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TREND**

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MOTOR TREND

TESTS:

- Car of the Year
- New 4-cyl Gremlin
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CAR of the YEAR

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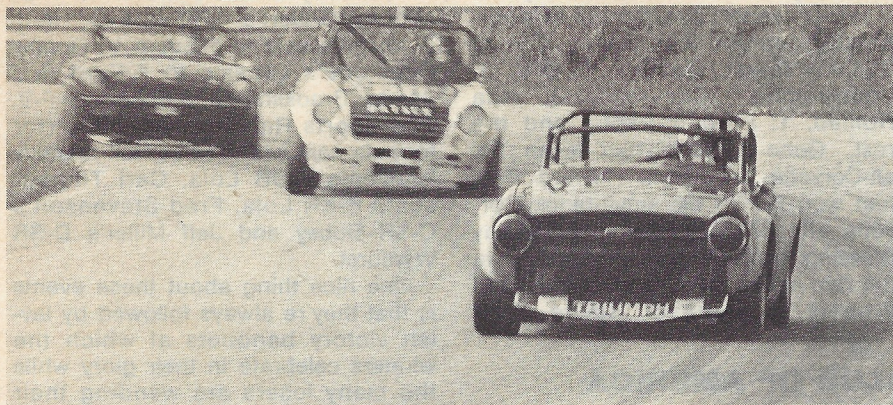
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1977 Chevrolet Caprice



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Competition



Paul Newman's out in front in his finest role.

Newman: SCCA Gold Beats An Oscar

by GARY WITZENBURG

When Bob Tullius plunged his marvelous \$50,000 V-12 XJ-S Jaguar into Road Atlanta's 100-mph-plus first turn, he hadn't counted on cold tires. Off he went in a cloud of red Georgia clay dust while the rest of the pack thundered by. "It was a dumb mistake," said he after the race, "but the car wasn't damaged and I was still confident of winning it."

Recovering from the spin, Tullius proceeded to put some added excitement into the last event of the annual orgy of SCCA road racing known as the Champion Spark Plug Road Racing Classic by climbing back up through the pack like a scared coon scales a tree. With just 6 laps down and 12 to go, he was some 16 sec behind the leader and gaining by nearly 2 sec a lap.

But it just wasn't in the cards this year for the talented Group 44 kingpin, as the big Jag suddenly developed a fuel leak and gas pouring over the hot exhaust system ignited. "He looked like a Saturn rocket when he went by me," said Stephan Edlis, who was running 5th in his Porsche 911, the only other non-Corvette in the race. With no idea he was on fire, Tullius flamed on once more around the 2.5-mile course, setting the race's fastest lap and a new B-production record in the process, until the fire got to the Jaguar's ignition system and his season was over.

It was the culmination of a disappointing weekend for British Leyland forces in general and particularly for the near-legendary B-L/Quaker State Group 44 factory team, which in the past 12 years has chalked up some 300 individual race wins and 14

SCCA National Championships. Tullius' partner and resident engineering wizard Brian Fuerstenau crashed heavily earlier in the day, breaking his collarbone and transforming the Group's E-P MGB into instant junk. And long-time team driver John Kelly spun his MG Midget in Saturday's rain-soaked F-P contest and then recovered—only to be nailed broadside by another spinning competitor.

In Sunday's D-P race, neither Tullius nor the fourth Group driver, John McComb, was able to get his respective TR-7 up to competitive speed, and it looked for a time like either James Reeve's Yenka Stinger (Corvair) or Jim Fitzgerald's Datsun 2000 would cop the prize. But fate and actor Paul Newman saved the day for B-L, narrowly beating Huffaker Engineering minion Lee "Mother" Mueller's TR-7 to the flag after a race-long battle and after Reeve had succumbed to a cut tire and Fitzgerald had developed engine problems. Thursday afternoon, after having qualified his ex-Group 44 TR-6 on the pole, Newman hired an airplane to tow a triumphant banner over the course. His prophetic message: "6's beat 7's."

Huffaker, B-L's West Coast factory banner-carrier, fared better in the E-P event, with Terry Visger bringing the team's MGB in ahead of a pair of very quick Porsche "bathtub" Speedsters. But the British legions were beaten in two other classes that have long been Spitfire and Spridget stomping grounds.

Joe Hauser, a 57-year-old longtime independent B-L pilot who had switched to a Datsun 1600 roadster

late in the season, beat his son's (Joe Jr.) Sprite by a scant few feet in Friday's G-P event; and Alfa Romeo driver Dick Blizzard slithered to victory in Saturday's wet F-P bash over a hord of Spitfires and Midgets, one lone Fiat and a Renault Alpine. What was particularly disconcerting about the Hauser victory was that his Datsun was the only non-B-L car in the race, and that the model had just this year been demoted from the faster F-P class.

Datsun, the second manufacturer with strong involvement in SCCA amateur racing, had a banner weekend in spite of Fitzgerald's demise in D-P. The Japanese marque had first become a pain in B-L's rearend when Connecticut Datsun dealer Bob Sharp thrashed out an F-P class victory with his 1500 roadster back in 1967. Then came a string of D-P victories and eventual domination of the C-P class by first John Morton's and then Sharp's factory-backed Z-cars, followed by virtual ownership of both B- and C-Sedan by the company's various sedan-based racers.

In the early '70s the classic confrontations between these factories were highlights of every year-end National Championship meeting. Battles between the likes of Sharp's 240-Z and Tullius' TR-6 for the D-P title, and Carl Swanson's and Fuerstenau's GT-6s vs. Fitzgerald's and the other fast Datsun 2000s, kept the crowds on their collective feet year after year. But then the TR-6 was reclassified to D-P (only to come up against Huffaker's near-invincible Jensen Healeys), leaving the G-P class to the Datsun "Z." The D-P 2000s had begun to age, and each company was left with its own strong classes to rule—until Fitzgerald almost won this year in D-P and Hauser stole away the G-P win, that is.

This season it was pro driver Elliott Forbes-Robinson (dubbing for Sharp, who had broken his wrist in a crash earlier in the year) taking both C-P with the Sharp Racing 280-Z and B-S with the ditto Datsun 610. The C-S contest was run in Saturday's downpour with Damon Pleasant's privateer B-210 coming through for the victory from the 15th qualifying spot.

There's a NASCAR adage that the make that wins on Sunday sells on Monday, which is a truism extending to road racing as well. "Racing successes sell sports cars," says B-L U.S. Sales Vice President Mike Dale. "There's just no doubt about it."

Most of the road racing spectators identify with and drive cars similar to the ones they see competing on the track, and that's why B-L and Datsun spend so much time and money trying to insure victory for their respec-

tive products. The reputations of their cars are built largely around amateur victories in this country, just as Porsche, BMW, Ferrari and others trade on their pro competition successes both here and in Europe.

Both B-L and Datsun run large-scale parts and contingency award programs to help independent drivers in addition to fielding their factory teams; and Alfa Romeo, Porsche and Toyota also offer incentive money for drivers who win with their products. This may be "amateur" racing, but it's important business for these manufacturers, since one year's SCCA National Championship wins

and losses will likely make themselves evident in the next year's sales figures.

The 1976 production car and sedan tally after three solid days of wheel-to-wheel, doorhandle-to-doorhandle competition among 436 of SCCA's finest: Datsun, 4; B-L, 3; "non-racing" Chevrolet, 3; Alfa Romeo, 1; Ford, Porsche and the rest, Gene Bothello had taken the all-Corvette A-P bash, Howard Park had won B-P in his small-block Corvette after Tullius' bad luck, Randy Blessing had sloshed home first in the rain in his A-S Camaro, and Todd Wheeler's bugeye Sprite had

emerged victorious in H-P to give B-L its third '76 crown.

Among the fenderless formula car racers it was Jerry Hansen's Lola in F-A, Bobby Brown's March in F-B, Michael Gilbert's GRD in F-C, Herm Johnson's Lola in F-Super V, Dennis Firestone's Crossle in F-Ford and James Brookshire's Agitator in F-V. The Sports Racing class titles (for formula cars with bodies) fell to Jerry Hansen's A-SR Lola, Carl Thompson's B-SR Lola, Fred Stevenson's C-SR Bobsy and Jeff Miller's D-SR Wynfurst.

One nice thing about these events is that they're always followed by lavish victory banquets at which the winners celebrate in their glory while the many losers are wending their weary ways home to every corner of the country. Each class champion gets a chance to vocalize his feelings before the assembled multitude, but few could sum up the whole thing quite so eloquently as Paul Newman when presented his first-ever National Championship medalion. "Screw the Academy Awards," said the handsome heart-throb of millions and master of countless demanding roles, "this is the greatest!"

Maybe so, but for the handful of pros like Tullius and Sharp, for their tireless team mechanics, for B-L competition manager Mike Cook, and Dick Roberts, Cook's counterpart at Datsun, it was the end of another very grueling weekend's work. And it all begins again at SCCA's opening events this spring.

1976 SPORTS CAR CLUB OF AMERICA NATIONAL CHAMPIONS

| CLASS | DRIVER | CAR |
|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| A-Production | Gene Bothello | Corvette |
| B-Production | Howard Park | Corvette |
| C-Production | Elliott Forbes-Robinson | Datsun 280-Z |
| D-Production | Paul Newman | Triumph TR-6 |
| E-Production | Terry Visger | MGB |
| F-Production | Dick Blizzard | Alfa Romeo Giulia Spyder |
| G-Production | Joe Hauser | Datsun 1600 |
| H-Production | Todd Wheeler | Austin Healey Sprite |
| A-Sedan | Randy Blessing | Camaro |
| B-Sedan | Elliott Forbes-Robinson | Datsun 610 |
| C-Sedan | Damon Pleasant | Datsun B-210 |
| Formula-A | Jerry Hansen | Lola-Chevrolet |
| Formula-B | Bobby Brown | March-Ford |
| Formula-C | Michael Gilbert | GRD-Ford |
| Formula-SV | Herm Johnson | Lola-VW |
| Formula Ford | Dennis Firestone | Crossle-Ford |
| Formula-Vee | James Brookshire | Agitator-VW |
| A-Sports Racing | Jerry Hansen | Lola-Chevrolet |
| B-Sports Racing | Carl Thompson III | Lola-Ford |
| C-Sports Racing | Fred Stevenson | Bobsy-Ford |
| D-Sports Racing | Jeff Miller | Wynfurst-Koehler |

Yarborough, Pearson Take All the Marbles

by JIM NORRIS and BOB MYERS

When Ontario's sun-drenched haze became orange with late afternoon, it was apparent that most of the "Good Ol' Boys" had fallen.

The 3rd annual *L.A. Times* 500 Grand National Stock Car Race and 200-lap finale of the 30-race Winston Cup Series had tempted more winsome mischief from capricious lady luck.

Petty was out—the King's car was dead; the Allison brothers, Donny and Bobby, went nose-to-tail into the pits after 102 laps; NASCAR Winston Cup Champion Cale Yarborough's gold and white Holly Farms Chevrolet had at last lost its basketful of miracle eggs. But there was David Pearson in the No. 21 Purolator Mercury doing his thing, and this time for real, in the 500-mile victory that had barely eluded him two years in a row. *cont.*

