

The Great Race in a 356



Pat and Ali Schulte race across the USA in two weeks

Story by Pat Schulte, photos by the Schultes and Gavin Smith

Below: Somewhere in Montana on the drive home to Minnesota from Portland.
Bottom: A sunny start in Concord, North Carolina.



This story should really start from the beginning, back in 1974 when my mom brought me home from the hospital in a '65 Champagne Yellow 356C. Crying in her arms I knew the car would one day be mine. Well, not really, but as it turns out, it would be.

A couple of years after I came home my mom sold that Porsche to her brother, my uncle, who for reasons he can't fully explain took loving care of the car for the next 30 years. He's not really a car guy, he just drove her a couple thousand miles a year, got her serviced routinely, and kept her under cover in his nice dry garage. He couldn't change a spark plug, but he sure did love that car.

Fortunately for me I've got both that great uncle and a great mother, who, after much thought mixed in with a little bit of pining for a grandchild, decided to buy the car back from my uncle and present it to me as a family heirloom type gift. So that I could "bring my baby home in it someday." A little transparent maybe, but who am I to complain?

My wife Ali and I are sort of adventure junkies, and having a beautiful vintage sports car just sitting in a garage wasn't going to cut it for us. Within a week, after trolling the internet looking for something fun to do in the car, we were signed up for the Great Race, an annual vintage car rally across America. It is a time, speed, distance rally, which basically means that every morning you are given a set of instructions detailing the course for the day. Your job is then to follow the directions perfectly. And by per-

fectly I mean within a second or two. For instance, the directions might say to proceed at 35 miles per hour to the next stop sign, then take a right and go fifty until you reach the T intersection where you should take a left going just 15 miles per hour. It sounds easy enough, but the trick is that the directions, and the "perfect" time, don't take into account that your car takes time to stop and to accelerate. Calculating the time lost or gained during that is your job, and calculating it perfectly is a necessity if you are going to win. During any given day there might be up to a couple of hundred different directions for you to follow, and a missed sign, or a wrong turn will basically break you for the day.

We didn't give ourselves long to prepare for the race, picking up the car in Portland, Oregon, just 24 days before the start. This was the first time I'd seen the car in at least fifteen years, and the first time Ali had laid eyes on it at all. She was instantly smitten, just as I was. Ali joked that she wouldn't have known what to do if my mom had given us a car that she didn't like; something like a GTO, which holds absolutely no appeal to her. No, the Porsche was perfect in every way: cute, smooth lines, and a great color. That was her take anyway, I was just in love with the whole thing. I'm sure a lot of owners feel the same way, the 356 just has a power over us.

My uncle, knowing of our plans for the car, had his mechanic give it a thorough going over before we showed up to cross the continent in it, twice. Brakes, lube, carbs, generator, points, pistons, you name it and it was checked out. Uncle Ray assured us it was running better than ever, and with that, and a big kiss for mom, we were on the road headed for North Carolina and the start of the Great Race.

For the first thousand miles or so things were perfect. We took hundreds of pictures of the car, stopping every time we saw an old barn, or a field of green against a blue sky, which was about every other mile between Oregon and Montana. Then our freshly rebuilt generator crapped out on us. Not a huge issue as the original Blaupunkt had stopped working twenty years earlier, and we weren't expecting to drive at night, leaving us with virtually nothing running off the battery anyway. We rolled in to Minnesota for a quick visit with family, a new generator, and an oil change, before continuing on down the road.

The drive to North Carolina wasn't without its problems. We were running rich, backfiring, stalling, and all sorts of fun things. This car and engine were totally new to me, so troubleshooting wasn't all that easy, but eventually we worked out a problem with the distributor. A little messing around adjusting the carbs and we were in Concord in plenty of time to get a shipment of parts from Zims and prepare the car for the start of the race.

We were a little nervous about the race. We kept telling ourselves we were just there to have fun, but we both knew that was a load of bull. We are both ultra competitive and we wanted to kick butt. However, after meeting a bunch of the racers even we came to realize that this race was as much about the people and having a good time as it was about winning. This group of people, about 70 teams in all, were here to drive their cars hard, that's what they wanted to do. Everything from Model A's to '32 Ford Deuces to '68 Corvettes were in attendance, any one of which could have just as easily been on the show circuit as been in a 4500 mile race across America.

The day before the race began the organizers had lined up a couple of hours of track time at Lowe's Motor Speedway. It was a thrill getting the car up high on the banks, even though we had to keep it under 70 mph as the pace car would have led us all out of there if he had been passed. The 356 was running good and we were excited to get going.

At eight o'clock the next morning we were all lined up down main street Concord, where a huge turnout had come to see us off. We were a rolling car show and Ali and I were having a blast as we cruised through the crowds lined up for blocks cheering us on.

The cool thing about this race is that two or three times a day we would stop in a small town in which seemingly every person who lived there would come out to see us. Generally there is a pit stop in the morning in which we would come into town and line the cars up for about an hour, during which the townsfolk would feed us, give us drinks and gift bags, let us use the bathroom, and then send us off on the next leg. A couple of hours after that was the lunch stop, which in the south meant a whole lot of fried chicken and corn on the cob. And by early evening we'd pull into our stop for the night, which would often be a hotel parking lot, but occasionally would be an automotive museum or something else along those lines. One thing that every stop had in common though, were the great people. Thousands upon thousands of them all there to see the cars, say hello, and generally make sure that we had a good time and enjoyed their town. It truly was the people that made the race so great. At each and every stop Ali and I would be cornered by one or two people with a 356 story of their own. Most of them were that old sad story about the one that got away. You know, "I never should have sold that car."

As for the racing itself, Ali and I were doing awesome. I should mention that I handed the keys over to Ali for the race. It wasn't easy, but the simple fact was that if there was navigating and math to be done that was going to be my job. And besides, Ali had learned to drive a manual before I had, and as long as I just told her to hang on and stay on the gas through the corner she would do it. She was a great driver.

That first day we missed one turn, but noticed right away, and thanks to the nimble 356 were able to whip her around on that tiny country road and get right back in position. At the end of the day we were anxious to see our scores, unsure if we had done as well as we felt we had. We scored a :01, :00, :14, and a :03 for a total of just 18 seconds off for an entire day of driving. For our first day out we were pretty stoked. And at the awards presentation that night we were happy to walk away with second place in the rookie division and the \$750 check to go with it.



Above: The race was run on all kinds of roads, including gravel.



Left: Ali did an exceptional job as driver, never having driven a 356 until a few weeks before the race.

Below: Pat acknowledges the welcome from locals in Flagstaff on day 11, one of the many towns where the racers overnighted.





Day two we spent racing through the Blue Ridge Mountains and had a great lunch stop at the Wheels Through Time Motorcycle Museum. By late afternoon the rain started to come down though, making the racing tough on everybody. We entered a section called the maze, which was a bunch of one way roads running every direction through an abandoned Army TNT plant. There were at least 50 sets of directions, and as people started to miss turns things got crazy. Racers were flying all over the place, narrowly missing each other as they blew through stop signs trying to make up time. It was a blast, and at the end of day two we collected another check, and had taken over first place in the Rookie Division, a place we wouldn't relinquish the rest of the race.

The next day ended at the Lane Motor Museum in Nashville, Tennessee, where Ali and I were met in the parking lot by a whole group of 356ers from the 356 Registry. They came down to see us and make sure that the car was running okay and offered us any assistance we could need. We tweaked the carbs a bit more as we'd still been running pretty rich all along, but other than that the tub had been running great. In fact we collected a first place check for a thousand bucks that night.

The days sort of blended together for a while after that - until day six when we had clutch problems. It sort of happened all at once. One minute the car was fine and then it wasn't. Ali hit the gas, dropped the clutch, and in return got a loud winding noise and very little power. We figured the clutch was shot, and that seemed to be the consensus around the pits. We just barely managed to make it through the day, while still grabbing a fourth place finish.

Thankfully the next day was our one day off during the entire race. So that night I hopped on the internet and shot off an e-mail to the Registry e-mail list. In no time at all I had a bunch of contacts in the Dallas area, and after a couple of phone calls had an invitation to a 356 owner's house just down the road, where we were assured he would do all he could to get us fixed up, as well as show us his collection of 356s.



Early the next morning we were in Ibrahim Kuzu's garage, changing oil, and getting the carbs tuned to perfection for the first time in weeks. The car was purring like a kitten at idle and I couldn't have been happier except for the fact that our clutch was screwed. After taking the car for a spin Ibrahim was pretty sure we had a serious problem, and he didn't sound too confident that we'd be able to drop the engine, and replace the clutch in time to get us back on the road. But he decided that he'd try one thing before we gave up. We grabbed a couple of wrenches and took a look at the clutch pedal itself. After a few quick adjustments we started the car back up and went roaring down the road. Success! It turned out the problem was much simpler than everybody had assumed. The clutch pedal was engaging too near the top of the pedal travel, essentially not allowing it to

Top: An evening stop in Nashville at the Lane Motor Museum, where a large crowd greeting the racers included several members of the Tennessee Tubs.

Above: Across the desert through temperatures as high as 114 degrees, the 356 ran effortlessly.

Left: The clutch problem was not heat-related, but took a good bit of time to figure out, and the efforts of both Pat and Ali along with Ibrahim.



fully engage. Simply tightening the pedal up a bit so it would engage a little lower to the floor fixed that and we were golden. We owed Ibrahim and his family a huge debt of thanks for wasting an entire Saturday on us, total strangers, but they wouldn't accept it. What goes around comes around seemed to be his motto. He simply asked that we do the same for somebody else if we ever have the chance.



Unfortunately for us the tune up had done too good a job. Our zero-to-fifty time had improved by 2 seconds and the charts we'd been relying on for the past week were rendered useless. The next day of racing we had our worst finish yet, a 5th. But at that point we were just happy to still be in the race at all.

The next couple of days we didn't fare much better. Our times seemed to be all over the place and we just couldn't seem to figure out what was wrong. The racing was still fun though, and we were driving through some beautiful country. New Mexico was incredible, with desert, mountains, and endless blue skies. And best of all, no more fried chicken - we were getting Mexican for lunch now.

Day ten almost spelled disaster for us. We were holding 45 mph through a stretch of rough road where 15 might have been a safer number. Suddenly, boom, we hit a pot hole that nearly swallowed our car. Both of our heads hit the roof, and when Ali got her bearings again she started yelling that she had no power. It took us both a couple of seconds to realize the transmission had just popped out of gear. The leg ended shortly after that and we stopped for lunch.



After lunch we lined up for the restart. When our time came up Ali tried to shift into gear, but couldn't get anything. I sat there patiently telling her to calm down and slowly put it in first. But she couldn't get it. I jumped out and hopped in the drivers seat, figuring she was just panicky or something, but then I couldn't get it in gear either. For nine minutes we sat there trying to jam the car in gear, before I finally found fourth. I yelled to Ali to jump in and while redlining it I slowly eased us out onto the highway.

We were nine minutes behind where we needed to be and had no idea where the next checkpoint might be, so I did the only thing I could: I flew. Flew past racer after racer with the car pegged at 95. Fifteen minutes later we were back in position, though we had no idea exactly where we should be, time-wise. The only thing to do in a situation like that is to try and go off of the cars in front of and behind you. In theory we should each be a minute apart, so we got ourselves within view of the car in front of us and started the stopwatch. The real problem though, wasn't the time, it was the fact that I couldn't shift out of fourth.

The race course meanwhile had all sorts of stop signs and turns along the way. I knew if we slowed too much or if we came on a hill moving too slowly, we were finished. So for about forty five minutes we raced around the countryside in fourth gear, blowing through stop signs and taking corners at 30 miles an hour. It was the thrill ride to end all thrill rides. But we were never so happy as when we came over a hill and saw our checkpoint in the distance. Somehow we ended that leg just 3 seconds off of perfect. We flagged down a racer friend of ours a few minutes later and within two minutes he had thrown all of our bags out of the back of the car and had our linkage tightened back up and shifting smooth again.



On day twelve we were headed for Laughlin, Nevada, where the forecast called for 114 degree temperatures. A lot of people were worried about us in our air cooled car, but Ali and I didn't give it a second thought. The car hadn't ever run hot on us before and we had total confidence that she'd get us through the mountains and the desert heat. We ran without a hitch that day, despite the toll that the heat took on us with no air conditioning other than our little triangle front windows.



The final day we all rolled in to Anaheim together (above) where a huge crowd was waiting. Ali drove us slowly under the finish line flag where we were greeted by the news that we had won first place in the rookie division, taking home a great big trophy and a check for ten grand along with it. We finished fourteenth overall which we were pretty happy with as well.



The race was truly the most fun either of us had ever had. We really enjoyed the comradery of the racers, the thrill of the competition, but most of all we loved driving the 356. Despite her quirks, she was still the best little car out there.

Cruising back up the West Coast we were a little sad to be saying goodbye to her. After six weeks and 9000 miles we had all grown close. This car that had carried me home as a baby had, thirty three years later, carried me on an awesome adventure.

Ali and I tucked the Porsche into storage at my mom's house in Portland and then set off in our '58 VW Panelvan with the plan to drive around the world. We kicked around Mexico for a few months, but something was nagging at me the whole time. It was regret. See, the 2008 Great Race is the 100th anniversary of the original Great Race of 1908 from New York to Paris. That's right, all the way around the world. And I couldn't stand the thought of letting the race go on without Ali, me, and our yellow tub. We decided to enter the 356, but after getting the car in the shop and up on a lift we decided that she just wasn't ready for the around-the-world-trip. She's about due for a restoration, and it would have been terrible to have the front end collapse on us in the middle of China. However, we are more than willing to take that chance here in North America, and since part of our winnings in the 2007 race was a free entry into the North American leg of the 2008 race, that is what we are going to do.

Beginning May 30th in New York we'll line up with about a hundred other cars, thirty of which will be going all the way around the world, while the rest of us race across Canada and end up in Vancouver, B.C. after two weeks. From there we'll return the 356 to Portland and take off in the VW again. This time we've decided to head to Alaska, then ship the bus to Russia. We'll drive across Asia, Europe, and then south through Africa from Cairo to Cape Town. That's the grand plan. We hope you'll all follow us along at www.bumfuzzle.com.