

COVER FEATURE*

(*Professional drivers on closed circuits.)

YOU WILL BELIEVE A RAM CAN FLY!

The Mopar Ram Runner



MOPAR® MAGAZINE GOES BEHIND-THE-SCENES ON THE CREATION OF MOPAR'S HIGH-FLYING 2010 MOAB JEEP® SAFARI SMASH HIT—THE MOPAR RAM RUNNER.

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RAM RUNNER

Game changer.

Those two words succinctly and accurately describe the Mopar *Ram Runner*, which made its much-acclaimed debut at the 44th Annual Moab Jeep Safari in Moab, Utah in March. Media and Moab attendees went wide-eyed and slack jawed watching the customized production truck fly through the air and easily rumble over obstacles, and upon returning to their computers they quickly told the world about Mopar's new masterpiece. The Mopar *Ram Runner* has earned more ink than Brangelina and Lindsay Lohan combined and garnered enough gushing blog posts to make Mopar's band of off-road engineers blush.

What prompted the creation of this Mopar parts-laden Ram, designed to rival a certain off-road truck named after a birdie and built by the folks over at the Blue Oval? Well, one rationale for the birth of the Mopar *Ram Runner* can also be summed up in two words: go fast!

"Since we formed the off-road group a few years ago and started attending events, it came to our attention that the younger enthusiasts are looking for the go-fast aspect, along with rock-crawling capabilities," said Keith Montone, Manager – Mopar Jeep and Ram Off-Road Engineering. "That's the way the industry is going; consumers want to build their off-road vehicles to go faster. It's a direction we want to take our off-road group in the future—a little bit more focus on the go fast. Everybody likes a little speed off-road now and then."

Another goal of the project was to connect with diehard Mopar off-road racers and enthusiasts.

"The motivation behind the Mopar *Ram Runner* was Mopar's long history in off-road racing," said Pat Muldoon, Senior Manager, Product Development Engineering, Chrysler Group LLC. "A lot of our heritage goes back to Walker Evans. We've long had a presence in the off-road sand racing world, so the *Ram Runner* lends itself really well to this kind of application.

"Part of what the public has seen from Mopar in the off-road market, especially on the Jeep side but also now on the Ram Truck side, is a reconnection of Mopar to its really hard core enthusiasts. The *Ram Runner* is a test bed but also an opportunity to kind of showcase the possibilities of the truck. When you get to the far reaches of the race side of this game, it's an opportunity to show customers the full potential of the vehicle. By doing that we stay connected to the sports side of this, and really connect to a large part of our audience."

Once the Mopar off-road engineering group, nicknamed the "Lunatic Fringe" and comprised of Montone and off-road Jeep and Ram technical experts Steve Houtman and Tony Carvallo, determined the plan was to build a go-fast Ram, initial discussions on how to go forward began at the 2009 Moab Jeep Safari.

The Mopar *Ram Runner* (foreground) and Kent Kroeker's SCORE Desert Series Ram, posed together at the 2010 Moab Jeep Safari.



Photo: SaraMae Kroeker

"We take a walk around on the last day of the Moab event, gather our thoughts and get a start point for next year's Moab. The birthplace of the *Ram Runner* was right there at Moab, while it's fresh in our minds and we've had a chance to interact with our customers," said Muldoon, who described his role in the *Ram Runner's* creation as "some idea generation, some issue removal, and trying to pair the right people on the build and keep them moving in the right direction."

Explained Montone, "We got the group together to talk about what the truck would be, what it would look like. I knew we wanted the long travel suspension and we wanted the fiberglass fenders, front and rear. We also wanted to utilize other Mopar parts, such as the performance hood, which looks really good on a vehicle."

Upon returning to Mopar HQ, Montone's team had to put their plans in motion pronto if they were to make the *Ram Runner* a reality in time for the 2010 Moab Jeep Safari event.

"When you talk about time frame, you've got about a year, but really the first couple of months are fully identifying what it is you're going to try to attain the following year," said Muldoon. "The last two months are the mad rush. Whenever you're working in a full-vehicle prototype that you eventually intend to take to production, your test cell is the actual vehicle you're bringing. You're learning lessons as you're building that vehicle."

Montone and his team turned to Kent Kroeker, owner of Kroeker Off-Road Engineering (KORE) and himself an off-road racer for more than 20 years, to bring the Mopar *Ram Runner* to life.

"We've known Kent for a few years now. We started talking, and he's a desert racer, so we started to explore things we could do with him," recalled Montone. "After the 2009 Moab Jeep Safari I said to Kent, 'I'd like to take one of your desert race suspensions and put it on the Ram truck.' Kent's a wild man, and he said, 'Yeah, we can do it.'"

"I can't overestimate how much Kent helped. The Mopar *Ram Runner* wouldn't have happened without Kent. He runs heavy duty in his race truck, and we wanted to take the kits and push them to the more light duty pre-runner. We wanted to apply his racing



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— Pat Muldoon,
Senior Manager, Product
Development Engineering,
Chrysler Group LLC

knowledge and expertise to a Ram 1500. It's a good marriage."

Kroeker's knowledge of the Ram has been gained through hours of wheel time racing over the "whoops," rocks and obstacles of the off-road course. He currently competes in a Dodge Ram powered by a Mopar 540 Max Wedge engine in SCORE competition. In 2004, Kroeker drove a stock Dodge Ram 2500 (the truck still had air conditioning and its CD player!) in the famed Baja 1000, earning a third-place finish. Following the race, as his competitors trailered their rigs, Kroeker simply hopped in his Ram's cab and drove back to his hometown of San Diego, Calif.!

"The idea was that it was a testament to the durability and toughness of the Ram platform and KORE's suspension," said Kroeker. "It put KORE on the map."

It surely put KORE on Mopar's map. Key to the Mopar off-road team's concept of a go-fast Ram was a suspension kit capable of absorbing the massive off-road impacts. Enter Kroeker and KORE to design the long travel suspension kit on the Mopar *Ram Runner* and bring the vision of Montone's group to life.

"We feel like we have a lot to offer with the suspension we've developed, and we can match up with our competitors," Montone said proudly. "It's a challenging part of the market, to make a suspension that can survive those tremendous impacts. We designed the kit as a pre-runner for an event like the Baja 1000. It's our first attempt at a desert racer."

Kroeker created fiberglass molds and poured the glass, creating and shaping the body panels, bumpers and fenders on the *Ram Runner* to accommodate the large 35-inch General Grabber competition tires. The KORE team also installed a six-point roll cage; basically, aside from the cab, frame and drivetrain, the entire vehicle was built or fabricated for its Moab debut. The front end boasts a tubular Baja bumper and aluminum skid plate combination, with four high-powered LED lights showing the way for night time off-roading. Under the hood is, of course, a Mopar HEMI® engine, this one of the 5.7-liter variety. Kroeker at times directed 15 men working simultaneously on the project, with KORE logging a total of 2,000 man hours to get the truck done on a tight time frame.

The designs utilized on the Mopar *Ram Runner*, such as on the high-angle CV joints combined with splined axles made of 300 M tool steel and the three-inch Fox shocks, were designs that had been previously proven by Kroeker on his race truck, but due to limited test time, Kroeker and the Mopar off-road team were a bit apprehensive prior to the *Ram Runner's* 2010 Moab Jeep Safari debut. Would it perform as hoped in the harsh Moab terrain, under the bright lights of the media microscope?

"You never really know how things are going to work until the rubber meets the road," said Kroeker.

Well, the rubber (and steel and fiberglass) met the road (and the sand) with astonishingly positive results. During the Mopar media day at the Moab sand dunes, the Mopar *Ram Runner* flew in the air more than 60 times and performed flawlessly, wowing the gathering of off-road journalists.

"I think we've had an overwhelmingly positive response," said Montone. "We had the *Ram Runner* in the air at least 65 to 70 times. One of the journalists at Moab told me, 'You never tire of seeing a truck in the air.' People are really excited about it. They see Mopar is coming back, we're coming at the competition, and we're doing it better than them in terms of performance. The off-road group here, we have 50 to 60 years of combined off-road experience between myself, Tony and Steve. We use that knowledge when we design a vehicle. We try to do a lot of thinking beforehand. When a vehicle goes out and performs at a high level, we're pleased, but on the other hand it's as we expected it to perform. We designed it with the intent to take a lot of abuse, and it's living up to our expectations."

"It dovetails to our philosophy in the off-road group. You do what you say you can do. You just don't talk about it, you build the vehicle and then you go and show everybody what it can do."

Added Muldoon, "You know that you've connected with your customers when you see it on magazine covers and in articles, and you see customers blogging to one another and generating excitement. It's a really gratifying part of the job to know that you've connected with your customers."

Kroeker made multiple runs in the Mopar *Ram Runner* at Moab, and any pre-event

apprehensions soon faded away.

"It was particularly exciting for me, because we had not tested the truck, aside from some mild off-roading," Kroeker said. "It exceeded my expectations. Small bump compliance was beautiful and its ability to absorb the impact of a seven-foot flight through the air was phenomenal.

"The truck is in the process of converting people. Every time people see it, they say, 'Wow, look at that Ram. I have to get one, that thing's cool!' Some perceive the Ram as a robust, stable, reliable truck that you can depend on. With the Mopar Ram Runner, I think people will also view the Ram as fun, exciting, youthful and sophisticated.

The Ram Runner has the highest level of sophistication in off-road suspension technology."

With the Moab debut in the rear view mirror, the Mopar team and Kroeker are working up a sweat yet again to bring the technology of the Mopar *Ram Runner* to the clamoring off-road community. According to Montone, the Mopar parts utilized on the *Ram Runner* will be available in Stage 1 and Stage 2 kits. The Stage 1 kit, which is already available, offers a direct bolt-on, high-performance suspension system. The Stage 2 kit will be revealed at the 2010 Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) Show in Las Vegas this fall, and from the sounds of it will be on every off-roaders' wish list.

Kent Kroeker (center, in glasses and red shirt), driver of a Mopar-powered Ram (shown top left) in the SCORE Desert Series, played an instrumental role in the development of the Mopar Ram Runner.

"The Stage 2 kit will be a lot more bad to the bone," revealed Montone. "It'll have more articulation, 14 inches of travel in the suspension, machined aluminum upper A-arms, chromoly steel lowers, three inch internal bypass shocks and fender flare kits.

"We'll have all these kits and parts available at SEMA, and consumers will also have the option to pick and choose. If an off-roader wants to start out with the fender flares or the suspension or the bumpers, they will be able to purchase each part in the kits separately."

The Mopar *Ram Runner* will also be tweaked before it is seen again at SEMA.



Photo Courtesy of Kent Kroeker



Photo: SaraMae Kroeker



"The *Ram Runner's* not done yet. There is some fine tuning that needs to be done," teased Montone. "It will be different when it comes to SEMA; it'll be a lot cooler. That's all we are going to say. The cooks are still in the kitchen working on stuff."

As to the question of whether there may be a limited production run of Mopar *Ram Runners*, "Lunatic Fringe" member Houtman remarked, "It's not that far from being a production truck. It has a stock engine and it's compliant with emission standards everywhere, so it's not a problem. I think that's something we would want to look at, but the platform would have to bless it."

Kroeker would be all for a *Ram Runner* production truck.

"This is America; the bold people win. If you're not willing to take chances, you're not going to succeed,"

— Kent Kroeker

"This is America; the bold people win. If you're not willing to take chances, you're not going to succeed," said Kroeker. "That would be a tremendously bold move for Chrysler, Ram and Mopar. I think we're at a crossroads, where it's going to take some bold, innovative thinking to execute this. That's why I'm excited about the involvement of Fiat. They know about inspiring people, with cars like the Ferrari and Maserati."

"Right now the ultimate goal is to take some version of the Mopar *Ram Runner* into a production available part," said Muldoon. "That's always the next phase when we come back from Moab. It's where the rubber meets the road, where we actually get this stuff in production and then continue to read our customers and see if we've hit our mark. We make sure what we build delivers on the promise. Every year we

try to come with something unique, with something that takes us to our most hard-core customers, but we want to make sure it's something that can be produced. We don't build concept cars. We build future production opportunities. If we take it to Moab, the intention is to follow through with it."

Translation: Mopar is putting up, not shutting up. Make way on the hills and on the trails, 'cause one way or another, either in kits or a limited production run truck, the Mopar *Ram Runner* is coming to the off-road—and soon!

For information on additional Mopar off-road parts and accessories, check out the Mopar Originals story on pages 26–31. To purchase Mopar off-road parts and accessories, shop the Mopar eStore by logging on to www.mopar.com. ■

MOPAR RAM RUNNER

P5155258 – DS Pre-Runner 3" Lift Kit

*P5155662 – DS Pre-Runner 4" Extended Travel Lift Kit

*P5155663 – Front Pre-Runner Bumper

*P5155664 – Tubular Tire Carrier Tailgate

*P5155665 – Front Pre-Runner Fenders

*P5155666 – Rear Pre-Runner Fenders

*November Availability

