1969 PONTIAC TRANS AM

Pontiac's top pony rides high

Courtesy of Mecum Auctions

The '69 Trans Am defied the "win on Sunday, sell on Monday" theory, but it set the stage for the model's amazing 33-year lifespan

VIN: 223379N106311

by Tom Glatch

- True one-owner Trans Am purchased new at Jules Meyers Pontiac in West Los Angeles
- Original owner, Jaques Toulet, owned the car from 1969 until 2013. The car spent its entire life in California and Arizona and is completely rust-free
- Number-matching original engine, transmission, rear end, heads, intake, carburetor and exhaust manifolds
- All original sheet metal and mostly original glass and interior
- Rebuilt engine by top Ram Air Pontiac experts in the country, Lance Kramer
- Less than 100 miles since rebuild
- Receipts for all of the work totaling over $15,000 are included
- Fully documented with original owner information, copy of original invoice, copy of original window sticker and full PHS documentation

ACC Analysis *This car, Lot F219, sold for $135,000, including buyer's premium, at Mecum's auction in Kissimmee, FL, on January 24, 2014.*

Parnelli Jones said it best: "The Trans Am was a no-holds-barred, highly competitive series. We had the best American drivers, we ran on the best North American circuits, and we drove cars that were spectacular to watch and that the fans could easily identify with. The Trans Am was the greatest road-racing series that has ever been run over here…"

An American series

The Sports Car Club of America's Trans American Sedan Championship debuted in 1966 with a simple set of rules: In the over-2-liter class, the cars had to be 4-passenger sedans with 5-liter (305-ci) engines. Roll cages, fuel cells and other safety equipment were mandatory, but any other deviations from factory stock had to be homologated. So if a team needed, say, a rear spoiler for more downforce, the manufacturer had to have the item approved, assign a factory part number, and make the item available to all. This was a racing series that greatly influenced the cars in the showrooms.

Chevrolet entered the battle first by introducing the limited-production Z/28 model in 1967. It had the heavy-duty suspension, fast-ratio steering and aerodynamic tweaks to make it nearly race-ready. It also had a new 302 V8 engine developed just for the series. In the hands of Roger Penske's team, led by driver/engineer Mark Donohue, the Z/28 won the Trans Am championship in '68 and '69.

Not to be outdone, Ford retaliated with the Boss 302 Mustang in 1969 and 1970. Much like the Z/28, the Boss featured a powerful 302 engine with tunnel-port heads and plenty of other race-derived engineering.

Parnelli Jones, driving a Bud Moore-prepared Boss 302, won the 1970 championship by one point over Mark Donohue.

Dodge and Plymouth entered the fray in 1970 with the AAR 'Cuda and Challenger T/A. Even AMC joined in, stole Penske from Chevrolet in 1970 with a $2 million budget, and put the Mark Donohue Javelin in the showrooms. With their emphasis on handling, braking, and drivability, the street versions of these Trans Am racers were arguably the finest all-around "pony cars" of the era.

Built for the track, sold on the street

Pontiac wanted in, too, and the company's Special Projects Group began developing the requisite 5-liter engine in 1968. The new Ram Air V engine featured huge tunnel-port heads, a reinforced block and other race-ready goodies. A 366-ci version was developed for NASCAR, while a 400 was readied for street and strip. The greatest challenge, however, was the 303-ci Ram Air V, which required a short-stroke, short-deck version of the venerable Pontiac V8. Pontiac also licensed the "Trans Am" name from the SCCA for $5 per car sold.

When Pontiac's Trans Am debuted at the Chicago Auto Show on March 8, 1969, many observers were disappointed that the new flagship Firebird had only the standard 400 Ram Air III engine, with the higher-performance Ram Air IV optional.

What happened to the 303 Ram Air V? Just weeks before the start of the 1969 Trans Am season, the "oversquare" 303 was generating 405 hp at a screaming 8,300 RPM, but the power was all at the top end, and reliability was an issue. Then the SCCA demanded 1,000 production cars be built with the 303 before it would be allowed to race. Time and money just ran out, and none of the Ram Air V engines ever saw a showroom.

It's truly a shame, since Motor Trend was able to drive a prototype 303-equipped Trans Am and marveled: "We could tell you about a Hemi GTX or a batch of Sting Rays, but you will never know what it was really like driving the first 303 Trans Am on the street. There can only be one first time you go into a sweeper at an even 100 and come out at 120, and the 'Vette behind is now much farther behind." Not that the showroom Trans Am was a poor performer, not at all — it just never achieved its full potential. Car Life magazine summed it up well: "The decal said Trans Am. The car didn't."

Mystique brings big value

The '69 Trans Am is unique in that it was built on the first-gen F-body platform, which was on the way out in favor of a complete redesign for 1970. In 1969, all Trans Ams were white with blue stripes, and all of them featured a trunk-mounted spoiler, fiberglass scoops and special badges.

A total of 697 Trans Ams were built that year, including eight convertibles. The ragtops were sold only to GM executives, and today they are some of the few true "Holy Grail" American performance cars on the market. How valuable? In 2010, one reached $1.1 million at Mecum's Indianapolis auction — without selling (ACC# 162786).

For the other 99%, the '69 Trans Am coupes have also maintained their mystique over the years, even though their intended Trans Am racing glory never came to fruition. These cars have been virtually recession-proof. Our featured Trans Am has just about everything a collector would want: very low miles, one owner, excellent condition, 4-speed, and 335-hp Ram Air III power. Only the rare 345-hp Ram Air IV option (46 4-speed, nine automatic) could have made this 'Bird more desirable.

At $135,000, this is the highest sale of a Ram Air III Trans Am coupe we've encountered, and only two RA IV Trans Ams have sold for more. The 1969 Trans Am defied the "Win on Sunday, sell on Monday" theory, but it still set the stage for the model's amazing 33-year lifespan. Considering its long-term single ownership and fantastic condition, I'd say this one was an excellent deal for both seller and buyer.

(Introductory description courtesy of Mecum Auctions.)

Detailing

Year produced: 1969
Number produced: 697
Original list price: $3,556
Current ACC Valuation: $85,000–$120,000
Tune-up/major service: $200
Distributor cap: $20
Chassis #: VIN plate driver's side instrument panel behind windshield
Engine #: On front of block below left cylinder head
Club: Pontiac Oakland Club International
More: www.poci.org
Alternatives: 1967–69 Chevrolet Camaro Z/28, 1969–70 Ford Mustang Boss 302, 1970 Dodge Challenger T/A, 1970 Plymouth AAR 'Cuda
ACC Investment Grade: B

Comps

1969 Pontiac Trans Am RAIII
Lot 52, VIN: 223379N106455
Condition: 2
Sold at $82,500
Worldwide Auctioneers, Auburn, IN, 8/31/2013
ACC# 227794

1969 Pontiac Trans Am RAIII
Lot F291, VIN: 223379N105731
Condition: 2+
Sold at $103,350
Mecum Auctions, Dallas, TX, 9/8/2012
ACC# 213156

1969 Pontiac Trans Am RAIII
Lot S110, VIN: 223379N117179
Condition: 2+
Sold at $92,750
Mecum Auctions, Kissimmee, FL, 1/24/2012
ACC# 192829