

TAKING THE WHEEL

NASCAR TRACK TIME FOR CIVILIANS

By Joe Sage / Photos by Randall Bohl



Arizona Governor Jan Brewer behind the wheel of the PIR Camaro SS Pace Car. The governor joined us in the morning, to present a plaque to PIR President Bryan Sperber, in honor of last fall's Kobalt Tools 500 Race Week, but unfortunately couldn't stick around for the Petty part. Too bad. She burned up the track nicely for a few laps before she left.

Not surprisingly, everybody asks the same question: How fast did you go? The conditions are controlled, with a lead car for each racer, carrying a system of lights on its back end—yellow by default, green if you're lagging and should close the gap, or red if you're too close. We assumed the cars were detuned and/or governed, as well, but racing staff assures us they are not: track speeds are the result of the lead car's wisdom and guidance.

THE NEW PIR TRACK

The event was the Richard Petty Driving Experience, a chance to drive an authentic NASCAR stock car. The occasion was the brand new one-mile oval track at Phoenix International Raceway—an incredible feat of off-season engineering covered in several of our previous issues—and a chance for the media to try it out.

In February 2011, PIR had announced details of the 47-year old NASCAR facility's first major track paving project since 1990. Construction began one year ago, in March 2011, with removal of the existing racing surface. A series of specific configuration changes were implemented to promote more side-by-side racing than the prior configuration encouraged. While maintaining the integrity of PIR's oval—including its one-mile length—these changes are intended to provide a "racer" track, with average speeds that are expected to increase by two to three miles per hour.

What better way to verify that speed increase, than to put us behind the wheel?

SUIT UP, BUCKLE IN AND GO

The day started with Arizona Governor Jan Brewer driving the PIR Chevy Camaro SS Pace Car, then reading a proclamation and presenting a plaque recognizing Kobalt Tools 500 Race Week. Lunch was served after

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ARIZONA GOVERNOR JAN BREWER: "MY FIRST CAR"

BY JIM PRUETER
PHOTOS BY RANDALL BOHL

Janice K. Brewer became Governor of Arizona on January 21, 2009, after the resignation of then-Governor Janet Napolitano. Following her election in November 2010, she was again sworn in on January 3, 2011.

Governor Brewer moved to Arizona about 40 years ago, after marrying Glendale native Dr. John Brewer. She and her husband raised their three sons in Glendale and have lived in the same house since the mid-1970s.

We recently sat down with the Governor to talk about one of her passions: cars, rather than Arizona politics.

Q: Where did you learn to drive a car and who taught you?

Governor Brewer: I grew up in California and lost my father at a very young age. Shortly thereafter, I was going to school and also began working in my mother's dress shop. It was my mother who taught me how to drive. She would let me drive back and forth to church and around the neighborhood. After I got my driver's permit, I would drive any car that someone would allow me to. My mother was a very good driver who had a lead foot.

Q: Were you a good driver?

Governor Brewer: I was a very good driver but I too had a lead foot.

Q: So like most teenagers, were you anx-

ious to get a car or did it not matter to you?

Governor Brewer: I was obsessed and couldn't wait to get my driver's permit, and got it when I was exactly age 15 and a half, and my driver's license on my 16th birthday.

Q: When did you get your first car?

Governor Brewer: My mother was in a position where she was able to give me a car when I was 16. It was a powder blue 1952 Chevrolet. I remember it didn't have a radio, so we had to go to the junkyard and get a radio (laughing), because how could you be 16 and not have a radio?

Q: How long did you keep the Chevrolet and what was your next car?

Governor Brewer: I kept it for about 7 months and then I got a car I really wanted. I didn't know how I was going to get it, but I was absolutely in love with the '49 Ford Victoria convertible, and it had to be a stick shift because I wanted to be cool. My uncle found the car for me; it was in great condition, so I purchased it. I was the envy of not only all my girlfriends, but the boys loved my car, too. And, it had a radio (laughing). And by the way, I chose all my boyfriends in high school by the kind of car they had. I was very material (again laughing). I just love cars.

Q: So when did you get your first brand new car?

Governor Brewer: When I was 18, I bought a Ford 500 Fairlane hardtop convertible. It was white and I thought I was the cat's meow when I got that.

Q: Now as Governor of the State of Arizona, I'm

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ARIZONA GOVERNOR JAN BREWER: "MY FIRST CAR" (CONT'D)

guessing you don't get to drive your own car as much as you once did, is that correct?
Governor Brewer: You are correct. My security detail has clipped my wings. Like I said, I've been obsessed with driving and that freedom of being in control my whole life, and now since I've been Governor I don't have that luxury. I have a different luxury, I have a driver and I sit in the back seat like Miss Daisy, and I've got security with an advance car and a tail car with me at all times, so I don't drive at all.

Q: For someone who loves driving and the freedom it brings, it must be difficult for you at times.
Governor Brewer: It is very difficult, and one of the hardest things I've had to be accustomed to do is to not be able to go outside, jump in my car and go where I want.

Q: Do you still have a personal car that you own?
Governor Brewer: I have a little BMW convertible that I just love to drive, and now I'm not able to just put the top down, put my CD in and drive it. It's just sitting in the garage right now, so I'm probably getting ready to sell it.

Q: Do you have a dream car that you would like to own?
Governor Brewer: You know, probably any car that I can drive today would be my dream car, just to have that freedom.

Q: Are there any cars you've owned that have been particularly memorable?
Governor Brewer: There are. In 1969, I bought a brand new red Volkswagen. We just got it, and my husband and I were debating who was going to drive it first, taking it from the dealership. He had to go to work, and I wanted to drive it around in my old neighborhood. So I drove him to work, which was about ten minutes from the dealership. I dropped him off, turned around and came to a stop at a traffic light, and a car came through, hit me and com-

pletely totaled out the vehicle. I had only had the car for about 15 minutes. Just broke my heart.

Q: So some day you'll get to drive again and get another car. Will it be another convertible?

Governor Brewer: Well I don't know about that. I'm getting more conscientious about my hair (laughing). I don't know what I'll get.

Q: It sounds like you've had a lot of cars over the years.

Governor Brewer: I have. I've had two Corvettes, Thunderbirds, a Buick Riviera, Lexus, a couple of new Cadillacs and others.

Q: Are there any of those cars you wish you would never have gotten rid of?

Governor Brewer: Yes! My '75 Corvette. It was orange and had a T-top. My husband gave it to me for Mother's Day, and at that time I had three children and a dog. I kept it for two years and realized my children were getting bigger and I wasn't really able to go grocery shopping and those kinds of things. I really loved that car. ■

Automotive writer **JIM PRUETER** first drove when he was 12 years old, after "borrowing" his grandfather's Ford pickup truck on the family farm in Michigan. He's been a car enthusiast ever since, driving and writing about hundreds of vehicles. His passion for cars and travel has taken him across the country and around the world, in search of great drives and interesting stories. As a spokesperson for AAA, his auto reviews and travel stories appear nationally in print and online. You can catch him on several local TV stations sharing his automotive and travel tips expertise.

the rides at PIR's upscale skybox club, Octane. (For more information on this facility, visit PIR online.)

A couple of dozen media personalities and personnel participated in the morning's track-driving event. Those who arrived later were able to do a Petty ride-along program after lunch. (Fans would have a chance to do the same, the next day.)

NASCAR cars are highly standardized. A naturally-aspirated, carbureted big-block V8 provides 600 hp, which feeds through a 4-speed manual transmission. Compared to the family V8, a NASCAR engine has highly modified cam profiles, pushing more air into the cylinders over a longer duration, with intake and exhaust tuned for boost at particular speeds. The ignition system is duty-built and highly programmed, and all pumps and power systems are of extreme durability.

The transmission's shift points are explained to us before we start, and are marked along the track. We put on our Nomex suits and helmets, then climb through the window and into the seat of car number 88. Belts are tightened, and final orientation is brief. The last step is to install the steering wheel, and off we go.

The manual transmission, for our duty, is as much about stopping at the end, as about shifting, because once we get through the first three gears—quickly—and settle into fourth, we are there for the duration. Following the fall line is the trickiest part. Keep an eye on that lead car, follow its path to the apex, and avoid the tendency to carve the turns short—the same tendency too many people have at every surface street cor-

ner. The rhythm comes easily, with very little lagging (green light) or closing of the gap (red light) in play. Our run is for nine laps, but we could surely do this all day.

SO HOW FAST DID WE GO?

As mentioned, conditions are highly controlled, with a lead car limiting our top speed. Not being fully track trained—we've driven Corvettes and Cadillacs very fast on the track at the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving, but by the seat of our pants—and we were just coming off an inarguable dusting by a French-Canadian F1 racing champ, in laps at Miller Motorsports Park in Tooele, Utah (see the Nov/Dec 2011 issue)—we were interested to check our speed against the rest. It turns out that among the media group that day, we all had average speeds within a few points of 100 mph. Speeds are recorded lap by lap, and over the course of nine laps we progressed from two in the 90s to seven more at above 100 mph. Our top speed turned out to be the second-highest in the group (at least among those admitting their results), at 103.41 mph. ■

Clockwise from top right: the Petty crew gives a final safety and gear check before launch. Various members of the media prepare to meet their fates. Governor Jan Brewer proclaims Kobalt Tools 500 Week with PIR President Bryan Sperber. Photographer Randall Bohl on the wrong side of the lens, ready to drive. Crew gives the hardware a quick review during a driver switch in the pits.

Richard Petty Driving Experience programs run year-round at 26 tracks nationwide, including PIR. Your hands are on the wheel, your foot is on the gas and 600 horses are ready to take you for 8 to 50 laps. If you'd rather let someone else do the driving—up to 165mph—ride-along programs put you in shotgun position with a professional instructor.

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