

LIKE A WALK IN THE PARK

Racing as they did back when doesn't require a

time machine. Just visit Pittsburgh.

STORY BY TIM SUDDARD
PHOTOGRAPHY AS CREDITED

EVEN THE CLEVEREST PURVEYOR of public relations doublespeak would have to admit that Pittsburgh's downtown Schenley Park race course is a bit precarious. There are stone walls lining much of the course. Light poles seem to be planted everywhere.

Turn 3 puts race cars near the top of third gear as they come onto the Panther Hollow Bridge some 120 feet above a lake. The start/finish line is so tight that this year organizers instituted a full-course double yellow through two corner stations to prevent crazy passes.

So, since 1983, why have drivers kept returning to the temporary course at the Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix? Dave Gibson, who bought his 1958 VAY Special from Virginia for what he says is his seventh or eighth time, says the appeal is the challenging course. "You get to race in town, in a park," he says, "just like the old days."

During the drivers meeting, in fact, event organizers stressed that this was an exhibition. Keep things limited to 70%, they added.

But as many have experienced at Monterey and so many other supposed exhibition events, when the green flag drops, the racing gets real. Gibson admits that while drivers may back off a little in the practice and qualifying rounds, it's hard to do that during the main feature races on Sunday.

Mike Moore, who was driving his bright-red Triumph TR4, backs up Gibson's claims. "We are racing!" he tells us. But as he notes, the racing is clean and respectful among the mostly veteran drivers. He returns, he says, because it's a rare opportunity

to race on public streets. "There is a real sense of family and camaraderie," he adds.

There's more to this event than a race through city streets. The paddock sits in a beautifully shaded park. The week-long schedule also includes more races at nearby Pitt Race plus car shows, a jet center affair and a Friday night street party. Then add in a giant club gathering featuring all makes and types.

I got to experience the track this past July in an iconic machine: a Triumph GT6 campaigned by Bob Tullius' Group 44 Inc. His team was contracted by the Triumph factory to prepare cars for SCCA competition, and the first was a 1969 model that we at Classic Motorsports restored and campaigned. Tullius now owns that car again.

Thanks to a body update, a second car was built for the 1972 season. This one lives with the family of Jim Dolan, the event's chairman of its board of directors. While our car was restored back to its state when it won that SCCA championship at Daytona in 1969, the Dolan family made a few modifications to make theirs a little faster, safer and more durable.

The original, fragile transmission has been replaced with a smooth-shifting Tremec TKX. It easily handles the 2.0-liter's roughly 200 lb.-ft. of torque. The slightly larger brakes come from a Toyota but still mesh with the vintage spirit. The rear end is from a Subaru WRX.

I was told that it drives like the Mustangs the Dolans also race. They were right: fast, predictable, easy to steer with your boot. Unlike



PHOTOGRAPHY CREDIT: BILL STOLER

Forget today's sanitized race tracks. The Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix does it old school.

a Mustang, though, the cabin is just a little small—the main reason we sold ours.

The track reminded me of a faster hillclimb: lots of shifting—mostly between second and third—with precious little room for error. The GT6's torque helped it keep up with the rest of the pack in the straights.

At one point spectating was free, but organizers now request a \$10 donation. Those funds collected—whether from the audience or partners—has largely gone to charity, with the event raising some \$6.5 million for individuals with autism and intellectual/developmental disabilities.

The event, though, operates with one full-time employee. For 20 years, Dan DelBianco has steadfastly dealt with sponsors, suppliers, club officials and, perhaps most importantly, the city. While Pittsburgh does not charge the foundation for use of the park, the nonprofit must carry its own insurance and cover expenses, including what looks to be a million miles of concrete barriers. And at the end of the event, the entire 456-acre park must be returned to its original state.

More than 100,000 people attended this July's event, a fact, DelBianco notes, not lost upon city officials. He jokes that he holds the event together with zip-ties and duct tape, but he quickly explains that the support of the community, some 75 sponsors, 560-plus vendors and more than 1200 volunteers are the key to keep this event going. "How good are these volunteers if it only takes one employee to run this event?" he asks. 🙄



1. We borrowed Jim Dolan's Group 44 Triumph GT6 for this year's Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix. As promised, it felt like a Mustang—but smaller.
2. The weekend's schedule also includes a show-field fully stocked with all the favorites, from British roadsters to American cruisers.
3. As we found during our visit, Pittsburgh is a fantastic, vibrant place to visit.

