CHAPTER 9

BODY AND INTERIOR MODIFICATIONS

We all spend a great deal of time in our cars. Whether you're driving to work, or just cruising around, it's important to be comfortable in the cockpit. No matter how nice your car looks on the outside, you can't admire it when you're behind the wheel.

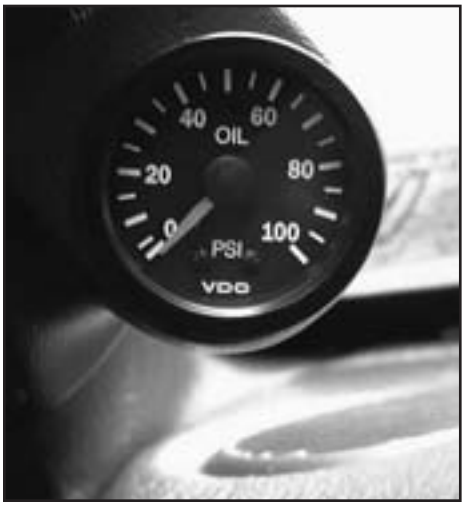
From a racer's point of view, a dent in the side of the car is a battle scar that tells a story of how you overcame adversity to eventually win the race against the non-Neon-driving competitors. Many racers don't care as much how their car looks from the outside, but the interior is another thing. Just like a fighter pilot, the racecar driver relies on gauges to help determine how the car is running and the proper driving position to be comfortable. Road racers who remain behind the wheel lap after lap will tell you how much of a workout it is. The constant g-forces wear down even the best athlete. Even Solo I, II, and drag racing can take a lot out of you. It's important that your cockpit is comfortable, and driving position is essential to success. If you aren't in the proper position to turn the wheel and perform multiple upshifts and downshifts or heel/toe braking, you probably won't be on the podium at the end of the day.

Most of us have spent a great deal of time and money on performance enhancements and engine modifications. Even though Neons and SRT-4s have well-equipped dashboards, we often need more information about how our car is performing than what the factory has provided. Let's face it – the majority of people who buy Neons are not gear heads. We've all heard the story about the driver who heard a funny noise coming from the engine compartment and dealt with it by turning the stereo up louder. In any event, the standard warning lights and gauges on Neons are not adequate to meet the needs of most of us hop-up types. Depending on how you use your car, there's certain information you need to know.

At Speednation, we're racers and tuners and mainly interested in functional modifications, but we can still appreciate a cool-looking Neon. By the time their owners are finished, some Neons don't even look like Neons anymore.

Gauges

Neons are missing one critical gauge that helps avoid engine damage: the oil pressure gauge. Those of you who have driven other people's cars that are simi-



An oil-pressure gauge is a must-have for modified engines.

The owner of this SRT-4 has added some essential gauges. From left to right: a boost gauge, a wide-band air/fuel ratio gauge, and a shift light. (Photo courtesy Chris Malluege)

lar to yours have surely noticed that all temperature gauges are not created equal. Some register a normal operating temperature by moving the indicator halfway between cold and danger. While others, even though they are the same make, model, and year, record "normal" as being about one quarter of the way to the top of the scale.

And then there's the tach. Who did they have in mind when they designed the factory tach? Certainly not us gear heads. Even the larger aftermarket tachs are only useful if you can sneak a look at them before you shift. Drag racers, Solo I racers, and road racers don't always have time to watch the tach, which is why the shift light is one of the best inventions to date. When racing in time trials or at the drag strip, there is no room for error. If you make even the slightest mistake that results in lost time, that run is ruined. I prefer to use a shift light that is so bright, I can still see it even if my eyes are closed. Shift lights are also very beneficial to road racers, but they spend so much time behind the wheel, they can probably tell you exactly what tone corresponds to 6,500 rpm. That is, if they can hear the engine. Even unmuffled Neons are quiet compared to a Mazda RX-7 with a straight pipe. Not only can you not hear your own engine when passing an unmuffled rotary car, you can barely even think. From a distance, it's a beautiful sound, but up close, it can make your ears bleed. For those occasions, a shift light becomes invaluable. In my last race, I was trying to pass a first-generation RX-7. I never had to look at my tach more in my life (no shift light, unfortunately). But with all the fuel this RX-7 was spilling out of its fill nozzle onto the road in front of me, I needed to concentrate completely on the track to keep from slipping on the mess. I didn't get to check my tach as much as I would have liked until the RX-7 was in my rearview mirror.

If you've added a turbo, you'll require additional gauges, such as a boost gauge. With a boost gauge, you'll be able to tell if your engine is making too much, or too little boost. It's also imperative that you install an exhaust temperature gauge. Since turbocharged

The SRT-4 gauge array is both functional and informative. All turbo engines should have a boost gauge, and the SRT-4 comes with one from the factory (right). Besides showing you how much boost you're making, boost gauges also show you the boost you don't have (when something breaks!).