

## DARREN'S TRUSTY BRONCO

Darren Mentone is driving his second Bronco. He used to own a Toyota four-runner and a Ford Ranger but decided he should get a real truck, so he found a deal on a 1985 Bronco, the big one. Like new, the owner said, only 60,000 miles on a rebuilt motor.

First the alternator broke, then the thermostat and brakes, and the carburetor. By the day of the tragedy, one window was stuck open and the others were stuck closed.

Because of back problems, Darren had recently given up his construction job and started tending bar. One afternoon on his way home from a lunch shift, he jammed the brakes to save mashing a car that had swerved in front of him, and a Honda Prelude plowed into the rear end of his Bronco, wrenching his problem back.

Besides physical therapy, he got put on Vicodin. Still, he kept working. His wife usually drove him to and from his job but on the rare days she couldn't, he drove the Bronco. Early one afternoon, he cleaned up the bar, drank one brew, headed home and almost made it before he rear-ended a Toyota that stopped more suddenly than his mildly sedated brain could compute.

The DUI ticket cost him \$5000, for attorney fees and fine, and a month in a half-way house where the frame of

his cot pinched off the circulation in his arm and crippled him. For several months he was a one-armed bartender.

He sold the wrecked Bronco for \$350 and went shopping for another vehicle. Though family and friends suggested he might have fewer mishaps in a car than a truck, he held firm to his belief that men drive trucks, not cars. He found a 1990 Bronco at an independent lot *in Tucson, where they could afford to buy house, which they couldn't in San Diego*. According to the salesman, it had just arrived and they hadn't had time to clean or prep it, so he'd make Darren the deal of a lifetime.

First the brakes seized up, in the mountains on an icy road. Then the oil pump quit pumping. But by the time they set out for a Padre spring training weekend in Yuma, it seemed ready to take on the desert.

Though the water pump failed fifty miles out of Yuma, they managed to limp to the outskirts of town. But two days later, the alternator failed, which cost them an overnight stay at the Chaparral Motel in Tacna.

Back home, Darren kept replacing and repairing, until he felt sure the Bronco was in shape for another road trip. They were going to meet Darren's brother-in-law in San Felipe when the motor chugged and missed then stalled, leaving them stranded in Stanfield, population 100 or so.

They called Darren's wife's brother and arranged to ride with him to San Felipe and back. While waiting for him, they hung out in the saloon. "It was a good time," Darren says. "The locals were cool. They kept buying us drinks, to prove they weren't hicks, I guess."

The Bronco hasn't yet recovered. It gets Darren around town, but if he tries to drive it more than five miles, it balks and coughs and dies. Still, the loyal fellow won't give up on it. "Look," he says, "I've replaced about everything except the motor. As soon as I save twelve hundred, I put in a new motor, and it'll be like new, right? It'll run forever."

#### BRONCO REVISITED

On February 26, 2002, "Driven" reported that Darren Mentone's latest Ford Bronco had broken down and left him and his wife Darcy stranded whenever they tried to cross the desert to San Diego, their hometown. But Darren persevered. "When I get the new motor," he said, "it'll run forever."

Now he says, "Okay, I find a used motor. \$900. A mechanic tells me, 'No problem, I'll install it for \$500.' But after he picks it up, he calls and says, 'There's a huge problem, this motor's from a later year. We have to

switch out all the electrical and stuff. It's going to cost \$750."

"I say 'Fine, whatever.'

"So they install the motor. I'm thinking it's going to run perfect, but the steering gear breaks. I go to the junkyard for a steering gear box. While I'm there, something slices my tire. Then, on my way to the used tire place, I'm making a U turn and boom. Two dudes in a lowered Cadillac smash into the door. But no big deal, I get home and use the plunger. The dent pops out.

"At the used tire place, the guy says, 'I can give you this set for eighty bucks.' They look killer. But after two days, they start making a screechy sound, from uneven wear. But I've got a friend who works at Firestone. He says, 'Hey, I'm just going to charge you cost.'

"\$500 later, brand new tires. I put in the steering box, which takes all day. The next day, it won't start. The solenoid's bad. I put in a new one, then I take it to the mechanic and tell him 'Look over the whole thing.' He does a twenty point inspection, says 'It's fine. Just carry extra radiator coolant.'

"I spend six hours detailing the Bronco and we're off for San Diego for Darcy's baby shower. The truck's running perfectly, I'm going eighty and every time we pass a

landmark, where we had broke down before -- Casa Grande, Stanfield, Tacna, Yuma -- we cheer.

"Now all we've got to do is make the grade up into the mountains, then we coast. On the grade, I'm going a little slower, watching the temperature, when I see smoke coming up. I pull over. And a woman pulls over too. She yells, 'Fire, Fire.'

I jump out look and underneath. It's a fire right in the middle of the motor. I yell at Darcy to get out and I run around and help her and we throw our bags out. She's brought lots of water since she's pregnant, and I start throwing it on the fire, but it just flames up worse. Two truckers pull over. I'm shoveling sand on the fire, which does nothing. I remember the radiator coolant, so I pop the hood and dump the coolant. The flames shoot up over my head. I think, It's over.

"But the truckers run up with fire extinguishers. They don't want to get too close, so I grab the extinguishers and I get in the truck and try to shoot the flames.

"Nothing would kill that fire. We just watched my Bronco burn and explode. Five explosions. We found the driver's side window across both lanes on the other side of the road.

"And the awful part is, we had the top off so we could carry a big TV somebody gave us. We have the Bronco top sitting in our yard, as a sad reminder."