

THE BUSINESS OF RACING

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RACING BUSINESS PROFILE:

CBM MOTORSPORTS

Innovation and diversity have kept this Southern California high-performance center steadily growing beyond its core engine-building business.

BY DREW HARDIN

Running a business in California is not for the faint of heart. Rents are high. Taxes are, too. State and local regulations don't always fall on the side of commerce, especially if that commerce includes manufacturing. Yet Bruce McKillop and Chris Bland, co-owners and founders of CBM Motorsports in Colton, have managed to thrive despite the challenges they've faced since setting up shop in 2006.

The secret to their success? "We've expanded our sights on different kinds of businesses," explained McKillop. In doing so, CBM Motorsports has grown from an engine-building shop occupying 1,200 square feet in a subleased warehouse to a performance multiplex, with two buildings totaling 45,000 square feet on 4.5 acres of land. Engine building still plays a key role in the multi-faceted shop, but McKillop and Bland also have branched out into engine tuning, parts manufacturing and retail, e-commerce and vehicle sales.

They also diversified beyond building engines for the active off-roading community in and around Southern California's Inland Empire, where their operations have been based since the beginning. "Over the last five years, our business has progressed from being about 90 percent off-road to about 60 percent," McKillop said. "The other 40 percent are car enthusiasts who have classic cars, muscle cars, and hot rods."

What they all have in common is CBM Motorsports' specialty: high-performance versions of GM's LS-based engines. "We're so busy we don't have time to do everything, so we decided to focus on what we're good at."

ON THEIR OWN

McKillop and Bland met when they both worked for an automotive group in nearby Ontario. McKillop was the parts and service director for three of the auto group's dealerships and was also a partner in a GM accessory business. Bland was an ASE-certified GM technician at the automotive group, and he also built sand-rail engines in his home garage. It was supposed to be a side business, but Bland became so busy with his engine customers that he decided to concentrate his efforts there and open his own shop. When he gave McKillop his notice, "I convinced him that it would be really hard to do it on his own," McKillop recalled. "I offered to partner with him."

McKillop found a warehouse within the auto group that wasn't being used, and he sublet 1,200 square feet for the shop and 800 for the office. There were three employees. Within three years their footprint grew to 8,000 square



feet, but they were forced to move when the warehouse was sold.

They moved to a 12,000-square-foot building in Rancho Cucamonga, but soon it was "bursting at the seams," McKillop said. They endured that tight space for six years, and then a search for a new location turned up one of the buildings they're in now in Colton. At the time it had been abandoned, and vandals had damaged the property. "It needed a lot of improvement, so we were able to buy it at a good rate," McKillop said. "But



Bruce McKillop, CBM Motorsports co-owner

then we spent the next six months with a contractor there every day getting it ready for us.”

The City of Colton wouldn’t allow them to open until every bit of work was finished. “We bought it in April 2016 and moved in November, but the city wouldn’t allow us to open until January 2017, when they finally issued us a permit to work in the city.”

The transition took its toll. “We had depleted our inventory in preparation of the move and exhausted all our income,” McKillop said. “And then business got slow. We had to lay off six people.”

In this part of California, “sand season” typically runs from October to February. After that, McKillop said, his customers “take off and go to the river”—the nearby Colorado River, where

spring and summer desert temperatures are more tolerable on the water—“and they’re not playing with their toys anymore.”

Years of experience in the community taught McKillop and Bland to “take on two or three big projects” to get them through the summer months, but the early months of 2017 were leaner than usual. Yet by August of that year, the business had rebounded enough that they were able to rehire almost all their laid-off personnel.

Today, the bustling facility has 22 full-time employees, and McKillop sees very little turnover. “We might lose and hire two employees a year. When we need to find new people, we’ll post ads on the local Craigslist and on websites we’re affiliated with. We like to hire trained technicians, but because what we do is



CBM Motorsports operates out of a performance multiplex in Colton, California. And while engine building plays a vital role for the shop, CBM's owners have also branched out into retail, pictured here, as well as parts manufacturing, engine tuning, e-commerce, and vehicle sales.

so unique, it's hard to find someone who has, for instance, already pulled an engine on a sand rail. They may have experience working on engines and chassis, but it's not what we do. We're fine doing a lot of training, as long as they have common knowledge of working on vehicles."

BUSINESS EXPANSION

To weather the seasonality of the sand-rail business, McKillop and Bland looked for other opportunities. That's one reason why their client base is now broader than just the off-road market. "We're involved with drifting; we have customers who do track-day events and road racing. But many of them are just car enthusiasts who have a classic car or a hot rod and want to put an LS or LT motor in it."

McKillop said, "In the last six or seven years we've gotten heavily into parts manufacturing," requiring an investment in CNC machines and the personnel to run them. Among the company's most popular products is a billet aluminum tool set used to align the front and rear seals on an LS engine block. "We sell probably 20 of those a week," McKillop said. "It's pretty amazing." Also popular are billet aluminum brackets that relocate the LS engine's alternator, air-conditioning compressor, and other accessories; and a billet belt-alignment tool to ensure the serpentine belt will stay on after an engine is modified.

Helping to move those parts are "successful" Amazon and eBay stores, as well as parts displays in CBM Motorsports' 10,000-square-foot showroom. "But we don't have 10,000 square feet of parts," McKillop

admitted, so cars are parked there as well. "Sand rails, hot rods, muscle cars—we take them on consignment, and it gives customers something to look at in the showroom." Sales average "a couple a month," McKillop said, "but in sand season we have sold eight sand rails in three weeks."

In addition to outright engine builds, CBM Motorsports is also modifying and tuning engines. Here, the business goes beyond its LS roots.

"We get calls about Fords, Dodges, and Jeeps all the time," McKillop said. "We don't want to work on the motors, but we will install supercharger kits with EO numbers on those cars. We also have some late-model Ford 5.0 CNC-ported heads because there's such a demand for Mustang parts."

Engine tuning has become a big part of the business. There are two in-ground chassis dynos at the CBM Motorsports

compound, and an engine dyno room is under construction. Last year the company hired tuner Josh West out of Boise, Idaho. "He was big in tuning for the King of the Hammers and Ultra4 cars for about five years," McKillop said, noting that soon after his hire, CBM Motorsports inked a deal to be the official engine builder for the King of the Hammers desert race. "We had a booth out there doing tuning this year, and we were helping every racer, not just our customers. It worked out really well."

NEW DIRECTION

Bland has also taken CBM Motorsports' tuning efforts in a whole new direction, literally: When we interviewed McKillop earlier this year, Bland was on one of his regular trips to Qatar and Dubai.

About 10 years ago, McKillop started building relationships in that region when he sold his personal sand rail in Dubai. From that point Bland started traveling to the Middle East two or three times a year "to help them repair and tune engines, and also train them to do a lot of that stuff themselves," McKillop said. "Now he goes over to tune, maintain relationships, problem solve, and so on. They installed the same dyno we use at home in both Qatar and Dubai, and we have given them tuning keys to use on our computers. We can even remote-tune them from the US if needed."

Demands for Bland's time are high. "Typically, when he arrives in Qatar, they'll have 40 cars waiting for him. He'll start at 8 in the morning, work until 5 the next morning, then go back to the hotel, get a couple hours of sleep, and start all over again. He'll do that for four days, then he'll travel to Dubai to do

Longtime customer and Formula Drift Pro2 racer Micah Diaz, pictured here, praised CBM Motorsports as a one-stop shop. "The biggest thing for me is having someone who can source the parts, balance the parts, install the parts, and then tune the motor as well—having that overall package available and ready to go," Diaz said.



the same thing."

McKillop said most of what Bland works on in the Middle East is "sand rail stuff. Once in a while he'll tune a motor for a car, but not very often." He also noted a distinct shift in that market. "The sand rail market there is only a 10-year-old market. Five years ago, they were spending a million dollars a year; now it's more like half a million. The market is so saturated now, they probably have 500 sand rails. Now they're starting to rebuild what they have rather than buying new. They'll send engines back to us to freshen up, switch from blower to blower, blower to turbo. They'll ask us about our newest parts, what camshafts work best, which cylinder heads we are using this year."

To that end, McKillop and Bland work hard to stay on the cutting edge when it comes to their engine-building business. That includes developing new products when they see a need. "We've done a lot of twin-turbo setups, and they were always air-to-air," McKillop explained. "But on a 2,000-horsepower engine, the intake temperatures can get too warm. We took a Whipple manifold from a supercharger with a water-cooled intercooler,

took the top hat off it, and made our own intake manifold. Now, most of the big, fast sand rails are using air-to-water rather than air-to-air because it's so much more efficient.

"We drive a lot of innovation because we're so large in the off-road industry," he added. "When we go in a direction we think is right, a lot of other people will follow."

CORE VALUE

Beyond innovation and diversity in what they do, McKillop credits a core value for the success of CBM Motorsports: "We try to be as genuine as possible. We don't put stuff out there that doesn't work. We do a good job of testing products before we put them on cars.

"I've had customers who, when they come in here, they're hot to spend a lot of money on an engine, but I'll talk them out of it," McKillop added. "Hey, I like to spend other people's money, but only when it makes sense. I think people appreciate that. It's a trust issue."

One customer who can speak directly to that is Steve Maldonado. The construction company owner has been an avid dune runner since he was a kid on three-wheelers





With 22 full-time employees, CBM Motorsports reports low turnover. When they do have an open position, CBM will post on industry websites and the local Craigslist page, according to Bruce McKillop, CBM co-owner and founder. Pictured here is Jody Vollmer lapping valves for an LS3 engine.

and has been working with CBM Motorsports for about 10 years. "Bruce built my first motor, an LS1, and then I had him build a really big motor for my new Funco car." The naturally aspirated LS7 stroker "was strong," Maldonado said, "but Bruce said to me, 'I guarantee you're going to come back for more power. Why don't we put the right cam in it, so when you do come back it will be less expensive than a whole new motor build.'"

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Engine tuning has become a big part of CBM Motorsports' services, especially after hiring tuner Josh West, pictured here. "He was big in tuning for the King of the Hammers and Ultra4 cars for about five years," said CBM co-owner and co-founder Bruce McKillop.

"I'm glad I did," Maldonado said. "Within the season I was back and had it rebuilt with a Whipple supercharger, and it saved me thousands of dollars doing it Bruce's way." The LS7 now puts out "960 horsepower to the wheels and about 1,100 to the crank," said Maldonado.

"What they do makes me very, very happy,"

he added. "In terms of customer service, they do more than they have to. They built my motor, delivered it to Funco, and then picked it up. Whenever they have my car, they look it over to make sure there's no damage before the car leaves. Another thing: Bruce takes my call when I'm out in the desert. If I hear something I don't think is right, he will call me right back. Not everybody will answer your call on a big weekend, but he does. It's phenomenal service."

Formula Drift Pro2 racer Micah Diaz also appreciates the communication and feedback he gets from CBM Motorsports. He first approached the shop three years ago when he "lifted one of the heads" on the LS motor in his E46 BMW and blew a head gasket. "They took my 6.0 engine and turned it into a 6.8 stroker that I've been beating the hell out of with zero hiccups."

The morning we spoke with Diaz he had been talking with the shop about its progress on a new cam installation. "Bruce and Chris have been extremely helpful, and when they get busy, the guys on the floor send updates to me. It's a real team effort over there."

Even more important to Diaz is the one-stop-shop nature of the business. "The biggest thing for me is having someone who can source the parts, balance the parts, install the parts, and then tune the motor as well—having that overall package available and ready to go. Most guys go to one shop to get the parts, another to build the engine, and another to tune it. Then if something goes wrong, you have the builder blaming the tuner and the tuner blaming the builder. But this is all from the same company. The whole package is all there. It's so nice."

Has Diaz been tempted to keep his engine builder a secret from competitors? He laughed. "It would be nice to keep it a secret, but when you're constantly being asked, 'Why doesn't your motor break down?' it's hard to keep it a secret. I want everybody to know. A lot of my success is dependent on my sponsors and their success."

"I've sent several competitors there," Diaz added, "especially those with tuner/builder issues. I've told them, 'Quit playing games and get to CBM to have your stuff built right.'" **PRI**

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