

POCI Member Spotlight

Dave Wolin, Oakhurst, California



John and Susan Grimes, from Elko, Nevada, averaged 154 mph for a 3rd place in the 155 mph class in their LS1-powered 1998 Trans Am.

There aren't many cars better for high speed touring than a recent model GTO, Trans Am or Firebird. These days, however, it's hard to do that without risking life and limb or getting arrested or both. That's where Open Road Racing comes in.

Open Road Racing, started by the late Indy legend Rodger Ward, has evolved into a major sport; not really racing but more like "high speed touring" without traffic and tickets. It has graduated from the "Cannonball Run" days to being a legitimately-sanctioned event; run like a rally in that the winner in each class is the one whose average speed is closest to the speed category they selected. Classes range from 85 mph to 170 mph and the speed you select determines the

amount of safety equipment required; i.e. a 90 mph class competitor needs no more than a racing quality helmet; at 170 mph a full roll cage and fuel cell is required.

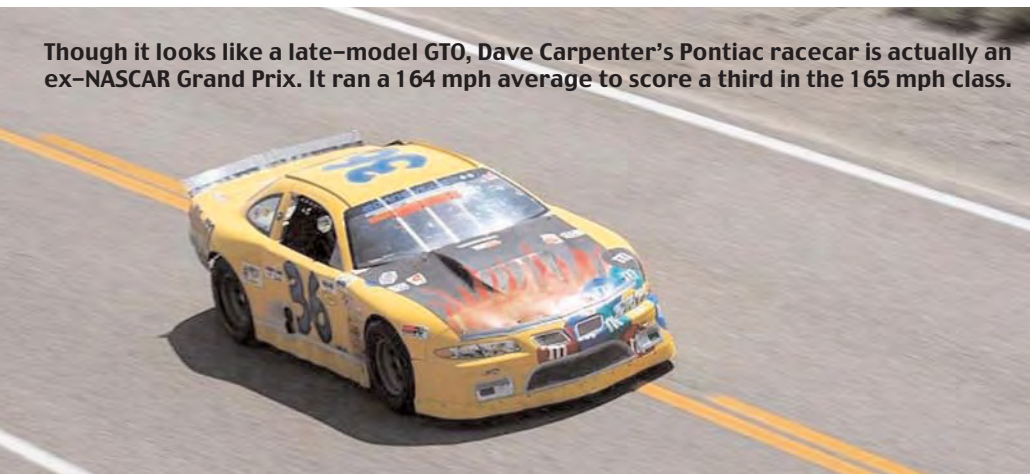
This is a family sport; most competitors drive their cars to each event and participate in the parties and fun events that fill the weekend; culminating in that high speed blast down the highway with wives or girlfriends riding along as navigators and the victory banquet afterward.

You certainly get to see some interesting places! This season began in Ely, Nevada; the gateway to Great Basin National Park and the county seat of White Pine County. Located on Highway 50 a few hundred miles from Las Vegas

and an equal distance from Salt Lake City, they've got a great steam train but it's not anyone's vacation destination. Then again they've got 90 miles of Highway 318 that is easily closed. The Nevada Open Road Challenge and its sister race, the Silver State Classic, attract a hundred plus entries, and fill up the town. We won't detail all the classes; suffice to say that our '04 GTO neatly won the 140 mph category. Other Pontiacs participating included Arizonan Gary Innocenti, who blew the transmission in his '89 Firebird and Bill Stebner, of Las Vegas, who won the 105 mph class in his '02 Firebird.

Next stop was Wendover Utah, a small quiet town on the Utah state line best known for the Bonneville Salt Flats, the first casinos you find driving westbound on I-80, a really big potash plant and the training ground for B-29 pilots during World War II, one of which was the Enola Gay that dropped the first atom bomb.

Then once a year, the Bonneville 100 comes to town. Unlike the nearby Bonneville Salt Flats, where racers get to drive in flat out spurts for three miles or so, with the support of the community and the Nevada Department of Transportation, the organizer is able to shut down 50 miles of Highway 93A, running south out of Wendover. Racers get that 50 mile blast, stop at the Lages Junction truck stop, refuel and eat breakfast and head back the other way. We had done some testing on the salt flats for Pontiac last year and knew the area well; they neglected to tell us or the marketing staff that the GTO was



Though it looks like a late-model GTO, Dave Carpenter's Pontiac racecar is actually an ex-NASCAR Grand Prix. It ran a 164 mph average to score a third in the 165 mph class.

Open Road Racing!

High Speed Touring For Pontiacs

By Dave Wolln

Photography by George Suennen



Dave Wolln's 2004 sits on Utah's legendary Bonneville Salt Flats, the site of many record-setting runs. The GTO is an ideal choice for high-speed racing, whether on the open road or on the salt flats.

being discontinued so our new records didn't have much value; but we got to spend some time learning the area roads. Highway 93A becomes pretty challenging at over 100 mph, with ten mile straightaways punctuated by sweeping corners and steep grades, culminating in an exciting blast through Wildhorse pass at 6700 feet and yet suitable for the over 200 mph speeds expected by the top unlimited cars. To keep the state happy, as we stated above,

the term race is downplayed; the goal being to average as close as possible to the speed class you select. At 150 mph, it's exciting whether you can average 149.999 or not.

Unfortunately, we didn't win here. A fat-fingered push on the GPS button created some huge error in my average speed; we managed a 4th place in the 140 mph class with an average of 141 mph. Dave Carpenter, of Parker, CO in his ex-NASCAR Cup Pontiac

pulled off a 164 mph average to score a third in the 165 mph class;

John and Susan Grimes, local favorites from nearby Elko, averaged 154 mph for a 3rd place in the 155 mph class in their '98 Trans Am.

A change was in the offing as we headed to western Nebraska for the Sandhills Open Road Challenge. Unlike the Nevada events, which have 10 or 15 mile straightaways punctuated by 150 mph corners, Sandhills replicates the early days



of road racing; Watkins Glen or Elkhart Lake of the '50's. Thirty miles, fifty corners, a break for breakfast and then a return run produce an adrenalin charged; hard on the brakes drive. Sold out every year, this has become a cult event; attracting drivers from all over the country. It's a 1500 mile drive for me; a once a year opportunity to see those who drove 1500 miles from the east coast for the same reason; one of the best events in open road racing. We pulled off a win here in the 110 mph class; note that the absolute record, held by a NASCAR Cup car, is only 133 mph. Other Pontiacs doing well included the above mentioned Dave Carpenter, who averaged 120 mph for a third in class, John Burbridge of Cheyenne, WY who ran well in the 90 mph class with his '04 GTO. Kansan Chris Stricker who knocked off an easy 93 mph run in his '86 Fiero. Chris Bischof of Southlake, TX, who usually wins his class at around 115 mph with his much modified '86 Grand Prix, had a rare mechanical problem and didn't finish.

Then it was back to the high deserts of Nevada for the longest event of the season, the Pony Express 130. Running south from Battle Mountain to Austin, Nevada on Highway 305 for 80 miles, a brief turnaround and a northbound 50 mile run provides enough driving for anyone. This is Pony Express country, hence the name of the event, and Highway 305 actually crosses the Pony Express trail of 1861.

Our GTO, running in the highly competitive 140 mph class, ran only .4 of a mph off. That's enough to lose in this class where the winner averaged 140.001!

Other Pontiacs included perennial podium finishers, John and Susan Grimes, from Elko, Nevada, in their '98 Firebird; running the 155 mph class. They missed winning by .131 mph.

Dave Carpenter ran his NASCAR Pontiac in the 170 mph class, broke the dry sump and didn't finish.

Gary and Bret Innocenti returned after breaking the transmission in May, now with a six

speed in their '89 Firebird, ran in the 140 mph class to a seventh place.

Mark and Van Lizanetz, more local favorites from Winnemucca, Nevada, brought out their fast '93 Trans Am, another 140 mph class competitor and missed winning by .101 mph.

Battle Mountain resident Jim Wheeler, a first time entrant, brought out his '05 GTO to run in the 110 mph class and had a fourth place finish. Not bad for a rookie! He's a real Pontiac enthusiast; his wife, who drives a Solstice, worked on the course and his mother in law rode along as navigator.

As a note of interest, Bob Kephart, long time POCI member and builder of the "Grey Ghost" replica Tempest, brought out his '02 Ford Crown Victoria ex - Police Car and ran a respectable third in the 105 mph class. Now we've got to get him out in a Pontiac.

So goes our Open Road Racing Season. Some wins, some good finishes and a lot of high speed driving. Bottom line to this is that all of you Pontiac owners need to try this exciting form of motorsport, with your daily driver, race car or even the van or SUV. You won't burn your tires down or run out of brakes like you do at track day events and you'll get the opportunity to drive flat out on a closed highway (with no oncoming drivers or cross traffic) for a half an hour or more. There's not much more exciting than that. And don't think you need a high performance model; the 90 mph class has been dominated by a Saturn and the 80 mph class is usually won by a small SUV!

While the Nevada events are a long days ride for anyone from Denver or the West Coast and possibly too far away for you easterners, Sandhills is worth looking at for those of you in the middle of the country (entries from Ohio and Wisconsin and even New York are commonplace) and there are even a couple of races in west Texas if that's close for you.

For more information about Nevada Open Road Races, look at www.openroadracing.com, Sandhills in Nebraska at www.sor-crace.com or Texas races at www.bbrr.com and find out how to be a part of the exciting world of open road racing.

About the author:

POCI member Dave Wolin has a background of over 35 years in professional racing, operating factory racing programs for manufacturers such as Ford, Mazda, Mitsubishi, Kia and Pontiac. His cars have won numerous professional racing championships in SCCA and IMSA, as well as winning in NHRA drag racing, the Baja 1000 Off Road Race and Pikes Peak Hillclimb. He has been awarded SCCA's "Jim Cook Trophy" for professionalism in racing and the Motorsports Press Association - "Professional of the Year" award. Today, he resides in Oakhurst, California, near Yosemite National Park, where in addition to competing in the 140 mph category of open road racing with his GTO, he's restoring a Bricklin, manufacturing track day cars and showing off his Testarossa.



Another yellow GTO, this 2005 model belongs to Jim Wheeler, who took a fourth place finish on his first attempt in the 110 mph class.



Arizonans Gary and Bret Innocenti, who blew the transmission in their '89 Firebird in May, returned with a six-speed and ran in the 140 mph class to a seventh place finish. Below: Why is this man smiling? It has to be the 140 mph class win!

