



VELOCITY NEWS

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SONOMA RACEWAY

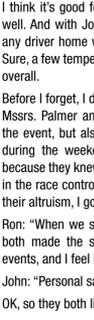
THE FINE LINE IN SONOMA

Story and Photos by: John Armstrong



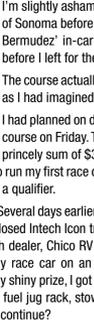
I know what it's like to hit a wall. I've hit a couple over the last 15 years, and it wasn't pleasant either time. One wall was concrete; the other was made of tires. Neither wall improved the condition of my car.

It was with some apprehension that I towed my car to the legendary Sonoma raceway for a few weekends ago to experience for the first time the Northern Sonoma Raceway. This 12-turn, 2.52 mile road course carved into the rolling hills of wine country is known for its brilliantly engineered up-and-down twisties linked by short straightaways. The elevation change from highest to lowest point is more than 160 feet. The racing surface is as smooth as silk. The course is also notorious for its walls—to wit, the close proximity of those walls to the track.



As I drove northward, I encouraged myself by mentally reviewing what Ross Bentley had written about walls in Speed Secrets—something to the effect of, “When you’re already driving close to a wall, the good news is you can’t hit it that hard.”

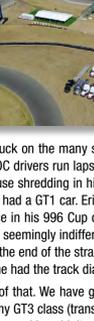
Despite this concern, I was really pumped to go to Sonoma. The POC hadn't been there since 2012, and it is hard to get a booking. It is reputed to be the busiest track in America, if not the world, with events scheduled about 340 days a year. These include IndyCar Grand Prix, NASCAR, and the SCCA National Championships.



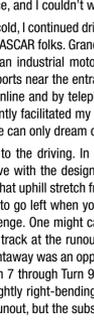
Our hardworking Director Ron Palmer and our tireless President of Motorsports John Gordon had managed to secure a single run group for the club, at no small cost, with a welcoming San Francisco HPDE club called Speed SF. Our run group would be restricted to Cup racers only. Regrettably, the single run group couldn't accommodate Time Attackers or PDS drivers. The Cup racers in all classes, from GT1 to Boxster Spec, would run the track together in every session and race.



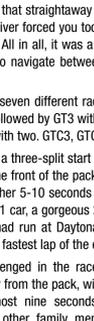
John limited the number of drivers to 45. As I turned out, though, only 32 POC racers actually showed up. John lamented to me over the weekend, “The POC doesn't travel well.” Which really is a shame. I love to experience faraway tracks like Thunderhill and Miller Motorsports Park, but there is no denying that the logistics, effort, and expense are vastly greater than they are for a weekend at one of our local tracks.



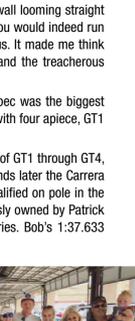
Nevertheless, the Board felt that this event was important enough for the Club to take a monetary hit at Sonoma in order to try to ease the cost for its intrepid wanderers. Due to terrific stewardship by our leaders, especially Ron and John Payne, who have secured numerous financial sponsors, the Club's bank account is in the best shape it has ever been.



I think it's good for us to spread our reputation throughout the land, as well. And with John Gordon's dire warning in mind that he would send any driver home who misbehaved, we would accept ourselves very well. Sure, a few tempers would flare, but we kept it in-house and looked sharp overall.

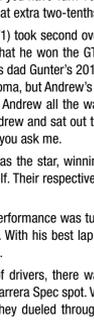


Before I forget, I do want to express my gratitude to Messrs. Palmer and Gordon, not just for organizing the event, but also for sacrificing their own racing during the weekend. Neither brought a race car because they knew they'd be too busy on the grid or in the race control tower. When I asked them about their altruism, I got these answers:



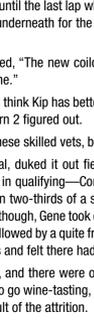
Ron: “When we signed up to be on the Board, we both made the sacrifices to have these types of events, and I feel it is the right thing to do.”

John: “Personal sacrifices? Like missing my dogs all weekend?”



OK, so they both live for the Porsche Owners Club.

I'm slightly ashamed to admit that I had never watched turn-by-turn video of Sonoma before John emailed us all a link to former Board member Alex Bermudez' in-car video of a race lap, which I finally watched the night before I left for the track.



The course actually looked like fun in the video and not quite as threatening as I had imagined.

I had planned on driving to Sonoma on Thursday night so I could try out the course on Friday. The raceway was offering half-day driving passes for the princely sum of \$325. I was prepared to grit my teeth and pay up because practice sessions and a qualifier.



But I got sidetracked. Several days earlier I had driven up to Chico, 1.5 hours north of Sacramento, to pick up a 24-ft enclosed Intech Icon trailer that I had custom-ordered six months earlier from California's only Intech dealer, Chico RV and Trailer. It was a fantasy that had finally come true. I had been towing my race car on an open trailer for long enough—almost a decade. Upon returning to LA with my shiny prize, I got caught up with accessorizing it as I had long envisioned: the tire cart, tool cart, fuel jug rack, stowaway sleeper/sofa, compressor, air hose reel, nitrogen tank holder.... Shall I continue?

Once I started, I couldn't stop myself. A couple of days and nights went by in a blur. I finally finished at 3 A.M. Friday morning, slept for a couple of hours, then loaded up and headed to Sonoma, 400 miles away. I had to nap twice en route. By the time I reached the race track, it was already after 3 P.M. I quickly unloaded my car and proceeded directly to the sales office atop the hill. It was 3:15. The manager told me that the track would go closed at 4, but I could still purchase a pass for the last half-hour of the day. However, there would be no discount. The price would still be \$325. Much as I lusted for those few minutes on the track, I couldn't possibly justify tossing away all that money.

Instead, I drove my truck on the many service roads encircling the track to key viewing points and watched other POC drivers run laps. Man, they looked good: Gene Sigal carving it up in his Boxster; Kip Waterhouse shredding in his Carrera Spec; Bob Mueller ripping in his GT1 car. I didn't even know he had a GT1 car. Eric Olberz flying in that day-glo GT4 (GT3 class), Tom Mueller in hyper-space in his 996 Cup car (GT2 class). Cars drifting slightly through the esses, coming out of Turn 10 seemingly indifferent to the wall so close on the left, hard braking in front of the wall directly at the end of the straightaway leading into the hairpin of Turn 11. Just what I was afraid of: everyone had the track dialed in.

I wasn't really afraid of that. We have great drivers in the club, and I don't drive enough to be really competitive in my GT3 class (translation: I lack the nerve and skill). I had to have an exhilarating experience, and I couldn't wait to get on the track and start trying to figure it out.

When the track went cold, I continued driving all over the complex. It's huge. There's an expanded oval section for the NASCAR folks. Grandstands all around the place. A gas station. Behind the Turn 9 Terrace bleachers, an industrial market park with 70-plus businesses! And, of course, Wine Country Motorsports near the entrance. I have bought a lot of stuff (shoes, helmet, driving suit) from this store online and by telephone, and it was fun to go in and put faces to Rob and Sean, who have patiently facilitated my running up the credit card debt. And what an incredible in-store inventory. One can only dream of a place like this at Willow Springs.

OK, OK, fast forward to the driving. In my first session, as expected, I was lost at sea. But I immediately fell in love with the design of the track. Some of the turns were puzzles I hadn't encountered before. That uphill stretch from Turn 1 through Turn 2, with the track dropping away and encouraging you to go left when you had to go right, and with the blind run-out at the top, was an exciting challenge. One might call it potentially harrowing since the wall is pretty close to the left side of the track at the runout. The downhill bowl of Turn 6, known as the Carousel, dumping into a straightaway was an opportunity for speed I could never quite take advantage of. The twisties from Turn 7 through Turn 9 required screwing up some faith in order to straighten them out fast. The slightly right-bending, high-speed Turn 10 demanded utmost attention, with the wall so near the runout, but the subsequent straightaway so crucially inviting.

Did you dare pass on that straightaway or in the hairpin Turn 11 with the wall looming straight ahead? If the other driver forced you too wide, or if you lost your brakes, you would indeed run straight into the wall. All in all, it was a course that required constant focus. It made me think of Odysseus having to navigate between the deadly rocks of Charybdis and the treacherous whirlpools of Scylla.

On Saturday we had seven different race classes in the group. Boxster Spec was the biggest group with 10 cars, followed by GT3 with five, then GT4 and Carrera Spec with four apiece, GT1 with three, and GT2 with two. GT3C, GT4C, and GT7 only had one car each.

Gordon decided to do a three-split start in the race, with the 16 faster cars of GT1 through GT4, plus GT3C and 4 of the front of the pack in the first group, then 5-10 seconds later the Carrera Spec group, and another 5-10 seconds later the Boxsters. Bob Mueller qualified on pole in the faster group in his GT1 car, a gorgeous 2014 GT America that was previously owned by Patrick Dempsey Racing. It had run at Daytona in the 2014 and 2015 Tudor Series. Bob's 1:37.633 qualifier would be the fastest lap of the entire weekend.

Bob was never challenged in the race and pretty much ran away from the pack, winning by a margin of almost nine seconds. His parents and several other family members had driven over from their homes in Napa to watch the race, which made the victory that much more satisfying.

Afterwards Bob shared his impressions of the track. “Sonoma is one of my favorite tracks, and I get there a few times a year with my family. It's a busy track. There is always something going on. Never much time to wipe the sweat off your brow. When you know the track, and the car is handling well, from Turn 1 to the exit of the Carousel can feel like one flowing section rather than a bunch of segments. It can really be rhythmic because there are no straights to break it up, and that's not like any other track I've been on. And then you have Turn 10, where you're asking yourself each time you get there, ‘How bad do I want that extra two-tenths?’”

Scott Mc Pherson (GT1) took second overall in Saturday's race, and Tom Mueller took the third spot—which meant that he won the GT2 class. Andrew Enz finished next, landing him 2nd in GT2. Andrew drove his dad Guntner's 2010 Factory Cup car. Guntner had transported both his and Andrew's cars to Sonoma, but Andrew's clutch had broken in Friday's practice. Since Guntner felt responsible for ruining Andrew's all the way from New York and his ad agency for the weekend, he gave his car to Andrew and sat out the race himself—quite a fatherly sacrifice for a driving maniac like Guntner, if you ask me.

In GT3, Eric Olberz was the star, winning the class by 15.697 seconds over Rob Phillips, who was plenty fast himself. Their respective best laps of 1:44.572 and 1:46.247 caught everyone's attention.

Another impressive performance was turned in by Steve Town, who was the lone GT4 driver to finish on the lead lap. With his best lap of 1:49.572, he was one of only nine drivers to turn a sub-1:50 all weekend.

In the second pack of drivers, there was a spirited battle between Kip Waterhouse and Vern Buwald for the top Carrera Spec spot. Vern outqualified Kip by .825 second and started on pole with Kip alongside. They duelled throughout the race. Describing the exciting finish, Kip said, “Vern kept me at bay until the last lap where he went wide—I think his car was pushing a bit—at turn 11, and I snuck underneath for the last 100 yards.” At the checkered flag, Kip nipped Vern by just .774 second.

Kip modestly suggested, “The new coilovers in the rear of my car must have done the job, as Vern normally beats me.”

Vern's take: “All said, I think Kip has better racing skills than I. He was much better on the brakes at Turn 11 and had Turn 2 figured out.

I like the humility of these skilled vets, both of whom have raced in the club for decades.

The Boxsters, as usual, duked it out fiercely (and this is where tempers came into play). The top three BSR drivers, qualified by Gene Sigal, Steve Radenbaugh, Matt Hollander, and Gene Sigal—qualified within two-thirds of the second of one another. Steve's 1:55.340 top 10 on the pole. During the race, though, Gene took command and bested the field by more than 10 seconds. Hollander took 2nd, followed by a quite frustrated Radenbaugh, who had been on Hollander's rear bumper for many laps and felt there had been blockage. The stewards did not concur.

Sunday rolled around, and there were only 23 cars for the race. Others had broken down, their owners had decided to go wine-tasting, or who knows? John Gordon decided to reduce the split starts to two as a result of the attrition.

Bob Mueller couldn't stick around for Sunday's race, so that left victory lane wide open for the other salivating speed demons in the POC. His namesake Tom Mueller seized the pole with a sizzling qualifier of 1:41.793, followed by Eric Olberz .309 seconds behind. Although they were driving in different classes, it was looking like an interesting matchup. Blair Boyce, who had encountered some problems and failed to finish Saturday's race, qualified next in GT3 group with a 1:44.357. Steve Town topped the GT4 qualifiers with a 1:48.383.

In the race, Tom proved to be impregnable, taking the overall victory by less than two-and-a-half seconds over a very game Olberz. Of course that victory was just for bragging rights, since at this point Mueller was running uncontested in GT2. Eric's victory in GT3 put him solidly in the running for the season GT3 championship. Blair had to drop out of the race with car problems again, and Rob Phillips took 2nd in GT3, some 41 seconds back from Eric.

In Carrera Spec, it was another battle between Vern and Kip. Although Vern again had a slightly faster qualifying time, Kip again was able to slip inside him in Turn 11, this time a bit earlier, in lap five. Conceding defeat, Vern said, “Turn 11 was great fun, going in fast, a lot of braking, and me trying to keep the lead. As I mentioned, I need to work on my braking skills. Every lap I thought I put a little distance between Kip and myself, and all of a sudden I would see him on my bumper going into 11.”

Kip summed up their weekend jousts as “fun, clean racing.”

The Boxster drivers in Sunday's race did not all necessarily agree with Kip's descriptor “clean,” at least as it pertained to their class. Gene Sigal was the fastest qualifier in the class, with a 1:54.027, while Steve Radenbaugh was just a hair slower at 1:54.269, followed by Matt Hollander, just .3 sec. behind Steve. In the race, Matt managed to get by Steve relatively early, and then it became a two-car race between Matt and Gene. This is 25-year-old Matt's first year as a licensed POC Cup Racer, but he's not letting his rookie status get in the way of competing. He's already in the running against the veteran Spec Championship. And he has stated that he'd like to be Driver of the Year—this year. Is that chutzpah... or what?

Gene, on the other hand, started go-kart racing when he was 14 and has been a pro race car driver for decades. He raced in Daytona from 2000 to 2012 in 996 Cup cars and prototypes. He has raced in the 24 Hours of Grand Am and knows pretty much every track in the US, Canada, and Mexico. It goes without saying that Gene is an aggressive, not to mention witty, racer.

Matt told me, “Going into Sonoma I knew it would be a tough battle. The rookie versus the pro. Racing against Gene is extremely challenging. He's the old bull and I'm the young bull. He will tire soon enough. Just know Gene's the best race starter out there, and if you get stuck behind him it will be something of a miracle to get back around.”

It must be said that Boxster Spec racing lends itself to a lot of passing in tight situations. Because the cars are all so closely matched, late braking is hugely important. In the turns, that creates congestion, to employ a euphemism, but it also makes the class exciting and highly competitive.

Thus it wasn't too surprising to see these two exchanging the lead and racing in an edgy manner, to use another euphemism. Matt somehow pulled off that “miracle” and managed to get by Gene, but in the process Gene had to go off track. Gene felt that Matt wasn't giving room in the corners, particularly Turns 6-8a, while Matt believed that he owned the corners that Gene was contending. At one point, Matt's right front tire touched Gene's left door—or vice versa. Gene got ahead, and he went on to win the race by half a second. However, the track stewards provisionally disqualified Gene and declared Matt the winner. Gene has protested, and the Board is reviewing the video footage. At the time of this writing, no final determination has been made.

It'll be interesting to see how the Boxster Spec Championship develops as the season progresses. As Matt said, “Anything can happen between now and the end of the year.” Including costly 13/13s.

Although my personal results were unworthy of mention, I considered the weekend to be a rousing victory because I completed both races unscathed, my times improved each session, and I got the car and trailer home safely to LA. Happily, most every POC driver in attendance can say the same, but the raceway did demand its toll. In the second lap of Saturday's race, the unlucky driver was Mark Boscher. He took the tricky Turn 2 too wide and hit the wall on runoff. It panicked the driver's side of his Boxster. Sorry, Mark. I know how you feel. Hopefully you'll get another shot next year. That's a hint, John Gordon and Ron Palmer.

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