

Ken Schutze of Cowboy Restorations preps author Tim Sharp's Austin 7 Special at Sonoma Raceway.



ARIZONA VINTAGE RACERS INVADE SONOMA

STORY BY TIM SHARP
PHOTOS BY KRISTIN AND TIM SHARP

There was a time when vintage races were nostalgic processions of historic cars. Proud owners paraded their rare race machines around the track at sensible speeds. That was twenty years ago. Times have changed. Today vintage racing is serious racing.

If you have not attended a vintage road race recently, you would have enjoyed this year's Sonoma Historic Motorsports Festival. You would have watched two talented Valley drivers put on a race driving clinic. You would have seen vintage cars driven in anger, as they were raced back in the day. You would have enjoyed some close competition at one of America's premier road racing circuits, Sonoma Raceway.

Vintage race fans saw remarkable driving performances put in by Arizona's Ross Thompson and Spencer Sharp. These two guys are not your average race drivers. They are ex-Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving racing school instructors, racing champions, former teammates and good friends.

This year, Tommy Thompson would not put his son Ross in the seat of his Pontiac Firebird for the 1982-1991 IMSA GTO/SCCA Race. Why not? Ross was coaching for the McKenna Team and he was racing John McKenna's 1985 Thunderbird. What was Tommy to do? Simple, he asked Ross' friend Spencer to race his car.

On paper, both Ross and Spencer's 1980s GTO machines should be mid-pack runners. The newer 1990s IMSA GTO and SCCA TransAm cars should kill them. However, Ross qualified on the pole against a factory 1991 Chevy Beretta while Spencer was relegated to the last row, due to an engine overheat problem in qualifying.

SCHOOLING THE LOCALS IN CALIFORNIA

When the green flag dropped, Ross Thompson took the lead in his 1985 Thunderbird, with Peter Balljet's 1991 Beretta in close pursuit. After a few laps, it was obvious that the old Thunderbird was at a disadvantage to the newer and more powerful Beretta. Regardless, Ross



(Above) The Sports Racer class heads out of the start during the Sonoma Historic Motorsports Festival, at Sonoma Raceway in northern California. (Right) Ross Thompson, Tommy Thompson, Spencer Sharp and Chris Hines in the paddock.

held off the Beretta for the first third of the race until the bulk of Ross' big bird took its toll on his tires. Balljet slipped around the Thunderbird and Ross was relegated to the runner up spot.

Meanwhile back in the pack, Spencer Sharp moved from sixteenth to fifth by the midpoint of the race. Methodically picking off the competition, he sliced through traffic like a sushi chef with a new Ginsu knife. However, when a tire began smoldering against the Firebird's body work, Spencer received a mechanical black flag (aka: the meat ball) and had to park the Pontiac. Game over, but it was fun to watch Spencer's great run.

ROSS GETS A SECOND CHANCE

Not that Ross Thompson needed to redeem himself after his fine drive in the IMSA GTO/SCCA TransAm Race, however he got a second chance in the 1973-1979 IMSA GT & FIA Race. Again, Thompson qualified on the pole. Again, he led the race. However, this time it was a rout, as Ross took the lead and hid from Ranson Webster's Porsche 935 Turbo.

With a lead of a half minute, Thompson entered the first turn at one hundred twenty miles per hour. Then his radiator cap flew off and water gushed onto the track. Not a good thing when your racing slicks are sliding on your own water. Even worse when you are in the dirt and are heading toward a cement barrier at a buck twenty.

Wisely, Ross turned into the slide, applied some throttle and kept his Corvette off the wall. Obviously, Thompson's years instructing at the Bondurant School paid off. Ross and the Corvette survived to race another day. No victory, but no damage to the family race car either. (Maybe this is why Ross' dad trusts him with his car keys.)



MORE TALES OF ARIZONA DRIVERS

We would love to tell you a Cinderella story about how our little 1938 Austin 7 Special won its race. We would like to spin a tale about how this spunky 850cc machine vanquished the big three-liter Alfa Romeo Grand Prix cars. However, that did not happen. It certainly would never happen if the Austin leaked oil onto its clutch and could barely ascend the Sonoma Raceway hills, which is precisely what happened.

However, there were some bright spots for other Arizona race drivers. One is the story of Mike Blackie of Prescott. Mike won the Sonoma Historic Award for "Performance and Presentation" with his Genie MK10 Can Am car. Mike drove a superb race and finished in a hard-fought second place in the 1959-1963 Sports Racing Group with his beautiful aluminum-bodied sports racer. Congratulations, Mike, for a well deserved honor and a great podium finish. Jonathan Ornstein of Phoenix and Owen Gibson of Arivaca also ran up front in this race, but experienced mechanical problems.

Mike's wife Barbara Blackie finished twelfth in the tough 1959-1963 Formula Junior race, and Jerry Clarke finished ninth in his ex-Dan Gurney Ford Galaxie in the 1963-1973 Grand National Stock race. It was remark-

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(Top) Spencer Sharp in his 1982-1991 Historic IMSA GTO/SCCA class Pontiac Firebird leads an Audi quattro through the curves while Ross Thompson brings up the rear in his Thunderbird. (Second) Thompson's 1985 Ford Thunderbird. (Third) Jeff Abramson of the Bay Area in his 1959 Morgan, in the 1955-1962 Production/GT Cars class. (Bottom) The hills and wineries of Sonoma County are the backdrop for your visit to the area.

able how well these monsters negotiated the twisty Sonoma road race circuit.

Scottsdale's Bob Paris finished ninth with his 1965 Mustang in the 1962-1966 Production/GT race, and Drew Alcazar finished fourteenth in 1966-1972 Historic Trans-Am, perhaps the most hotly contested race of the weekend. Steve Hilton finished sixteenth and twentieth in his two sports racing classes. Don Tevini of Cave Creek did not get to start his race due to mechanical problems.

ARROW LANE AND COWBOY RESTORATIONS

Chris Hines was responsible for the restoration, transportation and race support of most of the Arizona contingent. Chris restored many of the old race cars to original race condition, hauled them to Sonoma and left the racing up to their owners. The good news is that the Arizona drivers acquitted themselves quite admirably.

Ken Schutze of Cowboy Restorations worked long hours preparing our Austin 7 Special for Sonoma. However, as Roseanne Roseannadanna used to say on SNL, "If it's not one thing, it's another." So it was with our Austin. It had a new supercharger and new distributor, so what else could possibly go wrong? How about oil on the clutch. Of course, keeping old cars running can be a challenge. However, for us the Sonoma race was a tune-up for Monterey where we will get to run with smaller, more equally matched race cars.

WHY THE SONOMA HISTORIC RACES

If you are new to vintage racing, the Sonoma race is the perfect place to start: rare vintage cars, a wonderful race circuit, fine wine, lovely weather and superb cuisine. In addition, you do not have to contend with the high room rates of "Monterey Car Week," when the Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion, Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance and classic car auctions are held simultaneously.

Think of Sonoma as a "weekend getaway test" to see if you like vintage racing. If you enjoy it, then you can continue on to Monterey in August, one of the two most significant vintage car races in the world (the other being Goodwood Festival of Speed, in England).

What is *not* like about Sonoma in June? Weather is in the mid-seventies. You can tour the beautiful wine country. The vintage car owners enjoy telling you the history of their vintage race cars. Some owners will even let you take your child's photo in the cockpit of their marvelous machines (yes, we do that—just ask us).

The Sonoma Historic Motorsports Festival is in early June. Make plans now for 2013 (see resource and contact info at left), if for no other reason than you can get excellent hotel rooms at the lowest possible rates if you book early. ■

