

FINE LINES

1968 – '72 PONTIAC GTO

By Malcolm Gunn

Four years after the first GTO set out to conquer the streets, a sleek new version brought Pontiac to even higher levels of performance and popularity.

The third-generation 1968 "Goat," as GTO was affectionately called, offered a step up in power and one of cleanest shapes to grace any mid-size domestic car. For many street racers of that era, the car was something to be admired and coveted, but not something you necessarily wanted to come up against.

All grown-up and civilized, the GTO had come a long way from its infancy. In 1964, the precocious Pontiac was no more than a normally sedate mid-size Tempest with a big-block V8 crammed inside. This potent combination was the brainchild of John Z. DeLorean, at the time Pontiac's chief engineer, who believed that speed and performance was the key to increasing sales.

In base trim, the Tempest ran with a 110-horsepower four-cylinder engine (created from one bank of cylinders from a 389 cubic-inch V8 that first appeared in 1961) while a Le Mans option upped the stakes with a 326-tube V8. In the spring of 1963, during one of DeLorean's regular "skunkworks" sessions, a staff member mentioned that installing the entire 389 engine into the Le Mans would be a piece of cake. In a matter of a few months, the hybrid beast went from prototype to the production line.

What was never originally meant to see the light of day became the GTO, Italian for Gran Turismo Omologato. Basically, the term was used to describe a performance car that was built from a number of readily available off-the-shelf pieces.

Ferrari was one of the first manufacturers to label a car as GTO, and it was DeLorean's idea to give his creation the same handle.

The 1964 GTO was not so much a separate brand, but a reasonably priced Le Mans performance option package. Pontiac's estimate of building 5,000 such cars for its initial run turned into a flood of 15,000 orders within the first six months. All told, around 32,500 Le Mans coupes, hardtops and convertibles were fitted with the GTO essentials (325-, or optional 348-horsepower motor, fake hood scoops, dual exhausts, heavy-duty suspension and wide-rim wheels, to name a few).

The age of the "muscle-car" was upon the land.

The greased-lightning-quick GTO produced even bigger numbers for Pontiac in 1965, with more than 75,000 placed in the hands of speed-addicted buyers.

The second-generation GTO arrived in 1966 with up to 360 horsepower. By then a full-fledged Le Mans model instead of an option, the car shared its basic body styling with other mid-sized General Motors cars such as the Olds Cutlass, Chevrolet Chevelle and Buick Skylark, all

of which marketed their own muscle-cars. Sales fell just shy of the 100,000 mark that year, before falling back to around 80,000 in 1967 as the competition from Ford and Chrysler, not to mention corporate stablemates, took hold.

By 1968, GM's mid-sized fleet again went under the knife. The result was a bigger, heavier and sleeker design that made all earlier versions dated by comparison. Exclusive to the GTO was a body-colored ding-resistant "Endura" front bumper that was made of rubber. Despite some early problems with paint matching and chipping-, the distinctive front-end became a major selling feature, especially when combined with optional hidden headlamps. As well, more of these classier Goats were leaving Pontiac showrooms laden with air conditioning, automatic transmissions and other power-operated accessories."

The year would also see the launch of Plymouth's hugely successful Road Runner, a fun-loving no-frills muscle-car, complete with Warner Bros, cartoon mascot decal and "beep-beep" horn.

DeLorean saw the Road Runner as a direct threat to the GTO's category dominance, and, in 1969, came up with Pontiac's counterpart, the GTO Judge. Named after a comedy sketch from the TV show Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In, the Judge included a 366-horsepower 400-cubic-inch "Ram Air" engine, Hurst T-handle floor shifter, rear spoiler (which, as it turned out, created zero downforce), rally stripes and a pop-art-styled "The Judge" emblem on each front fender and rear deck. Initial cars were finished in a special orange paint, but other shades became available as production increased. Of all GTOs built that year, 10 per cent were Judges. Overall sales remained strong, but below 1966's high-water mark.

The GTO of 1970 was noted for its 370-horsepower 455 cubic-inch engine that found its way to the option sheet. A newly restyled and better-looking Endura front bumper (but no hidden headlights) completed the model-year transition.

Big cubes remained for 1971 and 1972, the last year for the most stylish GTOs ever, but power had dropped as pollution equipment began taking its toll. The car once marketed as the GeeTO Tiger was losing its stripes, if not its looks

Sadly, the once spellbinding nameplate endured a couple more years of toothless existence before disappearing in 1974.

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