

March Race Report

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944 Spec Race Report

March 15-16, Sonoma Raceway

For those of you that don't have it, here's NASA NorCal's preliminary timing and scoring web page:

timingscoring.drivenasa.com/NASA_California-Northern_Region/

Wine country. Dreams of Nationals at a home track for the end of the season. Old friends. New paint jobs. New parts from of offseason of trolling classifieds and online forums. Plus we had a guest, out of region racer Tom Atteberry. The locals were: Ron Dale, Ken Huey, Steve Lewis, and Aubie Schmidt.

The weekend started with worries, as we knew Tom had blown an engine. He made it out anyway and had his crew working to get his car back together, though as late as the post-qualifying racers meeting he was not hopeful. We all offered to help, but Tom felt as everything that could be done was being done.

It was nice to see our revered race director Ken Huey back on track, and the world responded to the moment by giving us pleasant weather, a nice breeze and clear blue skies. Perfect weekend for racing out in California while the rest of the country digs out from Polar Vortex 2014. This year also brought on new PRC requirements of in-car cameras for everyone. I actually liked having it, as I've never seen myself drive before and I got a chance to see where I was being too aggressive or not aggressive enough.

Practice was on a slick cold track, but the mechanicals checked out. Saturday qualifying shook out in the expected order: Steve, Ron, myself, Ken. We all crossed our fingers that Tom would be able to make the race.

Green flag dropped and I pegged the happy pedal. Ron and Steve jockeyed through turn 2. I should have glued my hood to Steve's bumper and tried to force my way past Ron but I didn't have a good angle and we slipped into a train of three. Ron pushed hard to pressure Steve. For the first time in a long time I was able to keep the leaders in sight as the race progressed. I just sat back behind the wheel and let the speed flow through me. Ron showed off his awesome sideways technique right in front of me, and a bobble through the carousel gave Steve all the gap he would need.

Steve kept a measured pace up, the faster GT traffic came through us and Safety vehicles hot-towing cooked 911s gave me a few brief looks at Ron but I wasn't able to close the gap enough to make it interesting. I wasn't able to make it interesting, but we caught Ken on one of the final laps. Ken got stuck on the outside of turn 2. Ron, trying to late apex through traffic got caught on the outside. I could have taken second and tried to hold off Ron for a lap or two, but I figured it was a pick and I let Ron back through. It was nice being fast enough that the huge pack of Spec 911s didn't catch me, but once I let Ron through that was that.

Finishing order:

Steve, Ron, Aubie, Ken...and Tom!

After the race we found out Tom Atteberry was able to get the car running, so he took the race as a practice session to re-learn the track. It was a good sign, we'd have another starter on Sunday!

Sunday Sunday Sunday!

I guess I made Ron nervous because he opened up Sunday by "cheating" and putting on fresh tires. Note that in racing it is considered cheating when other people follow the rules, but not when you break the rules. I'd opened my big mouth the day before and revealed we were both running RRs with about 20 heat cycles, so he picked up the advantage of fresh shoes and started walking away from me corner by corner. It's a sign of respect when you're fast enough to make people adjust to your presence by changing their setup. It's a far better feeling than wandering around the tail end of the grid trying to remember what the edge of traction feels like. Or maybe Ron was just trying to catch up to Steve.

We got a call from Steve: "I'm twenty minutes away and qualifying starts in twenty five minutes." Ron and I sat on grid and Ron rubbed his hands, figuring he had pole locked up when Steve cruised in last second. He was late to grid so they held him out of a lap, but he would at least get one.

True to form, Steve "cheated" by banging out perfectly legitimate 1:57 for pole in a single flying lap amidst an event filled qualifying session. Spins, blocking off the start, 911s gapping so far that they held us up, a crash and finally a black flag ended qualifying. I never felt good about any of my laps and Tom sniped me for third place on the grid.

The start:

Steve elected to take a right side start for an inside setup into turn 2. We lined up, our grid a little ragged when the green flag dropped and we were off. Tom drew right beside me as Ron and Steve battled up the hill. A mis-shift between two and three and I had position on Tom, but he was breathing heavy down my backside. Ron and Steve were side-by-side all the way through three, but Steve got him cresting 3A and Ron took position fully filling Steve's rearview. I locked up slightly into 5 but held it together to salvage a mediocre exit. I was too tentative into 6, leery from running wide and off course here last November, giving Tom a look up my inside. Another lock into 7 and Tom was next to me as we headed to the esses. I got a better exit to 7 and Tom wisely backed off on the entry, the alternative being a risky and slow side by side through a dangerous and narrow part of the track. The five of us streamed out onto the back straight.

Ron made great use of his tires and kept the pressure up on Steve. Steve didn't give him an inch, never flinched and kept running clean lines. My battle with Tom let Ron and Steve creep away steadily, Tom kept the pressure on me all through the front straight and over the hill. I was driving my mirrors and wasn't able to open any gap after a lap and a half. Tom locked up in a cloud of smoke into 7, giving me a reasonable gap. I was thankful he didn't collect my backside.

Tom backed off after a few laps while Ron kept pressuring Steve. Through flags, lapping traffic and fatigue, Ron finished just off Steve's rear quarter panel, and Northern California's 944 spec season was happily in the books. No crashes, no mechanicals, no fires, smiles all around.

We finished:

Steve, Ron, Aubie, Tom and Ken.

Thanks for reading. Hope to see you guys at the next event!
