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Speedster revs up students

Record-setting racer takes his work car to career day, and he flat out wows 'em

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VISTA – Dalton Smallwood, a 16-year-old junior at Rancho Buena Vista High School, crowded with his buddies yesterday in front of American Eagle – a race car that looks more like a bullet.

“It's a rocket,” Dalton said – and he wasn't too far from the truth.

The vehicle, designed and built by Vista race car driver Skip Hedrich, was the highlight of a career day at Rancho Buena Vista High. Hedrich set a land speed record two years ago of 323 mph at the Bonneville Salt Flats in northwestern Utah.

The record, which is an average of two five-mile runs in the car, still stands for the class of vehicle he drove – a gas-powered “streamliner” design.

Hedrich, at 73, is sometimes regarded as a kind of senior citizen of speed, and he told a group of aspiring auto technicians and would-be car designers that he needs help building his next record-breaker.

“The work is interesting and educational,” Hedrich said. “We are looking for new crew members, so if you are interested, see me afterward.”

Dalton said he's more into motorcycles, and he hopes to attend a college program in motorcycle engineering in Arizona.

But several of his classmates who joined him for the career day marveled at Hedrich's American Eagle. Ignacio Arroyo, a 17-year-old junior, said Hedrich's visit was inspiring.

“School kind of gets boring, but today you get to hear things more from other people's perspectives,” Ignacio said.

Howard Warnek, a counselor at Rancho Buena Vista High, said visits yesterday by Hedrich and other auto technicians served some teenagers well – especially those who are not necessarily headed immediately to college.

“This really gives them something to shoot for,” Warnek said.

Building race cars isn't work for the uneducated, Hedrich told the students.

A mechanical engineer, Hedrich designed the car with the help of an aerodynamicist. Reducing aerodynamic

drag on the vehicle, as well as crafting the car from scratch, required a lot of math, he said.

American Eagle is an amazing car. Although 23 feet long, the car is only 3 feet wide and 32 inches high. Its wheels are covered by a sleek, bullet-shaped body painted in red, white and blue.

Its highly modified, 372-cubic-inch Chevy engine – production versions produce about 250 horsepower – was engineered to put out 720 horsepower.

The result is that the American Eagle can speed past about one and half football fields in a second.

“You're kind of 'hauling the mail,' ” Hedrich said, using an expression common among astronauts headed for orbit.

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