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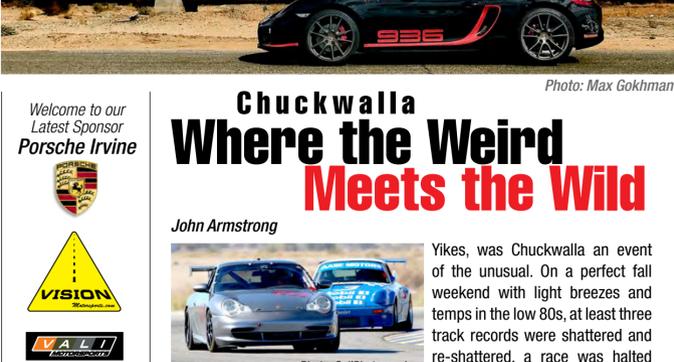


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Chuckwalla Where the Weird Meets the Wild

John Armstrong

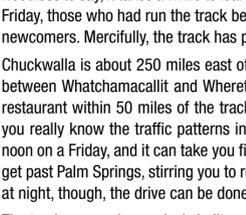


Photo: CaliPhotography

Yikes, was Chuckwalla an event of the unusual. On a perfect fall weekend with light breezes and temps in the low 80s, at least three track records were shattered and re-shattered, a race was halted after just four laps, cars broke in the strangest of ways, and two drivers vying for a Season Championship decided to start at the back of the pack just for the fun of it (it didn't work out for one of them). Furthermore, a complete novice won a race. And I was slow. Ok, that last one is not unusual.

The turnout for Chuckwalla this year was encouraging: 95 drivers, considerably up from the mere 50 we had when the club last ran the track two years ago. And for most of us the weekend was undiluted fun at this wonderfully varied raceway. Chuckwalla's 2.68 mile length has 17 well-planned turns that include sweepers, linked combinations, double apexes, a tricky decreasing radius, a tight kink, an off-camber downhill turn, and a banked bowl, as well as four straights and significant elevation changes. Needless to say, it takes a while to learn the course, and with no practice day Friday, those who had run the track before had substantial advantages over newcomers. Mercifully, the track has plenty of runoff everywhere.

Chuckwalla is about 250 miles east of downtown LA in the desert off I-10, between Whittamaccalites and Wherethehell, and there is nary a motel or restaurant within 50 miles of the track. The drive can be miserable unless you really know the traffic patterns in the southland. Start your drive after noon on a Friday, and it can take you five hours in bumper to bumper just to get past Palm Springs, stirring you to reflect on the futility of existence. Late at night, though, the drive can be done in half the time.

The track owners have wisely built a cluster of 40 cabins near the paddock with all the modern amenities, including, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, and living room with fold-away couch. Our club members booked them all at \$180/night plus tax, and everyone I spoke with was very satisfied. Cheap skate that I am, I stayed in an Indio motel but really didn't mind the 45-minute commute to that very fast last stretch of I-10. I felt virtuous, as only a self-rationalizing track fiend can, in putting the savings into my tire fund.

When I pulled into the paddock on Saturday morning, the first person I ran into was Don Matz, the tireless Board Member/PDS Director/Designer and Producer of Velocity online magazine. Don is one of the nicest guys in the club, and if you don't know him, go right up and introduce yourself at the next event. He'll have you writing articles for Velocity in no time. Don is extremely punctual. He asked me how my Chuckwalla article was coming along. I explained that the weekend hadn't occurred yet.

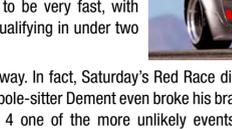


Photo: CaliPhotography

Don introduced me to his adult son Scott, to whom he was giving the best birthday present ever. Scott first flew in from New York then Don took care of his track fees, loaned him his own race car for the PDS sessions, and bought him a brand new set of Hoosiers to use for the weekend. (Actually, I'm pretty sure Don also used those stickers in the Orange race.) Unfortunately, they both had to miss a good deal of Saturday's sessions due to a broken rocker arm. Don Kravig of Precision Motor fixed the car, and that's how this great club works. The Matz duo was back on the track Sunday.

I observed the first oddity of the weekend in the first Red practice session. Coming around Turn 3, I saw a wheel rolling down the track all by itself. That was Brett Gaviglio's left rear. The wheel had literally broken off the hub. Fortunately his car wasn't damaged, he had a spare wheel, and he would return for a very successful weekend.

Two Red sessions later, in Qualifying, the record-breaking began. Dwain Dement, racing in the GT1 class, lay down a lap time of 1:49.676, bettering the old record by nearly 4/10ths of a second. Dwain's car, which would be the club's fastest all weekend, is worthy of a discussion all by itself.

It's an '05 996 GT2 Turbo that he built at Vision Motorsports, his well-known shop in Laguna Hills. He had originally begun building the car for a customer who ran into legal difficulties, went to jail, and couldn't pay to finish the work. Then a second person had stepped up to purchase the half-built car, but he had ended up getting a divorce and having to divest himself of the car. At this point Dwain was emotionally involved in the car, so he bought it and finished it for himself. He told me it's the best car he's ever built, and he has built plenty.

Back to Red Qualifying: Bob Mueller smashed the GT3 record by almost three seconds, with a 1:50.635 lap. Worth noting, Duane Selby also beat that previous GT3 mark which he himself had set two years earlier, with a 1:51.684. Since the Red Race would have a split start with GT4 cars trailing a few hundred yards behind the GT1-through-GT3s, the GT4 cars qualified separately. Brett Gaviglio took the pole, with Chick Richardson alongside him. By all indications every class in Saturday's 12-lap Red Race was going to be very fast, with 18 of the 25 drivers qualifying in under two minutes.

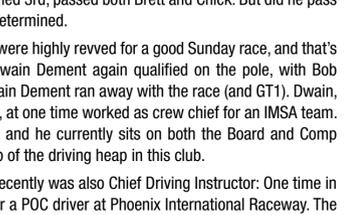


Photo: CaliPhotography

It didn't turn out that way. In fact, Saturday's Red Race didn't really turn out. The first three laps were brisk and clean; pole-sitter Dement even broke his brand new record in Lap 2 with a blistering 1:48.944. But in Lap 4 one of the more unlikely events in recent memory transpired. Highly esteemed former Chief Driving Instructor Marty Mehterian found himself coming up too fast on Dan Burnham as he exited T 7, the turn with the tricky decreasing radius. Marty lifted slightly off the throttle to avoid contact but he was on used tires—he was saving his better rubber for Sunday. The tires lost grip, and he spun. Cars darted every which way to avoid him. But Chuckwalla is relatively narrow as raceways go, and the POC Points Champion Brad Keegan had nowhere to go but into the rear of Marty's car. Parts flew all over the track. Fluids spewed. Brad's car rolled into the infield, but Marty's came to a stop in the middle of the track. Cleanup and towing were obviously going to take a while, so the race was black-flagged. That was that: a four-lap race.

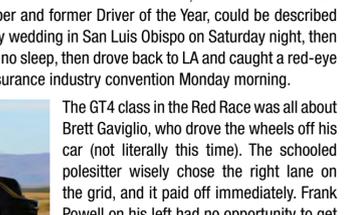


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Despite its brevity, the race was deemed by the Comp Committee to be official. Thus, the overall (and GT1) winner was Dement, followed by Bill Vogel. In GT2 class, which has been sparse of late, longtime stalwarts Gunter Enz and Dan Burnham finished 1-2. In GT3, the most populous race group with 14 cars, the top three were Bob Mueller, Rob Phillips, and Charles Persico.

The winners of the eight-car GT4 class have not been officially announced as of this writing. Brett had started on the GT4 pole, but he had chosen the left lane, which he quickly realized was a mistake. The kink at Turn 1 forced him to brake earlier than Chick Richardson on his right. Chick seized the opportunity and passed Brett before Turn 2 in the first lap. As the GT4 cars approached the crash site, Razvan Sporea, who had qualified 3rd, passed both Brett and Chick. But did he pass under yellow? That apparently is still being determined.

After Saturday's disappointment, Red racers were highly revved for a good Sunday race, and that's what most of them got. In the split start, Dwain Dement again qualified on the pole, with Bob Mueller next to him in the front row. Once again Dement ran away with the race (and GT1). Dwain, who has been involved in racing for 30 years, at one time worked as crew chief for an IMSA team. He has been the POC Competition Director, and he currently sits on both the Board and Comp Committee. He has earned his rank at the top of the driving heap in this club.

One more side note about Dwain, who until recently was also Chief Driving Instructor: One time in the early '90s he was delivering a 935 car for a POC driver at Phoenix International Raceway. The car's owner never made it to the event, and somehow, much to his surprise, Dwain was enlisted to drive the car in the race. He had never driven a car on a racetrack before. Nevertheless, he went out and took 3rd place. At the end of the race, Mike Hammond, the race director, approached him and told him he wanted him to instruct. Dwain protested, "But I need an instructor!" Mike would have none of it, and the following day the novice was instructing other rank beginners. Dwain has been teaching drivers ever since.

Getting back to the Red Race, in GT3 Bob Mueller put down some very quick laps initially and opened a gap, then pretty much cruised as he lapped GT4 cars. Towards the end, though, he saw Vali behind him shredding through traffic, and he resumed driving with urgency. He held on and beat Vali by only 2.527 seconds. Third place in GT3 went to Nathan Johnson, who finished less than a second behind Vali. Nathan, a Board Member and former Driver of the Year, could be described as a fanatical racer. He attended an obligatory wedding in San Luis Obispo on Saturday night, then drove six hours to the track, raced Sunday on no sleep, then drove back to LA and caught a red-eye to Indianapolis where he had to attend an insurance industry convention Monday morning.

The GT4 class in the Red Race was all about Brett Gaviglio, who drove the wheels off his car (not literally this time). The schooled pole-sitter wisely chose the right lane on the grid, and it paid off immediately. Frank Powell on his left had no opportunity to get by him at the 1-2 Turn combo. Not only did Brett lead the entire race and beat Frank by 8 1/2 seconds, he also caught up with and passed at least one trailing GT3 car. Dammit. Chick Richardson took 3rd after Razvan Sporea spun late in the race.

I was sorry to see some great drivers have to fall out of contention in Sunday's Red due to car issues. Duane Selby, another Driver of the Year, who had qualified 2nd in Race 1, continues to be plagued by new engine problems and had to pull aside early in the race. John Gordon, the Competition Chairman, who is also a former Driver of the Year (and my fellow alumnus from San Marino High School—go Titans!), had another of those freaky mishaps that kept occurring over the weekend. He was running in 3rd place in GT3 in Lap 9 when a bolt sheared on the upper droplink mount of his right front wheel. Are you ready for this? The bolt kept grinding inside the wheel until it wore a hole in the wheel, and the tire went flat. Race over. Brad Keegan, whose car couldn't be repaired for the race, borrowed a slower car just to garner competition points. All three of these hard-luck drivers have been locked in a tight competition for the GT3 Championship, but now it looks like Bob Mueller could take the crown at Willow Springs in December.

Over in the Orange group where the BSR Boxsters dominate the ranks, there were three races during the weekend—one on Saturday and two on Sunday. The Orange group chooses to run the additional race because their cars run at slightly lower speeds and weigh less than the Red group's cars, so they don't burn through rubber as quickly. Their tires are also less sticky, and most importantly, the BSR drivers have a mutual agreement to use only one set of new cloths for qualifying and all three races. Those guys and gals are smart—they make the extra race affordable. The way it shakes out, there is one Qualifying session to set the grid for the first Race. Race 1 results then determine the grid order for Race 2, and Race 2 results become Race 3's grid. You might say there's a lot riding on that one and only Qualifying session on Saturday.

The best qualifying time in the Orange group, 2:02.280, was laid down by Jason Wilberding, and the next best time was Steve Radenbaugh's 2:02.881. But those accomplished drivers are in orphan classes—EX and GT5 respectively. They start side by side at the front, but there is nobody to race against. Jason would go on to win the overall victory by 12 seconds in Orange Race 1. By contrast, there were 14 cars in BSR, with Anders Hainer leading all qualifiers in the class with a 2:03.219. With that time, Anders established a new BSR track record. The second-place qualifier in BSR was Nigel Maidment, who turned in a close 2:03.451. But for Anders' presence, it would be Nigel owning the new class record. These two have been duking it out all year for the championship, and at the start of the weekend, Nigel was leading by 22 points. Anders has the fresher car (having recently built a new one after a mishap at Laguna Seca that caused him to miss several races), and he is an ex-pro Grand Am champion with 20 years of racing experience, while Nigel has held a Cup Racing License for just four years.

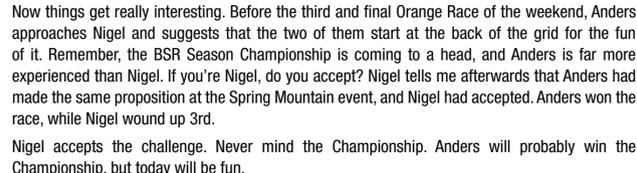


Photo: CaliPhotography

In this first Orange Race, Anders simply ran away from Nigel, beating him by almost 19 seconds. Nigel tried but couldn't keep up with Anders, so halfway through the race he decided to save his tires a bit and settle for 2nd place. Fiercely competitive, Nigel decided to save his tires for 3rd place in BSR between Joe Wiederholt, Branimir Kovacic, and Malcolm Van Halen, a freshly licensed driver in his very first race. Joe edged Branimir by less than 1/4 second, and Malcolm finished less than 1/2 second behind Branimir. It was quite an auspicious debut for Malcolm.

In Orange Race 2 on Sunday, the veteran Steve Alarcon, who is yet another former Driver of the Year, entered the race at the back of the pack. As the only driver in the depleted SCR class, he had run with the Red group in Race 1 the day before. I guess the Comp Committee had subsequently reassigned him to the Orange group. At any rate, after the lonely leader Jason Wilberding dropped out after 7 laps, Alarcon simply drove away from everyone and won the overall race by more than 21 seconds. Meanwhile Anders Hainer once again ran away from his BSR brothers and sisters, finishing almost 14 seconds in front of Nigel Maidment. The newcomer Malcolm Van Halen took a distant 3rd place, but he was almost eight seconds ahead of the rest of the BSR pack. In the second race of his life, Malcolm was already emerging as a factor in BSR.

Now things get really interesting. Before the third and final Orange Race of the weekend, Anders approaches Nigel and suggests that the two of them start at the back of the grid for the fun of it. Remember, the BSR Season Championship is coming to a head, and Anders is far more experienced than Nigel. If you're Nigel, do you accept? Nigel tells me afterwards that Anders had made the same proposition at the Spring Mountain event, and Nigel had accepted. Anders won the race, while Nigel wound up 3rd.

Nigel accepts the challenge. Never mind the Championship. Anders will probably win the Championship, but today will be fun.

The race gets under way, and there are a lot of cars to pass. Both Anders and Nigel are super impressed with how capable—and stubborn—the rest of the BSR drivers are. Every pass is difficult, especially on the narrow track with short straights. Anders leads the way through the traffic, and Nigel gamely follows. By Lap 8, they've passed eight drivers—four more to go to take the lead. But Anders gets a little too close as Branimir brakes hard in the off-camber Turn 9 at the top of the hill, and he clips him. Both cars spin. Branimir recovers and continues the race, but his chance for a podium finish is quashed. (Ironically, Branimir was also hit at the start of the race in a dustup that resulted in Joe Wiederholt's retirement in Lap 1.)

Anders' hood pops open from the contact with Branimir, and he can't see. His race is done. Nigel slips past Branimir and continues to battle, barely getting past Dave Leywas and Matthew Hollander, and at the checkered flag he has really earned his 2nd. The winner is—in a true Cinderella story—none other than Malcolm Van Halen. Malcolm the rookie wins the BSR race by an astounding 12 seconds.

After the race, Malcolm has this to say about his mind-blowing weekend. "My mindset going into the weekend wasn't to finish 1st but to finish the weekend with my car intact and to have learned from my mistakes. Finishing 5th was its own accomplishment. During the next race, the 3rd place finish just pushed me harder, which is why during my third race, I left everything out there and actually walked away with a finish that no one, not even myself, thought possible."



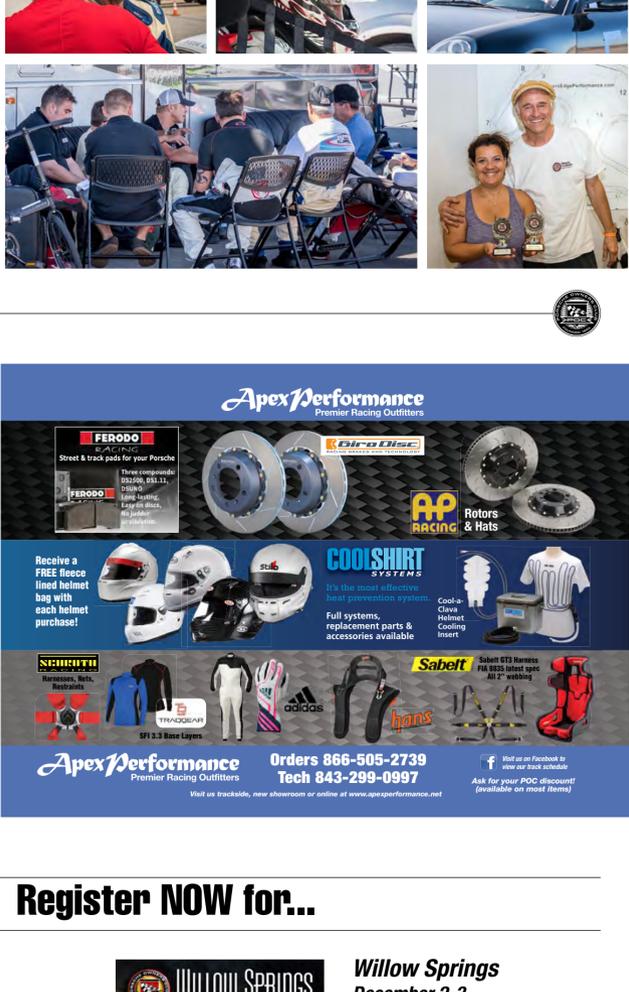
Photo: Frank Spasaro

Nigel and Anders will go to Willow Springs still battling for the Championship. Anders leads by four points, but he will be required by the Comp Committee to sit out the first race. He will then have to start the second race at the back of the grid. Will he coax Nigel to start at the back with him one more time? And what will transpire in the third and final race of the season?

A description of Chuckwalla weekend wouldn't be complete without mentioning Dwain Dement's party at his Vision Motorsports trailer encampment. After the track went cold on Saturday, Dwain generously provided all manner of beverages and snacks to everyone. It was pretty amazing to share a drink with stoked fellow racers as the sun's last golden rays glinted off the hoods of the lined-up racecars, then dissolved into a glow that bathed the desert in a deep, ethereal pink.

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Photos: Frank Spasaro



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