

GTO of the Month

By
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As most authors of the *Goat-of-the-Month* start out talking about their first car, I won't vary from the pattern. At age 17 I needed a car in order to make the 20+ mile commute from Buffalo to school at Niagara University. So my first car was a 1965 Ford Falcon Futura, 4-door, 200ci straight-6, with an automatic transmission. I paid \$420 for it in 1970, it was a gold-green metallic color with only about 45,000 miles on the odometer but the Buffalo winters had not been kind to the car – both front fenders were rusted through just over the headlights and there were rust holes in the rockers and lower quarters. My dad knew somebody who did bodywork and I repainted the patched spots with aerosol cans of matching paint. (See the photo of me washing the Falcon right after I bought it and, yes, that's Sandra in the passenger seat) I drove the car hard for two years until I started getting nasty ticking from the lifters and the radiator top tank started to separate from the core. It was a surprisingly quick car for such a small engine. Then I found out one night that the floorpan was rusted through when I ran through a deep puddle and it was like a fire hose had been turned on between my legs. I fixed that with some galvanized sheetmetal and roofing tar but it was time for a newer car.



After some time spent checking the newspaper classifieds I found a 1968 GTO, 4-speed car, originally Verdoro Green but repainted a dark brown metallic color (Chrysler *Tahitian Brown*). Options included a Safe-T-Track rearend, power steering and brakes, black vinyl roof, Rally II wheels, hideaway headlights, Rally gauges, clock, console, rear window defogger and a courtesy light package with underdash lights, underhood and trunk lights. In addition to abuse, I added a tachometer and the obligatory AM/FM Stereo 8-track “deck” under the dash (stereo sound was a big deal in the early 70s). I drove this car much harder than the Falcon and had a blast with it. Although the mechanicals were bone-stock, the Goat held its own against L78 Chevelles and

440/4bbl Mopars – at least between stoplights. Mustangs and Torinos were “easy meat” as were stock Mopar 340s and 383s. I had so much fun with the car that, even though I owned it for less than one year, the clutch and axle bearings had to be replaced. Some things had to be repaired so the car could be driven, others like replacing all the bias-ply tires I burned off the posi rear-end resulted in my scrounging around in the disposal heaps behind the tire stores. I did break-down and buy a recapped snowtire however. As if the skyrocketing insurance premiums assessed on musclecars weren’t bad enough, the first of several Arab Oil Embargoes struck in 1973 – gas prices tripled within 30 days and was being rationed (if your plate ended with an even number you were allowed to get gas on even numbered days, and odd for odd) if you could even find a station that had gas. If you think “Road Rage” is a problem, how about “Fuel Rage” people were actually being shot after cutting into gas lines. At 8 mpg city and about 13 on the highway (on Premium fuel), all my beer money was going into the gas tank and for insurance premiums. I had paid \$750 for the car in 1972 and sold it about ten months later for \$650 to a kid up the street who was driving a rusted-out ’66 GTO. My dad sold his ’66 VW Karman Ghia (the car I learned to drive a 4-speed on) and I sold the Goat and we bought and shared a Ford Maverick. The Maverick was considerably more fuel efficient but it marked the beginning of my string of “boring” cars.

While I owned the GTO for less than a year, it made a huge impression on me. After driving the Karman Ghia (with all of 58hp) I had no idea how much enjoyment could be had rowing through the gears when there were serious ponies under the hood. Naturally I regretted parting with the Goat almost immediately. Even though I had previously developed a tendency to push my vehicles to and sometime beyond their envelopes, that GTO was really special. But other priorities took over as is so commonly the case – finish college, get a job, get married, start a business, have kids, put the kids through college and wait a minute!

Flash Forward to about 2002. My daughters are finished with their Bachelor programs, I have a little extra disposable income accumulated and decide I’m in the market for a classic car. Initially I was looking at late 1930s Cadillacs with their Art Deco styling and Cadillac cachet. When I realized that I still retain that tendency to push my vehicles and the one that had been



the most fun to push was that '68 GTO, I switched my ebay favorite search from Cadillacs to GTOs. I had a buddy back in the day who owned a very nice '67 GTO, a 4-speed car with a bench seat and vinyl roof – black-on-black-on-white. The '68 model had essentially the same running gear but with curvaceous, sexier styling, especially with the hide-away headlights. Memories of my first '68 decided which

model year I was after. I surfed ebay for almost a year and a half before in early 2003 a dark red, 4-speed, hideaway headlight car with a freshly rebuilt engine caught my eye. The car was in Coudersport, Pennsylvania about 180 miles north and east of Pittsburgh on the New York state line. I talked with the seller several times on the phone and won the bidding at what I considered to be a very reasonable price. I put a deposit on the car and bought a one-way plane ticket to Buffalo where a good friend picked me up and took me to Coudersport to checkout the car. On close inspection the car had a half-way decent five year old paint job and still needed a fair amount of work, but did it run! The memories of cruising the streets in the Buffalo suburbs came flooding back and even though my three previous cars were all V-8s, I had forgotten what raw, visceral power was like. Based on the already applied



dark red paint, the hideaway headlights and the muscle under the hood, I decided this car had the makings of one badass GTO. Good thing I had brought the Cashier's Check with me.

After sealing the deal, I started driving the car to St. Louis a little before noon that same day. The thumbs-up salutes started before I even reached the interstate, that was a very different feeling that I had never experienced before and definitely addictive. By late evening I was in Indiana somewhere and considering whether or not to stop for the night. The car was running great and I was having a blast so I decided to drive straight through to St. Louis non-stop. I rumbled into my driveway at about 2:30 in the morning, and while I should have been exhausted, my level of excitement had yet to ebb. My son Clayton was waiting up for me and called his buddy up the street and we all went for a "Goat-Ride" in the wee hours. Apparently Clayton was as excited about our new toy as I was. The car was a fully functional and safe driver, except maybe for the stock 4-wheel manual drum brakes. It could be driven while being restified and drive it I do – averaging about 8,000 miles per year.

Per the PHS documentation the car was built in Meridian Turquoise with the WT-code block and #16 heads (standard for the 1968 GTO), options included the 4-speed M-20 Muncie transmission, 3.55:1 Safe-T-Track rearend, rally gauge cluster, dash tach, console, deluxe wheel covers on steel wheels and hideaway headlights. No air conditioning, power steering or brakes – no frills. Since owning the car I have had some major work done – converting to power front disc brakes (a Godsend) with a kit from Ames, rebuilding the tranny, new Cragar SS wheels and tires, new Centerforce clutch and a new Ram Air IV camshaft, lifters, pushrods and timing chain after wearing off a cam lobe by using Mobil One in the crankcase instead of an oil formulation with the zinc and other compounds necessary for use with flat tappet cams. Fellow club member Chris Simmons took over redoing the interior including all new window glass, weather stripping, headliner, sail panels, visors, steering wheel, carpet, console and door handles. Chris also rebuilt all the window regulators and installed new front seats from a 2005 GTO as well as



reupholstering the back seat to match. Just prior to the 2005 GTO Nationals here in St. Louis, fellow club member Cecil Morton painted and installed a new hood, hood tach, grills, hideaway doors and side mirrors. Then there's all the "little stuff" – replacing all four turn signal lenses, the license plate light fixture, front and rear window moldings, window tint, etc., etc.,

etc. Since I've owned the car I have spent at least what it cost to buy the car in refurbishments and mods. Owning these old cars is not for the weak-of-heart or the light-of-wallet.

But the car is really turning into the "badass GTO" I envisioned when I first saw it in 2003. I do pretty well with the car on the street but I am probably the world's worst drag racer. I guess the adrenaline takes over and I don't hook up and my 60-foot times are generally pitiful. I bought an accelerometer which computes 1/4-mile times (without reaction/60-foot time) and have achieved results in the high 12s, but my aforementioned difficulties at the track have netted me "best" timeslips in the mid-14s. I don't race enough at the track to be able to effectively improve my times. But almost all of my enjoyment in the car derives from the feel of all those ponies pulling and the guttural wail that accompanies it. The fact that even without flexing its muscles the car always gets me at least a couple of thumbs-up salutes is icing on the cake. The car still has a long "to do" list but it's almost "there" and I have loved it since that very first test drive in Coudersport.

I had more photos of my Falcon and of my first '68 GTO but they disappeared in the shuffle of the household moves we have made over the years. The one constant through all these years is my wife. Sandra and I were high school sweethearts – we both got doused with puddle water driving the Falcon through the water that one night, and we spent a fair amount of time in the backseat of the GTO (console interruptus) at the drive-in movies. I joke now that even if I could get her in the backseat of this car I'd probably need the Fire Department and the jaws-of-life to get me out. But her fond memories and support of my love for the '68 GTO is no joke – it makes all the difference in the world. Thanks hon!

As you probably know, we also own a 2006 GTO, but that's another story.