



an early 1995 model. They were affordable, quick, nimble, cool – and they were the answer for enthusiasts who wanted a legitimate sport compact but didn't want to buy an import.

### **First Generation Cars: 1995–1999**

For the first-generation cars, two chassis were available: the coupe and the sedan. There were SOHC (single overhead cam) and DOHC (dual overhead cam) 2.0-liter engines available. The SOHC made 132 hp and 129 ft-lbs of torque, while the DOHC made 150 hp and 133 ft-lbs of torque. There were only a few different handling and optional equipment packages that could be ordered during the first generation of production.

It all began in January of 1994 when the first Neon 4-door sedans rolled off

the assembly line. Even the SOHC was a highlight in an otherwise torque-challenged sport compact market. At that time, Honda was only offering its 125-hp, 106-ft-lb motor in its 1992-95 Civic Si. When the Si failed to return to the market the following year, some of the Honda loyalists defected. I was one of them. After racing Hondas for five years, I found the Neon to be a breath of fresh air. Although slightly heavier than the Civics, the Neons could out pull them on the racetrack as well as on the street.

These new Neons started to appear on TV sets across the nation on a regular basis. From the catchy commercials, to the SCCA Challenge and Celebrity road races, the Neon received a lot of attention from the media.

The first year of production was highly successful, and not much changed in 1995. However, there were a few changes for the 1996 model year. Base cars now came equipped with 14-inch wheels, and the gray bumpers were replaced with a body-colored piece. This was also the first time that antilock brakes were offered as an option on all cars.

In 1998, the base model was eliminated and replaced by the Highline, which became the new entry-level Neon. If you are building a racecar from scratch, the earlier base model or Highline makes a good donor car. They are the cheapest to buy anyway, and since

you'll probably be replacing the struts, springs, wheels, etc. anyway, you may as well not butcher up an ACR. Save those cars for the guys who need to race in a stock class in which major modifications are not permitted.

### ***Expresso/Sport (1997–1999)***

The Sport and Expresso models varied from year to year. Expresso started life as the “white wheel” package for both Plymouth and Dodge; early Expressos had either white wheel covers, or alloy wheels, along with special white badging. Later Expresso became the Plymouth counterpart to Dodge Sports. Early Sport sedans, and all later Sports (both coupe and sedan) were basically a fog light and spoiler package for a Highline, as they did not get a special suspension. Some later cars did get the DOHC as part of the package, making them attractive to an enthusiast who would redo the suspension anyway.

### ***The Sport Coupe (1995) and R/T (1998–1999)***

The 1995 Sport Coupe was essentially an ACR, but with all of the available options. They shared suspension with the ACR, except for the special struts. All of the options were available, so the weight varies widely.

The R/T was introduced in 1998. It essentially brought back the original