



A TIRE FRYER

in concours clothing

THERE REALLY IS NOTHING LIKE SURPRISING SOMEBODY
BY HITTING 4TH GEAR AND GOING SIDEWAYS



Colin's '65 GTO — looks stock but is optimized for terrorizing on the drag strip

Recently, the Big Man, aka Jim Pickering, and I had our usual exchange of emails wherein he tries to get me to write something that fits his vision for the magazine. And for once Pickering came up with an idea I thought made sense. He suggested in the wake of my offering ideas on how to optimize vintage cars that I write about one of my own “optimized” cars, a “money where your mouth is” kind of thing.

The car I’ll use as our lab rat is my 1965 GTO convertible.

True sleeper Goat

A little over 10 years ago, I wanted to build a GTO hot rod — a sleeper in the spirit of the original Royal Bobcat cars, but optimized by taking full advantage of modern technology wherever possible. Ideally it would be a 1965 4-speed, Tri-Power convertible — in black. Seems simple, doesn’t it? On paper, yes. In reality, no. Black is extremely rare in any muscle car, and very rare in a ’65 GTO ’vert. While I found a lot of decent cars to use as a starting point, none checked all the boxes.

But in 2004, I got lucky. While visiting Pontiac restoration guru Scott Tiemann, the conversation turned to my hunt for a ’65. Unbeknownst to me, Scott had a triple-black ’65 4-speed convert tucked away and was waiting to restore it. After telling him my plan (and a lot of arm twisting) Scott sold me his car with the understanding that he would do the restoration. Scott is an accomplished drag racer who is usually bound to Concours Gold standards in his restorations, but he is also a driving force behind the Pure Stock Drag series.

In other words, the right guy for this job.

The mission was to build the ultimate GTO sleeper, a car that could run high-12-second quarter-mile times but looked dead-stock to anybody outside of a concours judge. It also had to be 100% streetable. I wanted to take people that had never been in a GTO before and have them get out, legs shaking, and say “now I understand what all the fuss is about!” Deceptive? Perhaps. But fun!

Hidden power

Since the original block was long gone, we found a properly date-coded 421 block and went all-out to build a “Royal Bobcat Cheater”-style engine. While I initially topped it with a set of correct ’65 heads and a big tight-lash solid-lifter cam, I was concerned about having to always use race gas with nearly 12:1 compression. On top of that, we just couldn’t get it to run like I wanted. So we made the decision to use Edelbrock aluminum heads, which not only dropped the compression to a much more pump-gas-friendly 10:1, but also flowed far better than the stockers. We milled off all the casting numbers and identifying marks and did our best to make them look like cast-iron heads before painting them Pontiac blue. Other than the “peanut” spark plugs, they are fairly convincing.

We used a ’66 Tri-Power intake because they have a larger center carburetor than the ’64–’65 setup. The carbs were heavily massaged, re-jetted, and tweaked to work as best as possible, and while I know I am giving up a LOT of power over using a modern intake and big 4-bbl, I can’t bring myself to not have a 3x2 setup on my dream GTO. It also has a factory Ram Air pan and open-hood scoop. We used cast-iron 1967 exhaust “headers” and connected them to a custom 2.5-inch stock-looking exhaust. On the engine dyno (with real headers), the 421 made just over 500 hp, and just as much torque.

For the transmission, we put M21 close-ratio gears in the original M20 case, and it twists the power through a custom aluminum drive-shaft (painted cast gray) to the original (rebuilt) 3.90 Saf-T-Track rear with HD Moser axles. I also used a Centerforce clutch. Believe it or not, nothing has broken. Yet!



Standing the test of time at Gateway Motorsports Park

Suspension, tires, brakes

Initially we set up the chassis with soft original springs and 80/20 drag shocks up front, and used a lot of little tricks to get the weight to transfer to the rear tires. We retained the original manual steering box as well. Honestly, it drove like crap. So it got new springs and gas shocks all the way around, and a Borgeson quick ratio manual steering box went in, all helping to eliminate some of the diabolical handling.

We fitted G70-14 bias tires, as used in 1967–70, in place of the skinny 1964–66 7.75-14s, in a futile attempt to get some of the power to the ground, which kinda works. When I want to try harder to break stuff, I have a pair of era-correct 14-inch M+H Racemaster slicks I bolt on the rear.

We kept the manual drum brakes but fitted them with carbon

metallic shoes, larger wheel cylinders, upgraded hardware and cryo-treated drums. On the interior, we yanked the heater and radio and replaced with factory “delete” parts in the spirit of having a bare-bones, go-fast GTO.


Hammer down

So how does it work? For its intended purpose, extremely well. Immediately after restoration at the 2008 Supercar Reunion, I let my wife be the first to drive it down the quarter-mile. Mind you, she had never drag-raced before. After a few practice runs, she clicked off a 13.399 at 106.32 pass on the 14-inch Redline tires, leaving the line at just off idle. Needless to say, we were all pretty pleased with that.

Since then, like any fresh resto, I’ve played with it further and it’s even healthier now — the next time it hits the strip, with the M+H tires installed, I am positive I can see those 12s we planned for.

What would I do differently? Well, I’m still pretty tempted to put Jerico guts into the transmission for the ability to pull off clutchless shifting to really blow people’s minds.

My goal was never to make a ’65 GTO into something it isn’t, so it doesn’t handle or stop like a modern car and has no creature comforts. With a 4-speed, 14-inch tires, and a 3.90 gear, it sure isn’t a high-speed touring car, either. What it does do, thanks in large part to a thoughtful build using hidden modern tweaks, is run like we all want a muscle car to run. It uses pump gas, doesn’t get hot, is tight as a drum, and looks like a 100-point concours resto. Which is really, really helpful in getting suckers — err, I mean passengers — to take a ride. There really is nothing like surprising somebody by hitting 4th gear and going sideways.

After all, as great as factory-correct is, deep down don’t we all just want to go burn rubber? 



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