

Cinco de Mayo Autocross at Pinal Air Park



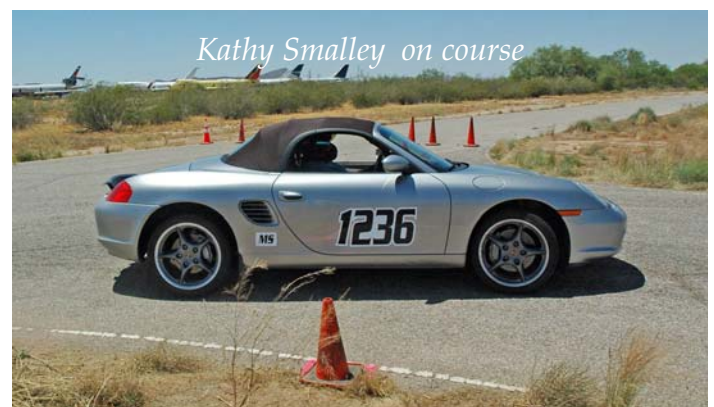
The Southern Arizona Region of PCA is one of the smallest in Zone 8, with only about 150 members currently (about 1/10 the size of SDR), but that doesn't prevent them from putting on world-class events. Their Cinco de Mayo weekend first began as a Zone 8 Concours held on May 1 and 2, 1981, inspired by the 3rd annual 356 Registry's West Coast Holiday, which took place in Tucson on May 4-6, 1979. Since then, it has grown and developed to become their signature annual Porsche celebration, including a reception "warm-up" party, concours, awards banquet, and an autocross. I am not much of a party monster (anymore), and I have never been a concours kind of guy, but I do enjoy a good autocross now and then, so I made plans to sample at least that portion of the Cinco de Mayo weekend, scheduled for May 6-8th this year.

I checked the SAR website (<http://saz.pca.org/>) and was intrigued by the description of their autocross venue, the Pinal Air Park track, as "one of the best-kept secrets in the Southwest." It is a 1.2 mile road course located at a National Guard flight training facility in Marana, AZ, about halfway between Casagrande and Tucson. I noticed that they were limiting entries to only 32 cars, so I signed up right away using their online registration form. I had first heard about this track in 2003, when I was competing in the Zone 8 autocross series in my AM-class '73 911E. I had intended to run there that year, but a family medical crisis forced me to cancel out. I didn't want to miss it again. The track map, available on their website, showed an interesting, fairly tight, technical, layout which looked like it would be fun to learn and well-suited for the GS-

class 911 I have been autocrossing for the past year.

I loaded my '67 911S into the trailer on Friday, May 6th, and packed up my tools, extra tires, plenty of food and drinks, and took off for Arizona on Saturday morning, heading east on I-8. I encountered some light rain from Pine Valley to Jacumba, but once over the mountain passes, it dried out and the weather was ideal. I didn't even have to run the A/C through the desert to Yuma, and once across the CA border, the speed limit goes up to 75 MPH with *no restriction* on trucks and vehicles with trailers (Hallelujah!) I set the cruise control at 78 and reeled off some miles on the mostly arrow-straight highway through the scrub brush and saguaro cactus of southern Arizona.

At the intersection with I-10 around Casa Grande, I turned south towards Tucson, and started looking for the Pinal Air Park exit; which I found just a few miles past the Rooster Cogburn Ostrich Ranch. The Pinal Air Park is situated about 3 miles west of the I-10 freeway at Exit 232, and like most active military installations, it is restricted for security purposes. By prior e-mailed

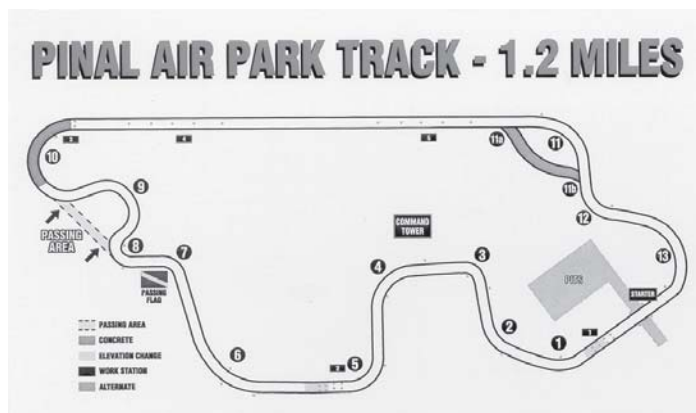


arrangements, I met the SAR autocross chair, Dave Radmacher, and the Treasurer and Safety Chair, Terry Prince, at the guarded gate to the base around 2:30PM, and obtained a visitor's pass to help them set up the track for the next day's event. This gave me a preview of the site and their format for the autocross that I wouldn't have otherwise had.

Although it is a road course, originally designed and built for military driver training purposes, the rental agreement with SAR and other clubs includes restrictions on speed that require some modifications. I helped Terry and Dave set up two, 5-cone slaloms with 65' spacing at the beginning and end of the back straightaway, to keep cars from exceeding a maximum of 80 MPH there, and while the course is devoid of any major elevation changes, there are two small "humps" in the surface which are sufficient to get a car airborne if taken at speed, so artificial "cone chicanes" are placed before them to slow down the approaches. Even including turn-in, apex and track-out cones, however, these setup tasks are trivial compared to the hundreds of cones we throw to make a course at Qualcomm Stadium, and we were finished fairly quickly.

Because of the small pit area and the lack of staging room, I learned that the format for this autocross was also a bit different, somewhat reminiscent of the way Grand Prix Region runs their "Day Away from Work" autocross at the Streets of Willow. SAR runs continuous laps at Pinal during practice sessions, with small run groups of about 10 cars each, and timed run sessions are done with a warmup lap and 3 flying laps of the complete track, without stopping between each one, with no more than 3 cars spaced around the track at one time. Passing during the practice sessions is accomplished only at Turn 8, by blue-flagging the slower car and pointing the faster one through a straight section which bypasses the slow horseshoe loop at Turn 9. During timed runs, spacing is adequate so that no passing is necessary, as long as cars with similar lap times are grouped together.

While Terry and Dave went out to set up the passing area, do a safety check, and fine tune the apex cones, I unloaded my car from the trailer and changed my tires in the cool of the late afternoon, to be ready for the next morning. Except for a small patch of newer, smooth concrete at Turn 10, I had seen that the surface of the track was very old, grainy, weathered asphalt, the kind that hasn't seen a new slurry and seal coat in many years,



where the pea-gravel is standing proud out of the tar binder by about a quarter-inch, making a very sharp, pebbled texture, and I did not want to chew up my softer race tires running practice laps on it, especially since the next day was forecast to be quite a bit warmer.

After doing the final setup of the registration table and EZ-Up canopy in the pits, Terry and Dave headed back to town; (about a 30-mile drive) while I chose to just stay at the site for the night. I was tired of driving, with an even longer day ahead of me, and had everything I needed to camp out in my rig, so I just settled in for the night. I ate some dinner, and then walked the track one more time as the light waned, trying to memorize the sequence of turns and imagine what it would be like to drive it at speed.

I climbed up on the highest of several observation towers built around the track, simple open structures framed out of telephone poles, milled timbers and plywood, and had a terrific view of the entire area as the sunset lit up the sky. I could see the airport control tower, and many military and commercial aircraft of all sizes were parked along the taxiways and around the hangars along the runway (but curiously, I saw virtually no active air traffic at all in my time there.) In the distance, to the south and east, one could see the I-10



David Wittreid & Mike Furnish in pits

ribbon filled with cars winding towards the urbanization of Tucson, while to the north and west stretched wild, open desert landscape, dominated by Picacho Peak, a strikingly-shaped lump of red dirt and rock which I later learned was the site of the westernmost battle of the Civil War (I guess there were only 3 casualties that day in 1862, so it was more of an “incident” than a battle, actually.) The next day, this tower, located between turns 3 and 4 in the infield, would be used for race control, to monitor the flow of cars around the track and communicate with the corner workers. I climbed down and finished my track walk as the stars started coming out, went to bed early and slept like a baby.

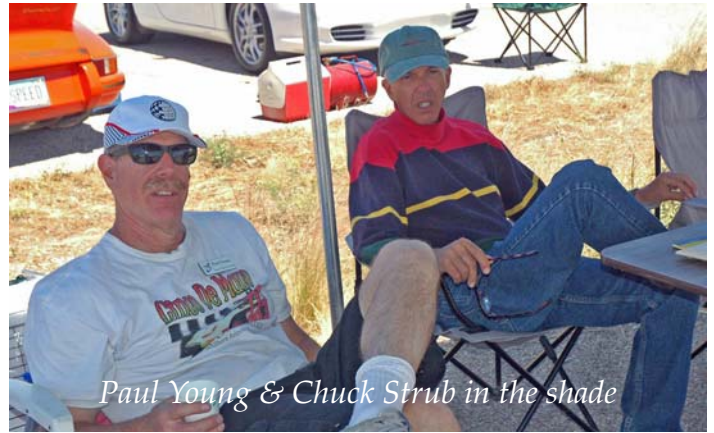
The next morning, cars started arriving early. One of the first familiar faces I saw was Paul Young, who had driven out to judge the concours and was also running his IS-class 911SC in the autocross. Bob Bertrand, a longtime SDR autocrosser and time-trialer, who has recently relocated to Kingman, AZ, showed up with his



View from the tower

yellow, #74 914, along with the usual Zone 8 autocross regulars from other regions I have met before, like Mike Furnish, Steve Lutz, David Witteried and Rich Bessette. I saw William Thorp from SDR, who shares a silver Boxster with Kathy Smalley in MS at many of our events, and the rest of the entries were local SAR people.

I was through registration and lined up for tech in a hurry, as I was ready to go at dawn, but was struck with my first mechanical woes when one of my brake lights failed to light up for the inspector. This was the first continuous lapping event I had attended with this car, and I hadn't checked them beforehand, since it's not an item on our usual SDR autocross tech list. I had flushed the brake fluid and bled the brakes the week before, but forgotten to check this vital item. I hustled back to the pits and got a screwdriver, removed the

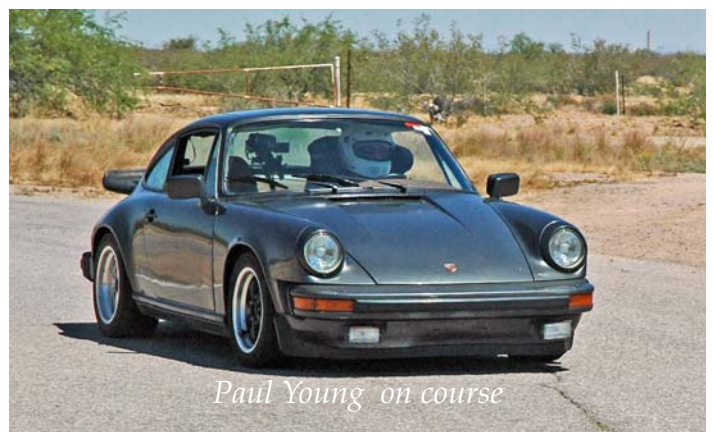


Paul Young & Chuck Strub in the shade

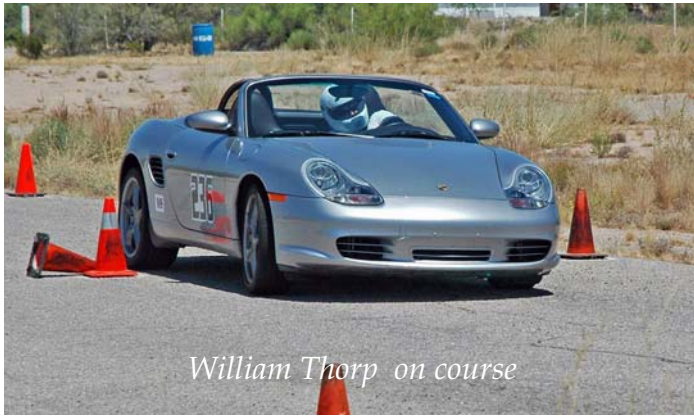
taillight housing, and was able to swap the burnt bulb out with a good one from the parking/backup light socket, so I was good to go. Note to self: stock spare bulbs in the trailer!

Next came the driver's meeting, where the schedule, run group format and passing rules were explained, along with the usual safety and corner-working issues, as well as a few unusual conditions required by our military hosts, including no alcohol, no firearms, and no pictures taken of the aircraft or facilities on the base (subject to confiscation of your camera and film!) After that, everyone went out for a couple of parade laps to see the course and blow off some of the dust. The first practice group started a bit ahead of schedule and the track was hot before 9:00AM.

I went out at the front of the second practice group and felt comfortable on the track pretty quickly, getting in eight or ten hot laps and starting to feel the rhythm of the course before getting stuck behind a red 996 Carrera Cabriolet that was circling at a pretty leisurely pace. I was not given the passing signal for two laps, however, because at the only passing zone, there was a third car in the horseshoe loop ahead of us in Turn 9 at a critical point, where if I was waved by and took the



Paul Young on course



bypass route, we might have collided entering Turn 10. I finally got pointed by a lap or two before the checked flag fell for our session, but my thirst for more time on the track was not quenched. It was a really fun and very technical course to master, with the two chicaned “jumps”, a lot of flowing, 2nd-gear, throttle-steering corner combos, along with a faster, 3rd-gear sweeper at Turn 6 after the second jump, and some spurts in 3rd gear on the straightaway between, and after, the two slaloms. A very interesting section was the change in surfaces during Turn 10, when the grippy asphalt turned to smooth concrete and would make the car start sliding very easily. I took that corner in full drifting mode several times by accident, sawing the wheel to recover, but you couldn't overcook it and drift to the outside of the track or you would DNF, as there was a gate for the first slalom placed on the inside of the exit, around the blind corner, so if you tracked out too far, you would miss the gate. It was a bit tricky. I was looking forward to refining my line in the next practice session and figuring out how to go faster, but had to go out and work corners for two run groups first.

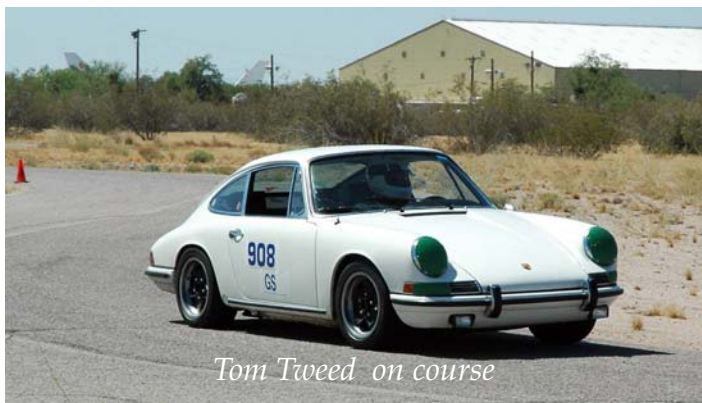
After my corner-working session, I rested up and rehydrated, then got into my car to warm it up for the second practice session. This is when the second, more serious mechanical gremlin struck. The car would turn over but not start! I could hear the electric fuel pump clicking loudly when the key was turned on, but it could not pull any fuel from the gas tank and prime itself, and I could see by the gauge on my fuel line in the engine bay that I had no pressure going to the carbs. Note to self: stock a spare fuel pump in the trailer! The situation was frustrating, and more than a little ironic, as I had helped Dick Schroeder diagnose a failed fuel pump in his red '67S at the last SDR autocross the week before, and I remembered his disappointment when it



had died in the starting grid just before timed runs. I had told myself at that time that I should have a spare, but I hadn't picked one up before leaving for AZ.

I was determined to post some times after coming all that way, though, and there was still a chance. It was only 1:00 PM, and the timed runs would not start for another hour. I started asking local folks in the pits where the nearest auto parts store was located. No one had a definitive answer, but suggested I ask the guard at the front gate. I disconnected my pickup from the trailer and headed out between run groups while the track was cold. The guard was very helpful, directing me down the I-10 about 12 miles to the Ina exit, where he knew there was a Pep Boys store. I charged up the freeway at 80 MPH and found the place. But no luck, out of stock, and the nearby Autozone was also a negative. Not giving up yet, I ran across the street to the Checker store. Bingo! On the shelf were several Facet low pressure pumps that would even fit the mounts for my old one perfectly. The third place was the charm, and \$43 later, I was back on the I-10 speeding northwest to the track.

I arrived back at Pinal as the first timed run session was finishing up, and crossed the track to the pits as soon as they were done. I tore the offending unit out and installed the new fuel pump in about 20 minutes, drawing only a little blood in the process. I was able to get the car started and warm it up, getting it to the starting grid for my timed runs in the 3rd of 4 groups, with 20 minutes to spare. I ran a warm-up lap, then a good, clean timed lap at a safe pace, then cranked it up about a half-second on my second lap. I started pushing hard on my third lap, but made a big mistake in the final slalom and put two wheels in the dirt trying to



recover. I ended up 1.5 seconds slower on the final lap, but at least I had gotten a result! It would have been nice to have the second session to practice instead of running around and working on the car, but I was just relieved to not be a “DNR” in the results.

I loaded the car in the trailer and packed up, leaving for the 6.5-hour drive home about 4:00 PM, during the last timed session, without knowing how I had done compared to the other drivers. Results were posted the next day on the SAR website, though, and I was happy to find that I had placed 7th overall and won my class, even though there was no time to change back to the Kumho V710 tires to get that extra edge, and I had to leave my Falken Azenis on the car for timed runs. I managed a high 1:30 to nick Paul Young by about a second on my fastest lap, but was only the third highest placing SDR member, as Bob Bertrand took 3rd place in his AM 914 with a 127.6 on Kumho V700s, and William Thorp was 5th in his MS Boxster S, turning in an excellent performance at 1:29.2 and winning the TTOD on Street Tires trophy in the process. Good job, William! Steve Lutz from Santa Barbara region took overall TTOD in his AI 914 on Goodyear slicks with a 1:25.5 second lap, beating Dave Radmacher from the SAR in his HI 914-6 by about 7-tenths of a second. Kathy Smalley placed a very respectable 11th place overall, and was the fastest woman on the course, with a 1:32.2.

All in all, it was an outstanding event, but I could have done with a little more racing and a little less personal drama, what with the breakdown “fire drill” and all. I can’t thank the SAR folks enough for their hospitality and hard work putting on a well-organized event, and I’m already planning on going back next year.

