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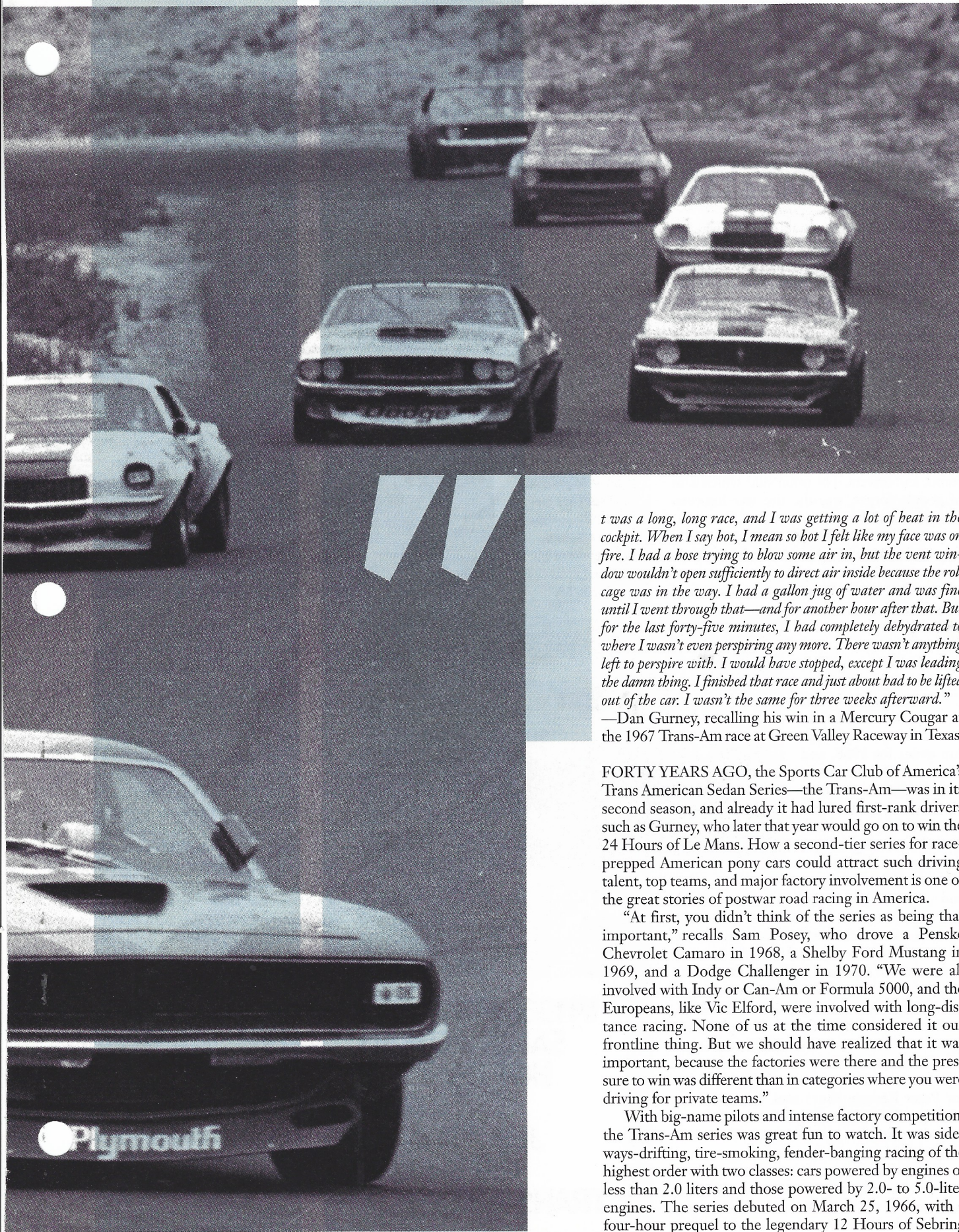
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PONY BOYS

For half a dozen years, factory teams and top drivers fought for the elusive Trans-Am title.

BY GARY WITZENBURG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE FRIEDMAN





t was a long, long race, and I was getting a lot of heat in the cockpit. When I say hot, I mean so hot I felt like my face was on fire. I had a hose trying to blow some air in, but the vent window wouldn't open sufficiently to direct air inside because the roll cage was in the way. I had a gallon jug of water and was fine until I went through that—and for another hour after that. But for the last forty-five minutes, I had completely dehydrated to where I wasn't even perspiring any more. There wasn't anything left to perspire with. I would have stopped, except I was leading the damn thing. I finished that race and just about had to be lifted out of the car. I wasn't the same for three weeks afterward.”

—Dan Gurney, recalling his win in a Mercury Cougar at the 1967 Trans-Am race at Green Valley Raceway in Texas.

FORTY YEARS AGO, the Sports Car Club of America's Trans American Sedan Series—the Trans-Am—was in its second season, and already it had lured first-rank drivers such as Gurney, who later that year would go on to win the 24 Hours of Le Mans. How a second-tier series for race-prepped American pony cars could attract such driving talent, top teams, and major factory involvement is one of the great stories of postwar road racing in America.

“At first, you didn't think of the series as being that important,” recalls Sam Posey, who drove a Penske Chevrolet Camaro in 1968, a Shelby Ford Mustang in 1969, and a Dodge Challenger in 1970. “We were all involved with Indy or Can-Am or Formula 5000, and the Europeans, like Vic Elford, were involved with long-distance racing. None of us at the time considered it our frontline thing. But we should have realized that it was important, because the factories were there and the pressure to win was different than in categories where you were driving for private teams.”

With big-name pilots and intense factory competition, the Trans-Am series was great fun to watch. It was sideways-drifting, tire-smoking, fender-banging racing of the highest order with two classes: cars powered by engines of less than 2.0 liters and those powered by 2.0- to 5.0-liter engines. The series debuted on March 25, 1966, with a four-hour prequel to the legendary 12 Hours of Sebring

grind. European ace Jochen Rindt won that first race in an Alfa Romeo GTA, but perhaps the most impressive drive came from Bob Tullius (of Group 44 racing fame), who set the fastest lap time and finished second overall in a 4.5-liter V-8-powered Dodge Dart. Ford won the big-bore title with four Mustang wins in the seven-race season, while Alfa took the under-two-liter crown. Among the drivers who turned up in Trans-Am cars were Formula 1 Ferrari pilot Jackie Ickx, Curtis Turner, Richard Petty, and A. J. Foyt.

In 1967, the pony-car wars exploded with the debuts of GM's Camaro and Pontiac Firebird, a new Plymouth Barracuda, and the Mustang-based Mercury Cougar. Sales were so hot that Chevy, Ford, and Mercury jumped in with factory support and famous drivers, and the Trans-Am series grew to a dozen hard-fought events.

"With factory involvement and a lot of talent in the cockpits, it was flat out all the way," remembers George Follmer, who drove for American Motors in '68 and '72 and for Ford from '69 through '71. "You could never let up. It was better than Can-Am, because we had deeper fields with more competitive cars, teams, and drivers. The other side, which a lot of people forget, was the tire war between Goodyear and Firestone."

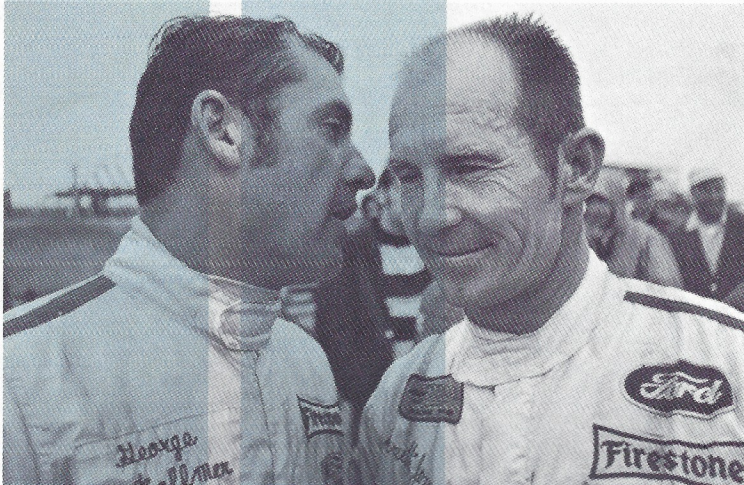
Journalist and racer Jerry Titus won four races in his Mustang that year, bringing Ford its second title—by two points over corporate cousin Mercury. In the under-two-liter class, Porsche took advantage of the SCCA's loose definition of "sedan" and topped the competition with a phalanx of 911s.

The annual 24 Hours of Daytona doubled as the season-opening Trans-Am event for 1968, and Titus and Ronnie Bucknum co-drove a Mustang to the win. Then the Penske machine, with Mark Donohue sitting behind the wheel of the Sunoco Camaro, kicked into gear and spun off eight straight victories to clinch the championship for Chevrolet. Porsche again dominated the small-displacement class.

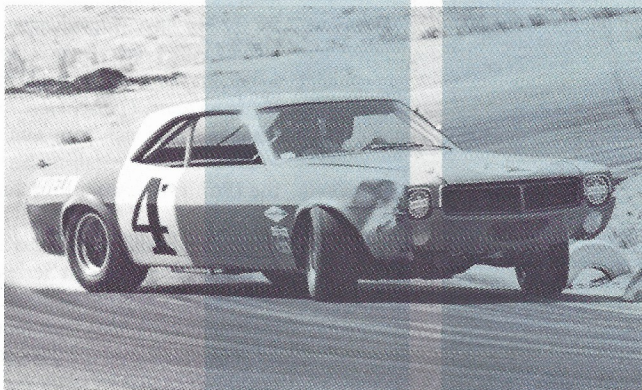
American Motors joined the fight that year with a pair of new Javelins, and more strong competition came from Posey in a second Penske Camaro and Craig Fisher in a Firebird.

Embarrassed by archrival Chevy's dominance in 1968, Ford fielded two factory teams for 1969: a pair of Bud Moore cars for Parnelli Jones and Follmer and a Shelby Mustang for Peter Revson. Jones took the opener at Michigan International Speedway, and Posey won the second race, subbing for Revson in Shelby's Mustang at Lime Rock.

"We had the best car in '69 and should have won the championship," Jones recalls, "but lost it because of the tires. Firestone didn't have a budget to do any real development, and the tire



Above: Ford teammates George Follmer and Parnelli Jones confer in 1970. Right: Dan Gurney's Mercury Cougar edges that of Jones (number 15) at Green Valley in 1967. Below: Follmer slides his battered AMC Javelin in '68.



IN 1967, PONY-CAR SALES WERE SO HOT THAT THE FACTORIES JUMPED IN TO RACE IN THE TRANS-AM SERIES.

they picked for us went away as much as two seconds a lap. You could qualify quick, but they would just go away. Ford didn't really care what kind of tire you were on as long as you were winning, so the pressure was on me personally. I was a Firestone distributor and had a chain of tire stores, so it wasn't easy for me to switch. I did a lot of testing and development in 1969 for the '70 season, and we finally came up with a decent tire and were in pretty good shape."

With Moore's Mustangs handicapped by Firestone tires, Donohue won six of the last seven races in 1969. And the one he didn't win, Bucknum did. Chevy won its second straight crown, while Porsche hastened its elimination as a Trans-Am "sedan" by decimating its small-bore competition for the third straight year.

The following year was both spectacular and pivotal. Riding the crest of a popularity wave that had drawn a record 224,000 spectators in 1969, the series enjoyed an unprecedented surge of factory interest and money, making 1970 easily its best-ever season.

Tired of getting beaten, American Motors had pulled off a shocking acquisition: Penske and company. If anyone could make the Javelin a winning racing car (and maybe a serious pony-car player) and crush the "grandmother Rambler" image, AMC executives reasoned would be Roger Penske and Mark Donohue. To Donohue's chagrin, Penske predicted: "Our Javelin team will take seven victories."

Chevrolet, with attractive new 1970.5 Camaros but without the team that had

JAVELIN: BOB TRONCONE

brought it twenty-one wins and two titles in three seasons, hired Can-Am engineer/driver Jim Hall, whose Chaparral Camaros would be piloted, at one time or another, by Ed Leslie, Joe Leonard, Elford, and Hall himself. Chevy also had the Owens Corning Camaro team of Tony DeLorenzo and Jerry Thompson, in addition to some strong independents.

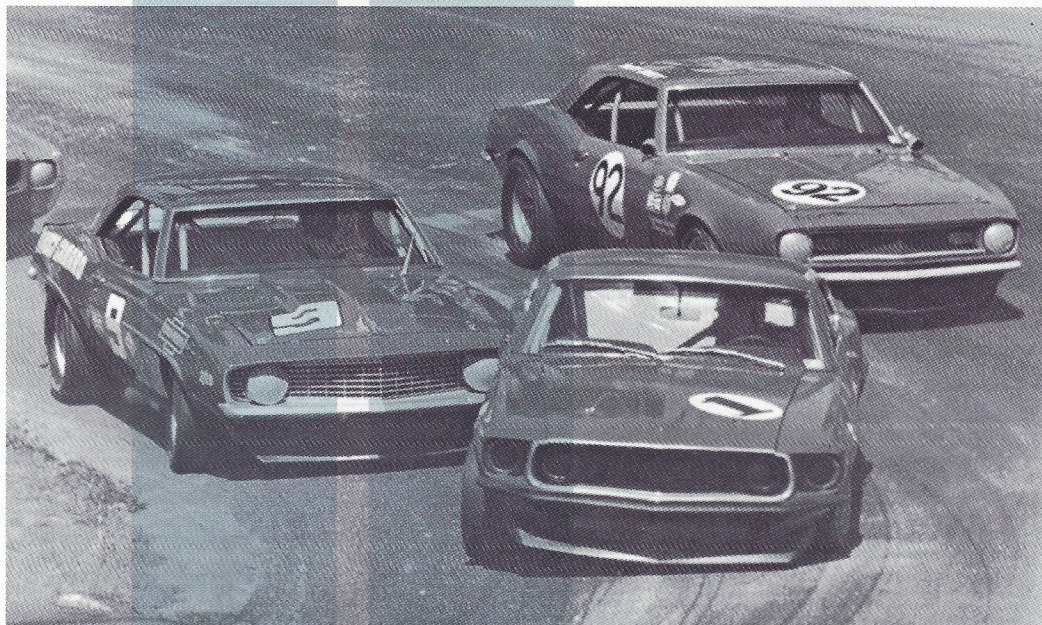
Ford was counting on its high-buck Moore Mustang effort with Jones and Follmer. Pontiac had Titus and Craig Fisher, and AMC had Revson backing up Donohue. There was a new Barracuda fielded by Gurney for Swede Savage and an all-new Dodge Challenger for Posey, plus a second of each in the works. It would be the most formidable field of teams and talent that any production-based American road-racing series had ever seen.

When the tire smoke, dust, and flying race-car parts settled, the title belonged to Ford with six wins—five from Jones and one from Follmer. The Penske Javelins suffered early teething troubles, but Donohue took a trio of victories and enough points to make AMC a respectable runner-up. Elford scored one win for the Chaparral team and Minter a second for Chevy in an independent Camaro. Pontiac had a terrible and tragic year, scoring zero points and losing Titus in the Trans-Am's only fatal accident of the era. And while Dodge and Plymouth did well at times, mechanical troubles kept them out of the winner's circle.

No one could have known it at the time, but the Trans-Am reached its pinnacle that season. With expensive emissions, safety, and bumper regulations around the corner and the cost of competition mushrooming, the factories suddenly realized that for all the money they spent—Donohue said the cost to build a competitive Trans-Am car was \$20,000 in 1967, \$30,000 to \$35,000 in 1968 and 1969, and more than \$62,000 in 1970—there could be only one series champion. And so they all dropped out—except AMC, which lusted after a Trans-Am title in the worst possible way. That winter, with its redesigned Javelin racer under construction in Penske's shop, AMC eagerly anticipated what would be its own personal season.

Sure enough, Donohue's Javelin easily won the rain-soaked 1971 season opener at Lime Rock over second-place DeLorenzo's Mustang and third-place Warren Agor's Camaro. But most of the excitement was provided by Tullius in, of all things, a 1964 Pontiac Tempest. He started dead last and worked his way into a strong second before a head gasket failed just laps from the end. "I never drove anything in my life that was so sure-footed in the rain," he later recalled.

Tullius's Tempest, built by Pontiac engineer Herb Adams and his "beer-drinking friends" as a part-time project, continued to entertain



Above: On the way to a victory in 1969, Ronnie Bucknum (number 9) nudges Peter Revson's Ford. Right: Mark Donohue and Roger Penske celebrate a win in '68. Below: Seated in his AAR 'Cuda at Riverside in '70, Gurney prepares for his final race.



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Trans-Am crowds and even scored some points for Pontiac with one fourth and two fifth-place finishes. Donohue won six more events. Follmer took two, along with five seconds, for the Moore Mustang team, which was financially strapped without Ford factory dollars. Then he jumped into a Roy Woods Javelin for the final race and won that for AMC, finally earning the company its long-coveted championship.

The intense factory competition and most of the famous names were gone, but there was still good racing with Donohue and Follmer in '71. The cars still looked like the ones the spectators drove, with the same hard-driving, paint-swapping appeal that made them so much fun to watch. And the newly instituted 2.5 Challenge, a companion series for sedans with engines less than 2.5 liters, was a hit in its first year with Peter Brock's upstart BRE factory Datsun team dethroning Alfa Romeo only after a protest was upheld at the very last event.

Penske and Moore quit the series at the end of the 1971 season. Thereafter, the Trans-Am was contested by the best of the midlevel teams from the previous six years. But without manufacturer money and big-name drivers, the halcyon days were over, and professional road racing in America would never be the same. ■

GURNEY: HRM ARCHIVES; DONOHUE: BARRY TENNIN