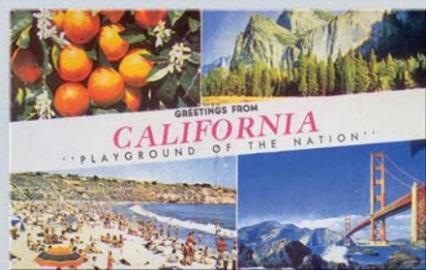


ARIZONA DRIVERS BRING THE HEAT TO CORONADO

Story by Tim Sharp
Photos by Kristin Sharp



Racing on the airport course at Coronado transports us back to the day when, yes, we knew the world was round, but the road race circuits were still flat.

Tom Benjamin of Boulder wows the crowd up close and personal in his #61 1964 Cobra; Edie Arrowsmith of Scottsdale passes the base's oil depot in her #42 1970 Porsche 914/6 GT; Jonathan Ornstein of Phoenix strapped into his #73 1969 Datsun 510; Lon Walters of Sedona banks into a corner in his #18 1964 Elva Courier; and Nick Colonna of Palos Verdes Estates, in his #69 1964 Cobra, feels the heat from Jeff Kline of La Jolla, in his #4 1964 Ginetta G4.

On the last weekend of September, temperatures in Phoenix were above the century mark. Temperatures in San Diego were in the cool seventies. This might be reason enough to spend the weekend in Coronado and escape the desert heat. However, for a few Arizonans it was more about bringing the heat than escaping it.

A dozen race drivers from Arizona traveled to the Coronado Speed Festival to compete against some of America's finest vintage racers. The Arizonans' race cars ranged from modest machines like Johnathan Ornstein's 1969 Datsun 510 to Brent Berge's exotic 1978 Lola T-333 sports racer. However, each Arizona driver had a common goal: to finish on the podium.

An airport race track changes everything

Unless you attended sports car races in the 1950s or '60s, you may have never seen a sports car race run on an airport course. The Coronado race circuit at the North Island Airbase is a bona fide old school sports car track. It mirrors the old airfield race courses of Santa Barbara, Palm Springs and Hourglass Field.

What makes the Coronado Speed Festival race special is that it features genuine vintage machines, racing on a genuine vintage airport road racing circuit. Today, most vintage races are run on modern race tracks which favor power over handling.

So forget what you think you know about sports car races: an airport race track changes everything. For starters, at an airport course you can see every inch of the race track from the grandstands. There are no hills, trees or valleys to block your view of the racing action. Therefore, races on an airport course are quite easy to follow and very exciting to watch.

On an airport course, there is also no banking to help slow the heavier cars in the corners or to hold them onto the race track. Since massive V8 power can only be applied on the straightaways, it is of less worth on short airport tracks. Thus, a petite Porsche can pass a powerful Corvette in a braking zone and go on to win the race.

Essentially, airport road courses are "The Great Equalizers." They allow light, small-displacement race cars to compete on a level playing field with heavy, big-bore machines. Airport race courses place a premium on driving skill, braking and passing technique. Airport circuits also force drivers to manage their brakes and tires wisely. Race drivers who do this will usually finish on the podium.

The best David vs. Goliath matchup of the weekend pitted a 1953 Porsche/Cooper with 1750cc displacement against big V8 Corvettes, Kurtis and Devins. When

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Photo: Joe Sage

Tom Claridge of Los Gatos in his #88 1962 Ginetta G4R has C Patrick Costin of Reno closing in, in his #901 1966 Porsche 911; Terry Miller of Simi Valley flat out in his #60 1963 Corvette; Paul Ryan of Coronado in his #7 1962 Lotus Super 7.

the dust settled, it was Cameron Healey's little Porsche/Cooper in first, followed by Thor Johnson's 1959 Lotus 17 and John Goodman's 1958 Devin SS. Phoenix's Bob Hardison finished a well deserved sixth in his 1958 Echidna and Mesa's Terry Larson finished tenth in his recently acquired 1953 Jaguar XK120.

The Desert Dozen at the Coronado Speed Festival

Arizona's "Desert Dozen" represented the Grand Canyon State quite admirably at the Coronado vintage races. While they were not victorious, many were in serious contention for the win at Coronado.

In the **Historic Trans-Am Race**, Tucson's Jim Click finished fourth in his 1969 Ford Mustang, and Drew Alcazar, of Russo and Steele Auction fame, finished thirteenth in his 1969 Boss Ford Mustang.

Sedona's Lon Walters finished fourth in the **1953-1966 Under 2000cc Race** with his 1964 Elva Courier, and Ed Roll was twentieth in his little 1964 Fiat Abarth.

Chandler's Phillip Reys finished seventh in the **FIA Manufacturer Championship Race** with his 1971 Lola T-212, and Mesa's Brent Berge finished just behind him in his 1978 Lola T-333. Jim Click was eleventh in his 1966 Ford GT40.

Phoenician Jonathan Ornstein finished tenth overall in the **1959-1966 Production Car Race**. Ornstein's 1969 Datsun 510 was edged out by Terry Forland's 1980 BMW 2002 sedan. Scottsdale's John Breslow finished mid-pack in his 1965 Alfa Romeo GTA. Ornstein was also runner-up in the **Sedan Group**.

While Jim Click's 1964 Cobra clocked the second fastest time in the **1962-1966 Production Cars over 2500cc Race**, he experienced mechanical problems and did not finish the race. Scottsdale's Edie Arrowsmith also clocked one of the fastest times in qualifying with her 1970 Porsche 914/6 GT. However, Edie also had a DNF. Bob Paris, also of Scottsdale, did manage to finish mid-pack in his 1965 Mustang.

The Valley's Tommy Thompson also logged one of the fastest qualifying times on Saturday in his 1994 Ford T-Bird **NASCAR Historic Class** machine. However, Tommy's car did not make the race on Sunday. Paradise Valley driv-

er Robert Lavinia managed to finish mid-pack on Sunday with his 1994 T-Bird in this highly competitive race.

Tucson's Gary Roberts raced his 1971 Hawke in the toughest event of the weekend: **1962-1972 Sports Racing and Formula Cars Under 2000cc**. Gary managed to finish mid-pack in a race filled with former Indy and SCCA professional drivers Dennis Firestone, Dave Vegher and Skip Streets. Vegher took the win.

Phillip Reys drove his second mount, a 1974 Chevron, to a respectable tenth place in the **1969-1980 Sports Racing and Formula Car Race**. Tempe's Frank Eckert finished immediately behind him in his 1980 March Super Vee. Dan Marvin, a talented ex-professional driver from Northern California, won the event in a 1976 March 76B.

What we like about the Coronado Speed Festival

We enjoy traveling to Monterey and Sonoma to see the vintage races at the Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca and Infineon Raceway tracks. Both have remarkable road race circuits with banked turns and silky smooth surfaces. Both have beautiful rolling hills and superb track amenities. However, the Coronado vintage venue is a refreshing change from the modern road racing circuits. Coronado is a nostalgic trip down memory lane.

Coronado transports us back to the day when temporary grandstands were constructed on an airfield and hay bales were laid about to mark the boundaries of the track. Yes, we knew the world was round, but the road race circuits were still flat.

Coronado teaches us that bigger is not always better and that power does not always win over precision. It reminds us that there was a day when innovative men like Ken Miles and Pete Lovely believed they could build lightweight "Specials" which could beat the best Italian sports cars that money could buy. They built them. They beat them.

Coronado also reminds us that there was a time when there was no substitute for driving talent. There were no antilock brakes, no traction control or no ground effects systems to help race drivers like Bob Bondurant, Phil Hill, Ken Miles and Dan Gurney when they raced on airport race tracks. It was all about race driving skill and car control.

Coronado also takes us back to the day when the American public could go onto a US Naval Air Station to watch a road race. It is remarkable, really, that Fleet Week San Diego has made this possible. Moreover, if you have not been onto a military base lately, you will not believe how courteous and helpful our armed forces are. Great guys.

Do you want to see fifty years of vintage Navy aircraft on display? It is at the Coronado vintage races! Do you want to go onto the USS Midway aircraft carrier? You can do this also. You really must take advantage of Fleet Week San Diego on the last weekend of September. Find details at www.fleetweeksandiego.org, then mark your calendar.

If you miss the Coronado Speed Festival, you will miss everything that sports car racing was all about back in the 1950s and 1960s. Talented drivers, driving real vintage race cars on a real vintage race track. It just does not get any better than this. ■