

DRIVING THE GT-3 WINNER



BY PETE LYONS

The "Chute" at West Virginia's Summit Point Raceway is a downslope plunge through a narrow, bumpy, too-fast right-hander. I wasn't taking it at real-racer speed, but even so, the car was recoiling off the bumps like a cannon ball running amok down a bobsled run. Leap, lurch, bang, bounce, weave, wobble & whiffle; no two laps—no two yards, in fact—produced the same behavior.

My main impression was the image of two fists slashing back and forth on the wheel in front of my face. They couldn't have been my fists. Mine can't move that fast. Must've been somebody else's.

Jackie Stewart's, perhaps? I recall the Grand Prix master pulling into the pits in his Formula One Tyrrell one day, climbing out and exclaiming in his high-piping Scots accent, "Och, I'm just a passenger!" In the furious grip of Sum-

mit's notorious "Chute," I finally knew precisely what he meant.

I pulled in after half a dozen laps for a breather. Lordie, this "door-car" driving is hard work!

The racecar I'd been let loose in was a Volkswagen Scirocco. A special one: the one with which Tom Davey was shortly to win the Sports Car Club of America's "GT-3" National Championship.

In the Champion Spark Plugs "Runoffs" at Road Atlanta, Georgia, Davey vanquished a surprisingly strong challenge from Bruce Nesbitt's Datsun B210 to capture his class in America's so-called "Olympics of Club Racing."

When I was allowed to drive the car, a couple of weeks before the Runoffs, it was hardly cool from an almost frantic campaign to get it qualified to even go to Atlanta.

Davey didn't actually race it until

the first weekend of August, months after his rivals had begun their own campaigns. He had to pack four more events into the next five weeks. His had to be virtually a zero-error program, but it paid off.

Tom brought the car over from Germany, where it had done a season of FIA Group Two in the hands of a journalist.

Working in Bill Scott Racing's facility outside of Washington, DC, Davey and his small crew had to hastily convert his racing Scirocco from German to SCCA rules—which involved going from the original 15-in. to 13-in. wheels, for one thing—and plunge into the last part of the racing season without being able to fine-tune their work.

"We ran all five races with no testing at all," recalled Tom for me that day at Summit Point. "We did have one test day, right at the beginning, but the clutch cable broke and we got no laps.

"But at the first race, Watkins Glen, we had no problems at all, and we won first time out. Then in race two we were in the lead, and a CV joint went. That is a weak point in this car. We've been changing the joints just about every practice session, although the cause of it breaking was actually a minor assembly error.

"Race three, no problem; race four, I was fast and then in the second qualifying session the clutch springs went and I had to run the whole race with the clutch slipping, and I finished third. That was another assembly problem: We didn't have a stop on the pedal and I was able to push it down so far the diaphragm spring deformed.

"Race five went OK."

So fast was the car in 1980 that there is a good deal of speculation that the SCCA will reclassify it for '81 into "GT-II," where it will encounter 1800cc Datsuns. For both Davey and his sponsor, VWoA, one gathers that will be fine. The killer Scirocco actually out-qualified the best next-class-up car at Road Atlanta by half a second as it is!

One of America's most experienced drivers of small-bore formula cars, Davey had to relearn a lot of technique to campaign what he calls a "door-car" effectively.

"I've been running a Formula Ford this year as well and even at the same tracks the Scirocco is harder work. Much harder—at least ten times.

"The single-seater really is more of an extension of yourself, because you can adjust the car so that it's exactly right for you. When you get one right,

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you know, you go out and you can just throw the car in a corner and you can do anything you want. It's the virtuoso instrument. In a door-car, you're always coping with something that isn't right, so it doesn't look as precise and perfect."

Was he prudently trying to impress me into being careful with his racer? Or courteously giving me a built-in excuse to perform poorly?

Only one way to really find out what he means, I thought, as I wiggled into the Davey chair and let mechanic Steve Cole snare me with the five-point spider-web of belts.

From the outside, the squat little yellow-and-black wedge of a racer looked the part, but from the inside there was a curious feeling of automotive schizophrenia. Except for the seats, almost all of the original trim was still in place. Headliner, door panels, sun visors, rear-shelf carpeting—even the cigarette lighter; all these street-car things were along for the ride.

Yet the snug-feeling, wrap-around competition seat, the no-nonsense pedals, the arm-restraint netting in the side window, the 220 lb. of lead weights bolted to strategic points of the bare metal floor; all these shouted out, "Let's go racin.!"

Suits me! The start-up drill was controlled from a switchbox mounted on the tunnel at my right hip. There was a loud whining from the electric fuel pump and the engine fired immediately with a roarty growl.

Now this was a nearly pure Schrick Super Vee motor, exactly the same as the kind Davey's protege, Peter Kuhn, races, with two minor exceptions: a somewhat milder cam and carburetors instead of fuel injection.

The softer cam is needed to lower the bottom end of the power curve a little, from about seven thousand down to nearer six, because the transmission gear ratios can't be altered as easily as in the "real racer." Anything lost by the lack of fuel injection is probably made up by the lack of SV restrictors in the intake plumbing.

The better of the team's two engines shows 188 bhp on the dyno, enough to pull the Scirocco to 60mph in just under six seconds when everything goes exactly right, says Tom. He also reports a radar-gunned 133mph at Road Atlanta. That's "only about walking pace" slower than Doc Bundy's aerodynamically cleaner Porsche 924 showed at the same place, he says.

So I was being entrusted with some-

thing pretty quick. Yet my first impression was that it was surprisingly easy to drive. The clutch was smooth and light and the engine was willing to pull at low revs, which saved me my all-too-frequent embarrassment of stalling a racecar on my first attempt to leave the pits.

That engine: Very raucous and lively. It made the 1970-lb. car feel light. Even with the engine well off the cam, at 4000 rpm, say, it still felt like enough motor to pick up the little car and just fling it up the road like a rock. Its smooth tractability made my learning laps a pleasure.

But when I took it over six it really came alive. "Other drivers tell me they know I'm coming up on 'em by the sound. It gets to seven thou and goes 'WHUHHH!'"

Davey uses 8300 as a normal maximum. I tried to hold myself to an 8000-rpm shift point, but to my great shame I twice wrong-slotted the somewhat vague gearshift and buzzed the little engine when I let out the clutch. The second time, the only thing that stopped the tach needle was the little peg—so when I came in to confess my crime, the tattletale was reading a horrifying 10,800! "Well, it's due for rebuilding anyway," said the philosophical Steve Cole. Yet when he tore it down a day or so later, I heard, he could find absolutely nothing wrong. Not even any marks to show a valve had touched a piston. What a stout little motor!

It's primarily on acceleration and straightline speed that the Scirocco blows off its "GT-3" competitors. The handling, at least at the stage of non-development that I was sampling, is another story.

My main impression about the chassis was that it leapt all over the road at the slightest provocation. True, Summit is a pretty bumpy track, but on the half-mile main straight I had to keep a good yard from the edge of the road for fear that one of the wild sideways lurches would fling me off completely.

But if the straights were disturbing, the corners were fearsome! With the suspension loaded to one side, every successive little ripple and pothole would snatch the car as much laterally as vertically. It was indeed very hard work, much harder physical arm and hand work than with a Go Kart, for instance. A true sidewinder!

It wasn't the springs doing the lurching. In fact, the suspension felt reasonably soft. That's a change Davey made

to the car from its German setup, much softer springs from a Formula Ford. "They seem to like to run their cars really hard. I guess that's to limit camber change with the strut-type front suspension. Most of our tracks are too bumpy for that."

There was also a very noticeable case of "power snatch" in the steering. When my throttle foot went down, the differential locker would hook up both front wheels and literally force them to straighten out. At one point, in fact, the steering wheel was ripped completely out of my fingers, and I had to make a very quick grab to keep us from hurtling into the bushes.

The major cause of the whole handling problem, as revealed by some testing the team finally managed to carry out a little after my drive, and before Atlanta, turned out to be a bad case of bump-steer.

Yet, perversely, I kind of liked the way it was. The Scirocco-racer's evil behavior that day in West Virginia made me feel like a real hero. I kept thinking, "This is amazing. I can't be going this fast. It can't really be me getting this thing this far sideways. I ought to be frightened, but I'm not."

I was also amazed at how, when I found myself hung out in a corner and decided to plant my foot (overcoming my foot's strong desire to back right off instead), the car would not do what I expected, which was plow straight ahead in a giant understeer off the road. To my delight, the tail would come out instead, the steering would straighten, and the car would actually seem to pull itself into the corner. With a lot of power on, it really seemed a pretty good handler.

Davey later agreed with my impression that if a person just had the courage to give the car a big bootful of power just when the overall feeling seemed to warn him to back off, the Scirocco would cooperate. "Yeah. If you stay with it, everything works out nice. It's that transition period that's terrifying."

"You just have to bite the bullet and get into it. Then it's OK. It's like jumping into real cold water."

Exactly. Cold water that for Tom Davey has turned into the toasty-warm bathwater of a nice, fresh National Driving Championship. There are a lot of champions around the many branches of racing, but I now understand a little about how much work it took to achieve this one. Many thanks, Champ and Bravo.