

Confessions of a Car-aholic

(or How All These Things Got into My Garage)

BY TOM TWEED

Passion is a curious human phenomenon. It arises in our brains somehow, in ways we don't fully understand and can't adequately explain or anticipate. These impulses drive us to do all sorts of things, some of which are related to basic survival needs. Others we pursue only because we perceive that they will add to the excitement and variety of our lives. A passion for high-performance cars is a fairly modern development, and is certainly in the latter group, since there is no doubt that we could all survive just fine driving clunky, utilitarian automobiles.

Passion can lead to obsession, which can drive us to do crazy things. They don't call us "car nuts" for nothing! The cars in my garage at the moment (and the others that have passed through it in the last decade) are certainly indicative of that. The modern development of the internet has added to the frenzy, allowing us to go crazy on a much larger geographical scale. We can easily communicate with like-minded enthusiasts all over the world, convincing ourselves of the "normalness" of our shared disease through the simple evidence of commonality, of the widespread existence of car nuts everywhere. This is an illusion. We are all sick, little, post-industrial-age puppies, and we don't want to admit it.

In the ever-present spirit of denial and rationalization, let me try to explain how I came down with my particular strain. I think part of it was genetic—I inherited it from my father. He was fascinated by machines of all types, and definitely nurtured me in that direction from an early age. This probably came from a long family history of vehicle disease. My great-great-grandfather ran the stage coach line between Julian, Ramona, and San Diego back in the gold rush days, hauling the mail, freight, and passengers with horse-drawn wagons. A great-uncle of mine opened one of the first garages servicing the new horseless carriages in San Diego in the early 1900s. My father put himself through college by running a gas station on University Avenue, supplemented by G.I. Bill benefits after WWII. As a teenager, he started building dirt-track cars out of the junkyard, back in the "flat-head" era, racing them on local circle tracks and out on the El Mirage dry lake bed. He bought his first Porsche, a used 356, when I was about eight years old, because he admired its engineering.

Despite a brief flirtation with a '57 MGA and various motorcycles in my teen years, I managed to avoid overt

symptoms of the "need-for-speed" type of car disease until I was almost 50 years old, through the mixed-blessing of poverty. Before then, there was little extra money left over, after providing for the basic needs of food and shelter, to indulge such a passion. Besides, I was under the influence of a lifelong obsession with surfing then, as well as a major infatuation with building and sailing a wooden cruising sailboat during the late '70s, early '80s, which drained any extra resources. The economic bubble of the '90s induced me to think that I could finally afford a Porsche, though, and my slide down the slippery slope of performance driving began.

I found my first 911 the old-fashioned way—in the Union-Tribune classifieds (print edition). Try doing that these days! It was a 1966 model that had been upgraded to 1967 911S specs. I went through the PCA-SDR Performance Driving School with it in 1997, and began driving it in autocrosses. Time trials quickly followed, and I was fully hooked. After attending the VARA racing school at Buttonwillow in February of 1999, though, I had a brief bout with reality, and realized that there were limits to my resources that would prohibit indulging in a full club racing program. This epiphany made me decide to concentrate on enjoying the less expensive venues of autocross, DE and time trial events. Of course, by then I figured I needed a faster car than the little 2-liter, so I bought a '73 911E with a 3.0 in it and started developing it into a 911RS clone, an endeavor that continued for the next six or seven years. My passion allowed me to effortlessly overlook the fact that even this limited scope of participation was proving to be quite expensive, according to the ancient koan: "What part of this racing thing did you think would be cheap and easy?"

In late 1999, I unexpectedly acquired the light ivory 1967 911S that had been the first new car my father had ever bought. There was no way I could justify having three Porsches to my wife (who does not suffer from speed-disease), so the 1966 911 was sold and shipped to an enthusiast in Australia, by virtue of the expanding scope of the internet, where it continued its evolution into a vintage race car. Around the same time, I started exploring opportunities to get more autocross seat time locally with the SCCA and BMWCCA racing programs. I scored my first TTOD with the BMW club, running the '73 in Exhibition class, but when I ran it in the ASP class with SCCA, I discovered I was bringing a knife to a gunfight.



Tom in his Ultima GTR next to the Porsche RS Spyder in the paddock at Willow Springs. Photo © Randy Wells, with permission of Penske Racing.

The C-Modified class looked like fun, with more equally matched cars, so in 2001, I bought an old Zink 10C Formula Ford from a guy in Topeka, Kansas, for a really cheap price (ain't this internet-thingie great!?!?) Of course, it was not street-legal, and hadn't been run in awhile, so I had to add a trailer to my entourage to pick it up and haul it around.

The FF was fun, and given some repair and development work (for a good laugh, ask Steve Grosekemper sometime about the rear wheel that ended up bouncing across Friars Road when he was co-driving), it was fairly competitive. After blowing two out of three runs by missing gates on the first day of the SCCA Solo II National Tour event at Qualcomm in 2002, I was actually fastest in C-Mod on the second day, and earned a trophy for second place overall. If Steve had been co-driving again, and stayed error-free in his usual "little-bit-faster-than-me" style (he weighs less, right?), it probably would have won. I met another Zink driver from Arizona that weekend, and in 2003, he gave my name to a FF club racer who had destroyed his Zink in an SCCA race at Firebird. This fellow needed a replacement car quickly that was compatible with the parts he still had left, and made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I replaced the FF immediately with a WCM Ultralite that was available on Ebay—a Lotus Seven clone with a Honda S2000 engine. It was heavier (about 1,350 lbs.) and didn't handle quite as well, but it had twice the power of the FF and was actually street-legal (without the racing slicks necessary to run it in the

D-Mod class).

Car disease combined with the reach of the internet can be a terrible thing. Hanging out in a D-Sports Racing forum, I found out about a vintage LeGrand Mk.18 sports-racer for sale on the east coast. While obsolete for club racing, due to the modern development of the potent Stohr DSR package, these older cars still make excellent candidates for the B-Modified class in SCCA Solo racing. It had an interesting history and the owner was pretty desperate to sell it, so I had to help him out, no? In December of 2004, this little Kawasaki-green car arrived at my house, forcing the sale of the WCM Ultralite to a fellow in San Jose, as my long-suffering wife had imposed a five-vehicle-at-a-time limit on my addiction by this point (a rule that had been passed down from her mother, who had applied it many years prior to her similarly-afflicted husband).

This LeGrand was a ton of fairly cheap fun, and is still in my garage, so I guess this is where my story turns from a historical review to current events. It was converted to a center-seat configuration by Hank Thorpe in the early '90s, and weighs about 880 lbs. wet, with a mid-mounted, 1,000cc Kawasaki ZX-10 motorcycle engine and sequential transmission, using a chain drive. With a stock motor, it makes about 120 HP, giving it a HP/weight ratio of about 7.3, making it comparable to the modern 911 Turbo—by that metric, anyway. Its light weight, low center of gravity, reduced aero drag, and 8" and 10" wheels allow it to corner, brake, and change direction better than



a big, heavy coupe. For comparison purposes, the DSR track record at Willow Springs is a high 1:19, set back in 1996 by a “little old grandmother” from Northern California named Nancy James. A modern DSR has even more potential. Those familiar with the Thunderhill race track will be impressed by the SCCA track record of 1:38.16 set there in May of this year by a Stohr DSR. It takes a very mean Porsche to run a 1:50 at that track.

I ran the little green car in local SCCA practice events, and even brought it out to a couple of PCA-SDR autocrosses and a DE. To be strictly legal for the B-Mod class, it needs to have its wheelbase lengthened by two inches to meet the minimum 80” requirement in the Solo II rules. That project is on my long-range docket at the moment, along with swapping the ZX-10 engine for the more powerful 1,300cc Suzuki Hayabusa motor (unless I recover from this illness in the meantime).

I had some good success with the '73 911RS clone in the GP, FI, and AM class over a five-year period, running it in the Time Trial and Autocross series as I improved it, but rule changes rendered it obsolete in 2004, so I started running the '67 911S in GS/S class instead. The '67S did very well for a couple of years, winning regional and Zone 8 autocross championships during 2004-05, until the rules were changed again, raising it up to the H class. It was around then that I retired from my job, and my “fun budget” was heavily impacted, causing me to reduce



my participation in “away” events to save money. By late 2005, the worldwide economic bubble, combined with peaking collector interest in the early-series 911 models, resulted in such inflated values for the long-hood 911 cars that I decided to sell both the '67 and the '73 to get something different. I think this might be similar to an addict getting acclimated to their drugs and needing higher doses, or a new combination. As the motorsports sage Peter Egan said: “Racing makes heroin addiction seem like a vague wish for something salty.” At any rate, the '67S went to Holland and the '73RS-look went to Sweden within 6 months of each other. Easy, worldwide communications from my computer made these deals possible, and the exchange rate for the Euro against the U.S. dollar at the time made for happy people on both ends.

It was during this period that I acquired the other Porsche that is still in my quiver. I bought a '68 911 “project” car from a fellow in La Mesa at the end of 2005. It had been built as a sleeper “hotrod” 911 back in the '90s by Dave Bouzaglou at TRE Motorsports in West Hollywood, but had been “rode hard and put away wet” since then. It had a good core, though, and over the last four



years I have renewed it into sort of a 911T/R “tribute” car to run in the FP class. It made its debut runs at the last few autocross events, so some of you will recognize it as the slate-grey, narrow-fendered, skinny-tired, short-wheelbase 911 with rally lights mounted on the hood and horn grilles—number 908.

Last but not least, toward the end of September in 2007, I was cruising the DSR forum on the web, when I happened to see an ad posted by one of the members for an Ultima GTR. This is an English-built, mid-engine, tube-chassis, fiberglass-bodied, two-seat sports coupe designed by Lee Noble, and offered only as a “kit car” in the USA, due to DOT regulations. I saw one in the flesh for the first time in 2002, when I was picking up some Fuchs wheels for my '73 at a shop in Morgan Hill. It was still under construction, tucked in the corner of the shop, looking low, wide and serious, kind of like an old Can-Am car, with a Porsche twin-turbo flat six lurking in the middle of it. That memory was indelibly burned into my brain. The one for sale was on Mare Island in San Fran-

cisco, put together by a fellow I had come to know on the forum as "Diasio Bill," since he had also owned and raced a modified Diasio D962 DSR, as well as a Honda S2000. His GTR had the more usual Corvette V-8 powerplant, with an inverted Porsche G50 transaxle, was a beautiful, well-developed track machine, and street-legal to boot. It had the less extravagant 350 cubic-inch small-block motor, rather than the big 427ci unit in the new Z06, making about 400 HP instead of 505, but with only 2,350 lbs. to haul around, that still gave it a HP/weight ratio of about 5.9, putting it on a level with the newest 911 GT2.

I kept telling myself over and over that I didn't need that kind of car. As the asking price fell week after week, dropping by \$20K over about two months, I had to at least email him and find out a little more about it. Bad move. By the middle of December, I had blown all the proceeds from selling my other 911s to buy the Ultima, loading it in my trailer and bringing it home in a marathon, 23-hour roundtrip to the Bay area. It first touched the ground in San Diego at Qualcomm stadium, unloading it the morning of the PCA-SDR "other car" autocross in 2007. Since then, the world economy has collapsed, my retirement fund has gone down the drain, and I've actually gone back to work, but I still have something that is as close as I'll ever get to a supercar in my garage. What was it that Frank Lloyd Wright said? Something like, "I sometimes do without the necessities of life in order to have the luxuries."

Ain't that just like a junkie? Where's the 12-step program for us car nuts?



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