

“PERSISTENCE  
BROUGHT THE CAR  
TO LIFE.” — Jay H. Coats

# IT'S ALIVE!

BY JOSEPH SIRIOTIS

**Jay H. Coats and his nephew Hal Lynch** had always shared a lifelong passion for racing.

“I remember as a kid going to the races,” Jay recalls. “I had an interest in sprint cars. My parents were kind enough to accommodate me and take me.”

As they got older, both men would embark on successful, yet demanding careers before devoting themselves full time to their hobby. Jay served as a professor of accounting at West Virginia University for over 30 years. In 2005, after serving four years as the Dean of the John Chambers College of Business and Economics, Jay made the decision to retire. It was around this time that his nephew Hal began pushing Jay to pursue his childhood interest in cars again. This would eventually lead Jay to joining The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club in 2008. Hal would follow soon after he retired in 2012 as a banking consultant with Accenture.







In April 2019, Hal spotted an ad in Hemmings Magazine for a '76 AMC Pacer. You might be familiar with this car if you've ever seen the popular TV show "Wayne's World." There was something different about this ad though, compared to others.

"Most of the ads in here (pointing at the magazine) have a lot of description and embellishment. There's photos and everything of the cars and this one had nothing," Hal said. "It only had a brief text that said, 'Pacer Turbo Centaur. Stillborn show prototype.'" Hal and Jay were curious. Hal called the owner to get some more info. The vehicle only had 19,000 miles on it and had practically been off the road for 40 years.

Built as a cooperative effort between AMC (American Motors Corporation) and Milwaukee dealership Buran AMC, it was ahead of its time. Just the turbocharged 232 CI engine alone, among many of its modifications, gave it an advantage over its competitors; it would never compete though. The Pacer's competitors Ford and Chevrolet wanted to challenge the Pacer in a claim challenge (the winner takes ownership of the car). The stakes were still

too high. At the last minute, AMC decided to pull the Pacer out of the competition. Even more to the company's disappointment, the same turbo-charged engine that made the car so unique would seal its fate. It proved too costly and limiting when it came to federalizing the turbocharged engine. The Pacer Centaur would never see action on the race track.

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The car would spend the next 20 years in Milwaukee at the Brooks Stevens Museum until its untimely closure in 1998. It was then locked away in a warehouse for the remaining 20 years with little hope of seeing the open road — until Hal and Jay saw the ad.

Cosmetically, the car would need some work including a ceramic coating. That would be the easy part though. The hard part would be spending the next three months undoing four decades of damage, due to age.

The gas tank had holes in it and the rubber hoses were all rotted. Jay and Hal said they couldn't get the power steering rack anymore either, so they had to have that rebuilt."



The biggest challenge was what made the Pacer revolutionary, and what led to its anonymity — the turbocharger. “When we bought it, the turbo charger was in the trunk,” Hal said. Jay and Hal wanted to get the turbocharger back on the Pacer’s engine, but how? With his one-of-a-kind piece of technology, they couldn’t exactly just look up how to do it. It didn’t help either that there was scarcely anybody who believed they could do it. Jay and Hal were determined, though.

“There’s a lot of naysayers that looked at it, but Jay and I pushed on. Jay wanted to continue doing it even if it was going to be a failure.”

Initially, they sent the car as far up as North Carolina to have a mechanic who specialized in turbos work on it. They didn’t get the answer they were hoping for, however.

“He looked at the system, and he decided that it’s not on the car because it won’t work. It was a failed project. Because of that, he didn’t want to work on it,” Hal explained.

It was during this time that Jay and Hal would also receive a plethora of helpful advice from The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club.

“These are the kind of guys you want to talk to when you have a project like this,” Hal said. Seeking a second opinion, they brought the Pacer to owner Mike Carpenter of Speedline Performance in Ocala. As if it were destiny, there was a mechanic present who specialized in turbos and was willing to take on the challenge.

“It had already been dialed into the car,” Hal said. “When we looked at it there was just too much specialized work done for us to believe it failed.”

After 40 years of sitting in anonymity, the AMC Pacer Centaur made its sound known once again.

When looking back on picking this particular project, “prototypes are unique because they are what could’ve been,” Jay said.

This is surely an understatement when looking at Jay and Hal’s AMC Pacer Centaur. They have continued writing an unfinished story.

“Persistence brought the car to life,” Hal said.

When he’s not showing off the Pacer, Jay continues to follow racing through various club activities. Hal plans to one day hit the track. Whenever he has the time away from being involved with finance, he is pursuing his vintage racing license.

