

Black, boosted & badass

The inside story
of the amazing GNX

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Thirty years ago, Buick went big.

The General Motors division long known for stylish, upscale sedans and coupes decided to build a muscle car that would challenge the Corvette. The sheer nerve. Sure, Pontiac had a longstanding intra-GM rivalry with Chevrolet, but Buick had never tried to upstage the performance credibility of its sister division. The GNX, the result of a skunkworks project by a handful of engineers and marketing guys, was more than a way to send Buick's highly successful, rear-wheel-drive G-body out with a bang. It also provided bragging rights for a brand that generally cared more about velour than velocity, and it was a massive challenge to Corvette.

The GNX wasn't Buick's first effort to change its image. With the Regal, Buick enjoyed great success in NASCAR in the early 1980s. Seizing upon that momentum, Lloyd Reuss, then the top man at Buick, hoped to remake the brand's geriatric image. The 1982 Regal Grand National was his first salvo, even if it was just a trim and styling package with a mildly reworked suspension. Turbochargers came next, however, and as more powerful variants appeared over the next several years, the Grand National stood in direct contrast to what Buick represented. Not that enthusiasts complained. The appeal of the Grand National was undeniable.

With rear-drive G-body production ceasing in 1987—and the Grand National with it—a small group of Buick engineers, designers and marketers had one last car up their sleeves: the GNX. As the baddest American car of the 1980s celebrates its 30th anniversary, we brought together the men who created it and let them tell the tale.

DAVE SHARPE, BUICK CHIEF ENGINEER:

When the decision was made to drop the rear-drive Regal and go front-drive, I said, "The Grand National has been a neat vehicle. Why don't we do something really special as a farewell?" I told the guys in our Specialty Car Group that I wanted a car that would be faster than the Corvette 0-60 and in the quarter-mile.

MIKE DOBLE, BUICK ADVANCED

CONCEPTS MANAGER: My boss, Tim Logsdon, pulled me into Dave's office and said, "We want to build a Grand National to end all Grand Nationals." Our objective was to build



Like the Model T, you could order a GNX in any color you wanted—as long as it was black.



External clues set the GNX apart from the Grand National, including functional fender vents and 16-inch wheels beneath flared wheelarches.

the quickest-ever GM production sedan, a limited-production Grand National that auto writers would never forget and car collectors would want to own.

SHARPE: There weren't any written rules, but this kind of vehicle wasn't considered "appropriate" for Buick. The project started under Donald Hackworth, who succeeded Reuss as general manager and who loved the idea. But when Ed Mertz came back to Buick as general manager, he had been given an agenda to make Buick the luxury car just below Cadillac. To say that Ed was lukewarm to the GNX would be putting it mildly. [Marketing manager] Darwin Clark, my partner in crime, was supporting me all the way, but it was borderline with [general sales manager] Bob Coletta. [Comptroller] Dick Payne was absolutely beside himself that we were doing it, but we just kept going. Otherwise, the plug would have been pulled.

ED MERTZ, BUICK GENERAL MANAGER: There was some consternation about how the GNX would fit into our "Essence of Buick—Premium American Motorcar" brand image and "Substantial, Distinctive, Powerful and Mature" product description. But we decided that it at least fit "Powerful."

SHARPE: We had to do much more than just put a bunch more power into it, which would have been a disaster. The regular production engine group was too busy, but a group of gearheads in the powertrain group was willing to work on their own time. They looked at the V-6 engine and

asked, "What do we have to do to make this thing do what we want?" It would not have happened had it not been for Mike Doble, who led our small development group.

DON RUNKLE, CHIEF ENGINEER OF ENGINES AND BUICK ASSISTANT CHIEF ENGINEER:

In mid-1982, we brought the old 3.8-liter pushrod engine into the modern era. As a 90-degree V-6, it had some unbalance, so we split the crankshaft to even the firing frequency and added a balance shaft to smooth it out. We also added Bosch port fuel injection, distributorless ignition, cast aluminum rocker covers and digital EGR, so it became a very modern engine. And when we turbocharged it, put it in the Regal and made the Grand National, my message to my engine group was: "We have to beat the Corvette." We didn't have the same peak horsepower, but in shorter races, we were unbeatable.

SHARPE: We contracted ASC/McLaren to work alongside our folks. They had a joint venture that was perfect for this project, because McLaren knew the V-6 very well, and ASC had capability beyond what I knew. They worked on the rear suspension design and body modifications, die work, and a lot more. I remember the first meeting we had with ASC's Heinz Prechter and the McLaren engineers. We laid out what we wanted to do, and they lit up, because they loved projects like that.

We installed much larger wheels and tires to deliver that kind of power, so they had to modify the bodywork front



GNX badging adorns the fan shroud, grille and wheel centers, while the only splash of color found on these black beauties is the yellow-and-red "6" symbolic of Buick's incredible V-6.

and rear. McLaren said we would never get what we wanted from the engine without a [lighter] ceramic turbine. The size of the GN turbo was fine for that car, but we would not get the acceleration we wanted because of spin-up time. It doesn't take a lot of weight reduction on the turbine to make a lot of difference in spin-up. We didn't change the size of the turbo, but we added an intercooler to cool the hot compressed air before it entered the engine.

DOBLE: When we had a dragstrip test at Milford [Proving Ground], we had Ed come out to approve the prototype to make sure he was on board. Before we took it to Bill Hoggland, who was running BOC [Buick-Oldsmobile-Cadillac] at the time, we wanted Mertz to throw some holy water on it.

We also had a fun development drive out west. We took off from Phoenix in three Grand Nationals and the two prototype GNXs. We were pushing hard going north toward the Grand Canyon, full-out all the way up through Nevada, where some local cops escorted us at high speeds. We spent the night in Vegas, then headed across to Santa Maria, California, and stopped at Death Valley. The difference in handling between the Grand National and the GNX was night-and-day.

We decided to go to a dirt-track race. I was up in the stands, and suddenly the announcer said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we

have a special event tonight. Buick Motor Division from General Motors has brought one of their prototypes." And here came a GNX out on the dirt track. It was going sideways and throwing mud all over, for two or three laps. It was one of the guys from ASC. I was livid. I left the stands and called a meeting in my hotel room as soon as we got back. I was ready to have people thrown off the program. They said, "Wait a minute. We had fun and it was great image for Buick." I objected because of liability. They all thought I was being a pansy ass.

DARWIN CLARK, BUICK MARKETING MANAGER:

There was so much demand for it. [Autoweek editor] Dutch Mandel kept calling, wanting to know how we were going to distribute the cars. I told him, "We'll tell our dealers before we tell the media." He put a blurb in *Autoweek* that he had talked to me, that I was responsible for distribution of those cars (which was stretching it a bit), and that "apparently even Darwin Clark doesn't know how they're going to do it." We got letters from all over the world from people who wanted one. I called Dutch and thanked him and said, "When we decide how we're going to do this, I will call you." And I did.

DOBLE: The original production number was just 200. Then we decided to build 500 because of the Indy 500 and the Daytona 500.



The engine bay is dominated by the turbo, intercooler and plumbing required to make it all scream. And while a V-6 muscle car would have been laughed at in '67, the package was no joke 20 years later.

CLARK: Well more than our top 500 dealers wanted one. They competed to be in our Select 60, our top 60 dealerships in the country, but only 47 met the performance criteria for Select 60 in 1986. Mertz promised each of those 47 an extra GNX. Dave Sharpe and I asked, "How are we going to come up with 47 more?" But ASC/McLaren was able to build them.

DOBLE: Mertz told me to make 547 cars, because these other 47 dealers deserved a second one. And all this press was coming out before those cars were even built. We were getting far more press on the GNX in that short period of time than we probably got three years running on every other Buick product. Except for the two prototypes, all of the GNXs went to dealers. Because they were all sold before the first car was done, there were no press cars, so we used the prototypes for press rides. I'm not sure what happened to those.

LARRY GUSTIN, BUICK PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGER:

I called everyone—*Car and Driver*, *Motor Trend*, *Road & Track*, *Automobile*, *Hot Rod*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Popular Science*, *Autoweek*—and lined them up for a day apiece. We had one prototype GNX for driving and the other for photography, and I brought a writer in every day to take photos and spend the day driving it, mostly out on curvy desert roads near our Mesa, Arizona, Proving Ground.

DOBLE: One guy showed up with a Callaway Corvette and a Chevrolet representative. He said, "Let's see how hot your GNX is." And we beat them on every run, straight-line

acceleration and quarter-mile. But given another 300 feet, the Callaway—with a twin-turbo V-8 vs. our single-turbo V-6—would have won. The GNX was very quick but not long-winded. I think it did a hell of a lot of good for Buick. The people who bought them could afford them at \$10,000 over the sticker price of the Grand National, and some sold for \$80,000 to \$90,000.

SHARPE: The objective was not profit but strictly to make a big splash. And it did, way beyond expectations. I had media, dealers, owners and others call to talk about it all the time. I still get calls, letters and emails about that car.

Thirty years later, the GNX has lost none of its mojo. Values have soared accordingly in the last three years, as buyers happily spend on the car seemingly named for the generation—Gen X—it dominated. And while the greatest Buick of the '80s failed to make *Car and Driver's* 10Best Cars list for 1987, that is perhaps its only failing. In his June 1987 road test, John Lamm at *Road & Track* approached the rare car with a notably prescient take: "Say you manage to snag one of the GNXs for your own. What could you do with it? Some might consider locking it away because in this era of too many same-same cars, there are precious few that will be the serious special interest cars of the future. This is one of them."

Or, he continued, "You could go looking for Corvettes to embarrass." //