

## HOW 66HP LED ME TO AUTOCROSS

By John Schmidt

I was asked to write an article for the club with a topic of my choosing. With limited writing skills and any subject on the table, either car related or not, I pondered what topics to consider. I first thought of writing why I autocross and why I enjoy being part of this club. Then I thought maybe I can write why I autocross a vintage car that can be expensive to maintain if you are not careful. Then I thought about writing why I became fascinated with cars as a young boy and list some of the memorable cars that led me to autocross, which I will probably mention because we all like to read about cars that influenced us growing up. But as I recalled my youth, when I consider the cars I dreamed about and the cars I could actually touch, I realized my auto enthusiast story began with a 1972 VW bus with its stock Type 2, 1.7 liter motor and whopping 66 BHP. Well maybe it's a stretch to say a VW bus lead me directly to autocross but that bus, and other buses to follow, plus a squareback, Datsun 710, and ultimately a Mark I VW GTI, collectively pointed me towards autocross and the car I have been running for eight years.

I start with the bus because that is what I learned to drive with. It began before my learner's permit, probably 1978 when I was 15, with my parents letting me move the bus around in our driveway to let cars out. Then it led to driving the bus in a small shore town in New Jersey off-season when it was almost a ghost town. My dad would let me drive around town as he bird watched in the passenger seat. I realized years later that anyone learning to drive a stick shift with a VW bus was a master of the manual transmission. Our bus, and all buses actually, were notorious for the challenge of finding second gear which led to first to third shifts in certain situations. Let's not mention reverse, pushing down and to the right, it was a skill to master.

As I learned to drive with the bus and entering high school I realized this vehicle did not emulate anything motorsports related and if I wanted to be part of the group I would have to consider another car. Luckily two close friends in high school were Volkswagen families and we would often park together at school, two buses and a beetle in a line. I have to thank my close friend who also drove a bus. He made me understand what a donut was. And believe it or not the bus is a demon at donuts. With that low horsepower but descent torque flat four motor hanging out over the rear axle of a long car, with the driver position literally on top of the front axle with your head almost on the windshield, those buses could turn donuts for hours on end. Here is another technique my close friend showed me and our group of friends. The air scoops on the rear of the bus are great hand holds. With his help and driving skills we would take his bus to a local school at night, lights off and on the grass and the sliding door in the locked open position. As he proceeded to enter a continuous donut, we would climb out the sliding door holding on the roof rail, grabbing the rear scope with our feet on the generous rear bumper, we would be hanging on the back end of the bus as it spun in perfect circles. At one point you would lose grip and jump off sliding across the grass safely stopping away from the ever donuting bus. Several of us would do this one after the other. It was a blast! Ok it seemed safe at the time but realizing as I became an adult it was a risky stunt and I do not endorse using a bus in this fashion... Luckily no one got hurt.

I graduated to a 1971 VW Squareback that was given to me when my grandfather passed away. I always admired his Squareback growing up and it felt special to have it as my own. The Type 3, 1.6 liter car was

a step up from the bus. Lower profile comparing a whale of a car to a wagon. Slightly different suspension and a fun car to drive. The stove pipe style head lights and sloping hood since the motor was in the back provided a great view and you always sensed the location of the front wheels.

My next car was supposed to be a 1971 bus that my dad had replaced his 1972 bus with, after it was totaled in an accident. Being rear ended in a bus provides a lot of cushion and luckily my dad was not hurt too bad, the bus however was crushed in the back. I say I was supposed to get a 1971 bus, but my sisters joy ride one night resulted in totaled bus number two. As a consequence of her joy ride she had to pitch in for my own car, which was a bright orange Datsun 710. This was a step up from the Squareback in some ways. A 2 liter motor with a about 94 hp with a form factor new to me, front engine rear wheel drive. The form factor had a problem though, this model had a solid rear axle with leaf springs taken from Datsun truck chassis. Even with the rear axle I did learn quickly this car was a blast to drive and on wet roads, snowy roads or ice, the tail would wag all over the road. At times driving my Datsun I felt like a rally driver on the farm roads of Pennsylvania.

Just about the time I had punished my Datsun from a couple years of pretend rally driving my older brother bought a black on black Mark I VW GTI. I will never forget the day he let me take it for a ride. This car changed my perception of what a well-designed car could do on a twisty road. That first drive is etched in my brain as one of the most fun and eye-opening experiences I have ever had. Equipped with a 1.6-liter motor with mechanical fuel injection, independent suspension, 4 speed transmission and shift knob that looked and felt like a golf ball, the GTI enjoyed the corners and felt planted. After several drives with the GTI I thought someday I will get myself something similar. I was sold on the light and nimble form factor.

Fast forward decades later and many different cars, some boring, some interesting, some I don't car to mention, but I can say I never owned a minivan and I never will. The list included a Chevy Van, Nissan Sentra, Volvo 740 GL, Ford Ranger, Ford F150 Subaru GL wagon, Subaru WRX wagon and Toyota Tundra. The GTI stuck with me all those years and was brought to life with the WRX wagon, when coupled with my beginnings with VW air cooled cars, lead me to the car I have today.

The migration to considering an air-cooled Porsche started about the time I bought the WRX wagon. I had been reading about Porsches for years and it started to grow into an obsession. I also became a passionate auto racing fan following the US Lemans Series and Grange AM series which eventually merged into one IMSA series. Every time we were driving as a family and I saw a Porsche I would rattle off some statistic about the cars build period, displacement and model type, often to the frustration of my family riding with me. At one moment years ago, I had enough money set aside to ask my wife a very important question, "can I buy a Porsche 911?". After she looked at me for a few minutes she said "if we buy a Porsche will you stop talking about them so much when we are driving around?". I smiled and said of course I will stop and I think she knew I would continue to talk about them, which I did and I still do to this day.

I will end this story with my pretty, bright red, 1984 Euro Spec. Porsche 911 I purchased in 2012. Maybe my next story will be about my experience in this incredibly fun, light and agile car.