

Zone 8 Autocross Doubleheader



Text & Photos by Tom Tweed

“Racing makes heroin addiction look like a vague wish for something salty.”—Peter Egan

On the first weekend in October, while many of the PCA-SDR performance driving addicts were satisfying their cravings with the time trial at Spring Mountain Motorsports Park in Pahrump, NV, I opted for a slightly less ambitious goal: competing for the Zone 8 autocross championship in G-Stock class. There were two Zone autocross events being held that same weekend, the GER “California Challenge” at Minter Field in Shafter, CA, on Sunday, Oct. 2nd, and the GPX “Day Away From Work Autocross” at Streets of Willow the next day.

The California Challenge was originally conceived in the late '90s as a “North meets South” affair, pitting the Zone 7 autocrossers from the Bay area against their Zone 8 counterparts from down south, at a “neutral” setting outside of Bakersfield. I had attended one of these events earlier, in 2001, but I only learned this year that one of the originators of this concept was Alyce Thorp, the sister of Bill Thorp, who currently runs his silver Boxster S with Kathy Smalley in our local SDR series. Another “it’s a small world” happenstance that amazed me....

Minter Field is a great racing venue, with a history stretching back to the early days of sports car racing in the western USA, following WWII. Notable roadracing events were held there in the early '50s, attracting the likes of Ken Miles, Phil Hill, Lance Reventlow, and James Dean, who drove his 356 Speedster there and won the FP class in an SCCA race on only his second race weekend ever, on April 30-31, 1955, just months before acquiring the 550 Spyder in which he met his end that September, fifty years ago, while driving to another race in Salinas.



Located on the Lerdo Highway (the same road as Buttonwillow Raceway Park, only further to the east, off

the 99 instead of the 5), Minter Field was an Army Air Corps training base during WWII, and it is still an active airport. The Golden Empire Region sets up a very long and fast course with cones and haybales on the runways and taxiways at the southeast end of the airport, and the event can be interrupted momentarily when a plane needs to cross the course to get to its hanger or the fuel dock. One corner worker is assigned just to signal the planes to stop as they approach, the starter holds the cars, and after the last car on course clears the taxiway, the plane is allowed to cross, then the event resumes, making for an interesting diversion that happened a half-dozen times or so during the event.



The course is completely devoid of any elevation changes, but it is very interesting, nonetheless, with several surface changes from concrete to asphalt and back, varying grip considerably during a lap. The beginning straightaway is very long and fast, requiring 4th gear in my car, even though there are several chicanes set up along it to limit speeds, leading into a fast, diminishing radius sweeper, followed by some tight sections, a couple of slaloms, another fast straightaway, some more squiggly stuff, and ending in a very tight slalom to slow the cars at the finish. Despite the high speeds in places, the length of the course is such that even the fastest cars are over 100 seconds per lap during the first practice sessions. The course has a heavy layer of dust on it at first, but as the line cleans up and rubber is laid down, times drop into the 90s. There are only 24



cars entered, the lowest turnout I have ever seen at a Zone event (due, I think, to conflicts with other events this weekend), so there are only 3 run groups of 8 cars each, making for a very busy schedule of run one group, work one group, then one group to rest and prep the car for the next run session.

The only other SDR members I see running during the early groups are Bob Bertrand, in his yellow, 914-4 2.4, and Neil Heimburge, in his silver 993TT. Later, I hear that Charlie Kleinhans had come up for the event, but was stuck in Shafter for several days with a tire debacle and was unable to run. Bill Thorp and Kathy Smalley showed up at lunch to visit, but they are saving the tires on their Boxster for the next day at SOW and didn't enter.

After two rotations of practice, there is a short break for lunch, followed by another shorter practice session, and timed runs begin. I manage a 97.111 run on my third lap, which is my fastest of the day, and head out to work the course for the next group. I see Neil come by my corner station at a snail's pace during timed runs, and afterwards, as I am packing up the car to begin heading south for Willow Springs, I learn that he has nearly used up his tires already, with another day still to go at SOW, and since he didn't have any competition in his class, he just cruised around the course once, to get a time.

Although I left before the awards ceremony and didn't get to see the final results, by checking the Zone 8 website a few days later, I find that my time was good





enough for the GS class win and the second top time of the day, eclipsed only by a 94.525 run put in by Bob Bertrand for TTOD. Steve Lutz, in his AI-class 914, had been faster than me all day, but ended up with cones on all his runs, managing only a 98.176 with the 2-second penalty added. At any rate, it is a good start to the double-header for me.

After a fast run down the 99 freeway to the 5, and then east on the 138, I manage to arrive at Rosamond before dark, and grab something to eat, and then head out to WSIR to sleep in my rig at the big track for the night. Early the next morning, I head over to the Streets to get ready for tech, and Michael Dolphin is there early with Perry Bradshaw to shepherd this event thru its fifth iteration. I see Vince Knauf and his yellow 944T, who has made it over from Pahrump after the time trial there, and Neil Heimburge limps in on his toasted rubber, wondering when the tire shop at the big track will open up. OCR member Steve Eguina, whom I first met when he was running a Camaro in SCCA Solo2 and winning national championships several years ago, arrives in his 996TT, which he has been dialing in at the Zone 8 events this year, and I figure he will be a good bet for TTOD. Richard Clewett (of Electromotive) is there with a beastly looking 914-6, Steve Lutz



and Bob Bertrand have also come over from Shafter with their quick 914s, and I see a GT3 and a few other Turbos as well as some fully-prepped early 911 race cars getting ready to give him a run for his money, though.

Overall, there are some 60 entrants, but because of a large number of less experienced drivers, Michael decides to run the standard configuration, clockwise, without the new bowl section. After the driver's meeting, practice begins in earnest, with continuous lapping and controlled passing, only on the straight, with a point-by. The weather is cool and breezy, and my car feels good on the familiar Streets configuration. The more powerful cars blast by me on the straightaway, but my 38-year-old vintage piece holds its own in the twisties.



For timed runs, we line up on the skidpad and begin the lap from a standing start at the entrance to the straight. The finish lights are set up on the last little straight chute before the entry to the skidpad 180-degree turn, and I am surprised to come around on my first hot lap to discover a line of cones creating a left turn where one usually goes right! It is a safety measure to keep cars that are finishing clear of the cars lined up to start, but it was not there in practice, and I find I am carrying way too much speed to make the left turn required after the finish. I just blow thru the cones and brake in a straight line, still well clear of the starting grid, and line up for my next run, dragging a cone under the car.

On my second run, I know the finishing turn is there, but I still overcook it thru the finish and can't make it to the left again. This time I run between two cones, but still a penalty run in my mind. I take it really easy on the final run and make sure I am braking early for the finish and can turn left before the skidpad. I register a



75.99 lap time on the clock, after a previous 75.078 best, but at least it is clean.

I load the car in the trailer and head for home before the results are announced once again, but I find out later on the website that I finished 2.5 seconds in front of the next GS car, clinching the Zone 8 class championship for the year in the process (with one event still left to go) and finished 18th overall out of the 60 cars entered. Steve Eguina did indeed take the TTOD for the event with a 66.752 lap, ahead of a GT3 by about 3 tenths of a second. Steve Lutz is third, with a 69.717, Richard Clewitt is fourth, over a second back, followed closely by Bob Bertrand and Bill Thorp. Kathy Smalley is the fastest female driver, finishing ninth overall, with a 72.231 lap. Very well done!

All in all, it was a great weekend for me, and a good end to the season for my GS car, which will be retiring to street duty this year after two undefeated seasons in both regional and Zone 8 class competition, as well as several indexed (BRI) TTOD results. Judging from the proposed rule changes for next year, it has been dubbed an "uberdog" for the class, so I am already at work on a new, top-secret, autocross-weapon project, to be revealed sometime next year. Stay tuned and thanks for listening....

