



CLASSIC TRUCK PERFORMANCE

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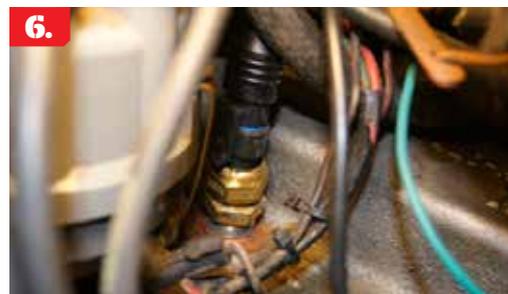
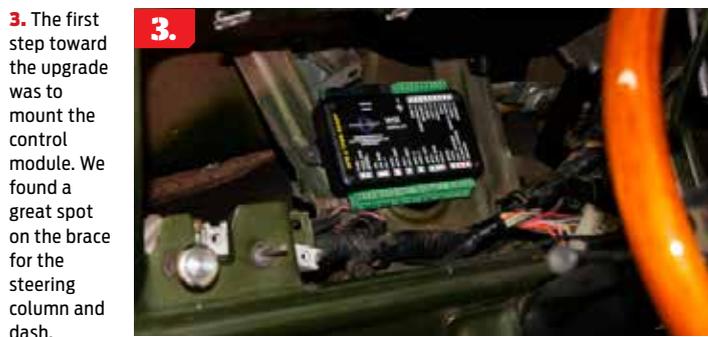
BY DON LINDFORS ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR

KEEPING COOL & KEEPING TRACK

Part II: The Dakota Digital Gauges and LMC Truck Dash

In the last installment on our '76 F-100 project we did a Vintage Air air conditioning/heater installation. Our truck didn't come with factory air and that just doesn't cut it for a hauler in SoCal where the summers can be a bit toasty. The kit was very complete, the installation was quite straightforward, and the air blows nice and cold. Check out the Oct. '21 issue of *CTP* for the full story.

Looking at the dash as we were starting to pull it apart for the A/C vents and controls, it struck us how this was the perfect time to upgrade that gauge panel. This being a base model truck, it didn't have a full gauge setup, just warning lights for oil pressure and the alternator. Apparently the water temp gauge didn't work and the previous owner didn't trust the oil warning light as there were mismatched gauges hanging under the dash for temperature and pressure. The chrome trim on the bezel was worn and the lens had turned yellow, not to mention the cracked dashpad had a cheap plastic cover over it that was also cracked. Time for some changes.



1. The dash was really rough when we started; faded, nonfunctional gauges, aftermarket parts hanging under the dash, and a cracked cover over the cracked dashpad did not make for a pleasant sight.



2. After pulling the dash apart, the comparison between the well-worn original gauges and the new Dakota Digital VHX is like night and day.



4. Dakota Digital includes new sensors with adaptors for the speedometer, oil pressure, and water temp.

5. The aftermarket water temp sender was leaking a bit and was an old-style mechanical bourdon tube. We removed the distributor cap to make it easier to access and removed the sender using a flare wrench.

6. The Dakota Digital sensor went in with a single adapter and includes a heavy-duty wiring harness. We reinstalled the distributor cap once it was all tight.

7. The oil pressure sender port on Fords is behind the fuel pump and in front of the oil filter. The hard line was loose and leaking, making a bit of a mess.

8. After a little cleanup the new sensor went in along with the supplied harness.

9. The speed sensor replaces the cable in the transmission and includes the necessary adaptor for your specific transmission. Once again, a heavy-duty harness is included. That dirty old T-18 trans will soon be replaced by a five-speed transmission.

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10. Using a combination of the Dakota Digital instructions and the Ford wiring diagram, the factory wires for the high beam, turn signals, dash lights, ground, fuel gauge sender, 12V constant, and key on power, along with the new wires from the Dakota Digital harnesses for the oil, temp, and speed sensors, were all hooked up to the control box. The bulk of wiring under the control box is the factory Ford wiring without the wrapping.



11. The kit comes with this switch and bracket, which is used for programming the gauges and for toggling between different functions. We mounted it under the dash on the left side.

12. After the wires were connected, the gauge panel was linked with the CAT 5 cable and then installed in the dash. The new LMC bezel was installed; it fit perfectly to the dash and the Dakota Digital gauges without any gaps, plus it looked better than new.



12. Thinking of options for the gauges I considered everything from a factory gauge-style instrument panel to making an aluminum panel for aftermarket gauges. I then remembered a story I did for *Hot Bike* magazine 15 years ago on installing a Dakota Digital gauge pod with the vacuum fluorescent display and thought I'd see what they had to offer. I didn't really want the vacuum fluorescent-style gauges as it didn't fit the style of truck I was building so I was pleased to see that they also offer replacement instrument panels in their RTX, HDX, and VHX product lines. All of these resemble a factory-type gauge with a much more modern look and offer many optional features. Check out their website for the wide array of styles that are available for many classic trucks. We chose the VHX system with a Silver Face with White Needles and white backlighting. They offer many different faces and colors to suit your desire. The panel features a speedometer, tachometer, oil pressure, water temperature, fuel level, and voltage gauges. Additionally, there are two LCD readouts that can be programmed for different information, including odometer, trip meter, high-speed recall (perfect for checking up on your teenager when he borrows your classic), rpm recall, 0-to-60 times, quarter-miles times, hour meter, as

well as warnings like high temperature and low voltage. On top of that there are inputs for a check engine light, brake warning (can be either failure switch or e-brake on), 4x4 engaged, "Wait" (for diesel glow plugs), gear indicator for automatics, and even cruise control.

The kit comes complete with the gauges installed in the sealed mounting panel, all the senders with a variety of adaptors to suit most engines, wiring harnesses for the senders, a CAT 5 cable to connect the gauges to the control unit, and a computer control unit that integrates the senders to the gauges and contains the sensors for the acceleration display functions. Installation is straightforward with the control box mounting separately and is simple to wire up to the senders and power. We were able to use the factory wiring for power (both constant and key on, the fuel sender, lighting, and grounds). The only wire we had to add was one from the coil for the tachometer. The CAT 5 cable makes it easy to remove the gauge panel if you need to do any work under the dash. The gauge panel mounts to the original factory holes in the dash, no drilling necessary.



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With the new A/C vents and controls in the dash and the beautiful gauge package the remainder of the dash really looked sad. LMC Truck is one of the leaders in replacement and aftermarket parts for classic trucks, so a quick perusal of the catalog showed a staggering amount of replacement parts for the interior for these Dent Side trucks. We could have gone total restoration on the gauge panel while upgrading to the factory all-gauge version and replaced that yellowed lens with a nice new one. Since we had already decided to go with the Dakota Digital (which LMC carries as well), we ordered up a new black and chrome instrument bezel (they also offer the woodgrain version), headlight and wiper switch knobs, and a new dashpad that is a direct factory replacement. The bezel is exactly like the factory one would have looked when new and we even got new screws to replace the slightly rusty originals. The dashpad came with studs molded in just like the one from Ford and installed through the stock holes.

With the Vintage Air heat and A/C, Dakota Digital gauges, and the LMC replacement trim parts, our truck looks better than ever would have been thought of back in 1976, while upgrading the functionality and comfort of the truck. Not bad for a weekend's worth of work. **CTP**

► **SOURCES**

DAKOTA DIGITAL
(800) 852-3228
dakotadigital.com

LMC TRUCK
(800) 562-8782
lmctruck.com

VINTAGE AIR
(800) 862-6658
vintageair.com

- 13.** The LMC replacement knobs are factory fresh looking, it's the details that make the difference.
- 14.** LMC also supplies these OEM replacement dashpads. What a difference from the cracked factory pad with the cracked plastic cover that was over it.
- 15.** Following the directions, the simple programming was accomplished and we were ready to head out on the highway. The backlighting looks great, and with the gauges easy to read and supplying more information, we can easily monitor the vitals as well as the speed of the truck, all while looking better than it did new 45 years ago.



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