

Gerie Bledsoe's 2010 PAN AM RE-CAP

One hundred and fifteen cars started the 2010 Carrera Panamericana in Tuxtla Gutierrez on October 22 for the 335 mile leg to Oaxaca, across roads damaged by hurricanes and tropical storms.

Twenty-seven of these cars did not finish the first day. Early casualties included Brad Kaplan and Derek Dwyer in their beautiful '54 Lincoln. Doug Mockett and Angelica Fuentes, among the pre-race favorites, suffered a broken differential on the way to the starting line. They would return to the race the following date, only to suffer an "off" on the fifth day, ironically at the same place Mockett lost it last year! Thus Doug now has the dubious distinction of having a corner named after him.

On the third day, the long run around Mexico City from Puebla to Queretaro, four cars were wrecked on the second planned speed stage due to slick pavement. Even a former Pan Am champion did not appreciate the treacherous pavement until it was too late. In an unusual event, an Opel from Germany burned to a crisp in the middle of the tarmac because of an engine fire.

On the fourth day, the beautiful '53 Corvette of John Schantz and Bill Peter wrecked on Mil Cumbres, when the car's brakes locked up on one side, spinning it into a guard rail. Both ends impacted and were shattered. After some fiberglass repairs, the 'Vette should return next year.

Few crashes were as spectacular as the end-over-end crash of Pam Am Champion (2008) Bill Beilharz. Bill lost his brakes on another treacherous stage near Morelia the fourth day and left the road at high speed. The event can be witnessed on YouTube.com. Not a body panel on the Studebaker is straight. This crash was especially unfortunate because the car, suffering prior mechanical problems, was no longer in serious competition.

After Morelia, the event paid a public relations visit to Guadalajara, and then moved on to Aguascalientes. In Aguas, the cars raced on the new NASCAR track south of town, giving many drivers (like me) their first experience on a banked oval. Sadly, no one warned the cars that a gravel pit could be found at the end of the acceleration lane and several cars spun at that point, causing body damage to one.

By the fourth day, the race had turned into a two-pony event, with the Finnish WRC driver, Harri Rovanpera barely edging out Mexican racing champion Michel Jourdain. At the end of the event the drivers finished only 12 **seconds** apart, and surprisingly, they were 13 **minutes** ahead of the TP car in third place, driven by Jorge Pedrero, who is no slouch. In fact, Jourdain had the fastest times the last three days, but his margins were not great enough to overcome Harri's modest lead.

It was reported that Harri and Michel, whose cars were built and supported by Mats Hammarlund Racing, had a great relationship throughout the event.

In Historic C, the largest class by far (31 cars), three pre-race favorites fell behind because of crashes and mechanicals: Thierry de Bosque (transmission), Bill Shanahan (engine), and Jochen Mass (crash). Tomas Lopez Rocha and Carols Martinez Campos, drove Hammarlund Falcons to the top two spots, while John Nielsen (Canada) recovered from some mechanicals to place third. This was the first time in some years that a Historic C car or two did not finish in the top ten overall.

Car #395. a cute little baby blue and white Chevy II Nova, finished 11th in Historic C (of 31) and 46th overall (of 115) because of a wild series of spins and navigation problems. It went from 13th fastest overall on the first speed run of the event to taking a four minute penalty for not being ready to start a speed stage. Both driver and rookie navigator have declined further comment.

For the first time in recent memory the Pan Am ended in Zacatecas, with two runs on the famous mountain road La Bufa. What followed was a great party in the old bull ring at the Quinta Real Hotel. It was windy and chilly but most guests had sufficient antifreeze in their systems to prevent icing.

Special notice should go to the team of Martin Lauber and Conrad Stevenson (CA-USA) who finished first in Historic A+ and eight overall in their Alfa Romero sedan, the Lost Taxi. Taz Harvey and Rudy Vajdak (USA) finished in third in this class, in a Datsun 510, an outstanding accomplishment for their first time south of the border. Both crews have had significant experience in other forms of racing in the US.

An unofficial "Spirit of La Carrera" award must go to John and Chrislana Gregory (Canada), who after a bad "off" on the morning of the third day, returned to win the Original Pan Am class. John reported that the frame was probably bent in the crash, so the car turned left a lot better than right! John and Chrislana also spun and hit the wall in the famous gravel pit on the track at Aguascalientes, but their resolve remained unshaken. Pre-race favorite Carson Scheller (CA-USA) finished second. Tom Overbaugh (NY-USA), aided by guest co-piloto, Michael Emery (CA-USA) of Fortlesa fame, were third.

Honorable mention also goes to Helge Nyland (CA-USA) who not only finished the race but also managed to bring his car, a beautiful TM '54 Studebaker, home unscathed for the first time in some years! Well done!

A "most outrageous" award must go to Carlos Anaya, our jovial baker and Mexican NASCAR driver, for his so-called LT-Special. Any resemblance between a car made in 1954 and this beast was purely coincidental. What an interpretation of the rules! Too bad he lost it momentarily in a ravine on day three. Even so, he finished in 7th overall. Bravo!

**2010 IMPRESSIONS

- 1) The Pan Am has become a major media event, largely because of the participation of Televisa, which entered 10-11 cars and has already broadcast a 1.5 hour documentary on the event in Mexico.
- 2) The event was marred again by timing and scoring problems. Results were not available at the nightly drivers' meetings, and sometimes they were not even available at the starting arch. Competitors also complained about the accuracy of the printed results, which were not checked for even obvious anomalies .
- 3) The crowds in most cities, except Guadalajara, were large and enthusiastic.
- 4) The level of competition continues to increase with faster cars and more professional drivers.
- 5) Safety and security were not an issue, as police and army protection was more than adequate.
- 6) The driving meetings were held in beautiful locations, but again they tended to run late, without published results.
- 7) Lines at registration were too long, and really, someone needs to sweep up the rusty nails in the parc fermé before the race cars and service trucks arrive.
- 8) The route was a mix of mostly well-known rally roads, with a few new ones that should remain unknown. Thankfully, two speed stages were cancelled because of the condition of the roads.
- 9) Hotel accommodations seemed overall adequate, with only a few crews showing up to find "no room at the inn."
- 10) It was great to see the two Mercedes Benz 300 SL "Gull Wings" back in La Carrera (with MB engines this time). They were classic, beautiful, and well driven by Pierre de Thoisy (7 time LCP Champ) and Phillipe Vandromme.
- 11) Some people are still wondering how Datsun Z cars were allowed to compete, but such is the nature of this event.
- 12) The weather was beautiful. Sunny, dry, and on the warm side.
- 13) Wow! Beautiful crop of navigators this year!