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The Racing Lamborghini



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The twin passions raised by automobiles and racing surely intersect on a twisty back road somewhere in Italy. Ferrari. Alfa. Lancia. Fiat. Maserati. All have storied racing in their past, with names and dates and places and cars all inextricably woven into the marque's fabric and mystique; the association between Italian cars and racing is so strong that it's hard to think of an Italian car without some sort of competition provenance backing it up. The street cars benefit, in image if in no other way. After all, what captures the public imagination more than spinning overhead cams, a lusty exhaust note, a whiff of high-octane gas and subsequent exhaust, and a flash of brightly hued paint as it screams by in a blur of color and drama?



And yet, as with any rule worth mentioning, there is an exception. Most prominent among the exceptions is Lamborghini, which has never really had the racing provenance that one associates with its home country. Ferruccio simply wanted a better road car, and he set out to build one.



Oh sure, Dan Gurney's Weslake F1 racing engines had destroyed Lamborghini bottom ends, the marque had another brief dalliance in Formula One when Chrysler owned it a couple of decades back, and an Islero S attempted (and failed) to qualify for Le Mans in the late '60s. There are also later efforts to race Murciélagos and such. In the scheme of things, it's not much to hang your hat on for a marque history that spans nearly 45 years. Google "Lamborghini" and "racing," and mostly what you get in between the genericky junk are Gran Turismo 4 video game cheats and driving gloves.





So with a concerted factory effort not really in the cards, it was up to sporting privateers to help establish a racing history for the marque. There too, the call not made has gone unheeded; nearly 45 years of storied Lamborghini history, and there isn't much. Since Lamborghini and racing have not generally come together, the few cars that have turned a wheel in anger at the track do become that much more crucial; even a small part can grow in history and lore, simply because there is less competition to drown it out. This 400GT 2+2, privately entered in the 1987 La Carrera Panamericana revival down Mexico way, is one of those cars.

It started as a discarded toy. In the fall of 1971, Vic Galich was a Huntington Beach, California, high school student reading week-old classifieds out of the *Los Angeles Times* instead of paying attention in class. He tripped over an ad for a Lamborghini 400GT 2+2 for \$3,000; these cars cost nearly fifteen grand new. "I thought it was a misprint," Vic admits. "I took the ad home to show my dad."

Dad wasn't just any old shmoe: He was Jerry Galich, part-time fireman and part-time Alfa engine builder/racer/repair shop owner--he'd been racing Alfa spiders for years, and had gotten to know Italian cars well. So he well understood what he was going to see--and how to take care of it. "It was originally orange," Vic says. "The previous owner, some kind of playboy type, had run it out of oil, and it seized from the crank bending. When we got there, it was in the front yard of this guy's house, and his kids were using the windshield and hood as a slide, playing on the thing. We bought the car the next day."

It took a couple of years of part-time tinkering, but the Galiches got it running again. "We had a billet crank made by Chick Wilson, the legendary hot rod guy out in Ontario [California]--that took most of the time. We also got a set of Carillo rods, and Dad blueprinted the engine--he made his own timing marks like any good builder would do. Y'know, people wonder why the car runs so well, and it's because everything's done right. In all the years Dad built engines, he never found an engine that was correct out of the factory. Not just Lamborghinis--anyone's. From the pointer being bent to crank pulleys stamped a little off, they're close enough for street, but for racing you need to be right on the money." The cams were reground to match a Miura S profile--"it's the same lift and duration as on an Alfa Veloce cam; it's a common grind on a lot of hi-po Italian engines, giving more duration but not a lot of lift. That way you get the benefit of a wild cam without rough idle and fouling plugs. Plus, you still have some top end."

New paint, the very metallic dark blue that it currently wears, went over the factory-original orange. And from the mid-'70s, the Galiches had a decade and a half of street-driving fun, taking it to the Monterey Historics on a yearly basis as well as to events sponsored by the local Lamborghini club.

By 1987, Jerry had retired from the fire department and was playing with cars full-time. "We knew some people who had been involved with the Carrera Panamericana revival, and it got us excited," Vic recalls. "We wanted to race something, and it was a question of, what do we have that's alive and running?" The 400GT 2+2 was quickly identified as the most likely candidate. "We dropped some belts in it, put in a hot spark box back when those were a new thing, used the biggest venturis that would fit in the 40mm Weber, changed the full exhaust to a set of megaphones, bolted in a fire extinguisher, put on a set of good tires, slapped a number on, and that was it." It all sounds so simple.

In all of those years, Vic had never really had an opportunity to get to know the car--so he made his scouting run a get-acquainted opportunity. "We had towed it in a trailer behind our El Camino, and we unloaded it in Ensenada. I drove it, and I had to stop frequently for Dad to catch up with me. That crankshaft is fired on so rapidly--every 60 degrees rather than every 90--the torque is there without having to be a truck-type with all that heaviness. Then the mid-range is there. And then the high end is there. It just goes and goes, in any gear.

"The next time I drove it was in the race. He gave me all sorts of rules ahead of time--don't rev it past 6,000 rpm, don't race anyone, all this. So I drove the first leg of the race and it felt great. I pulled over at our halfway spot, and he started screaming, 'What's wrong?' I said, 'Do you want to drive?' And then he remembered. So we did the fire drill; we had rehearsed putting on the belts, but he didn't put them on. We were pulling redline and anyone who came near us got challenged as hard as they could. One guy got behind us, and Pops wouldn't let him by; he had a video camera running so we have some footage of the run. All the rules I had to abide by were out the window.

"We encountered public traffic in the opposite direction at 160+--we counted three vehicles who didn't get notified. It was plenty dangerous--one fellow didn't make it on his bike, and a guy and a gal in a Porsche went off a cliff. The locals like to throw gravel on mountain curves without guardrails, so there are a lot more challenges to La Carrera than just getting the car around the corner. We finished 13th out of 300 cars overall, with an average speed in the 90s. Ain't bad for stopping."

Jerry and Vic had enough fun that they took it out to the annual vintage races at Palm Springs that November. "After that, we wanted to race more and put a rollbar in it, but other projects slowed that. Plus, Dad didn't have full approval from the board of directors on installing a rollbar." The Board of Directors? That would be Mrs. Galich.

And in all that time, the thought of restoring it back to new--of erasing that racing provenance in favor of a pin-neat restoration--came up just once. "The only time we thought about restoring it was when we were going to sell it," says Vic. "Dad didn't think anyone would want it in the shape it was in. He thought he'd have to repaint it, but that would entail getting the glass out of it ... he didn't have the energy." The car sold as-is to a buyer in Texas in 2003, and just three months later, Jerry passed.

Then it materialized in San Diego, in the hands of early Lamborghini collector/enthusiast Perry Mansfield. With a pair of the 100 Islero S models built, plus a rare twin-sunroof Jarama in his collection, the 400GT is the perfect capper to Perry's pre-Countach Lamborghini set. Perry retains a deep reverence for the race history of this particular 400GT 2+2, as well as its significance within the (admittedly brief) Lamborghini racing palette. As a bonus, he is steadfast in his belief that Lamborghini's GTs of the '60s were the finest GT cars of the era.

His shop, Precious Metals in San Diego, completely rebuilt the suspension, but was careful to leave the 2+2's irreplaceable racing patina intact. There are significant dents in the nose from high-speed rocks. Paint is chipping in the door jambs, with shades of hot orange poking through. The seats are truly worn, the headliner is missing in action, and the shift boot is fraying around the stick. It looks a lot like a well-driven 40-year-old car, in fact.

There's more headroom available than you'd think looking at a car of this height, but that's the closest thing you'll get to anything resembling comfort here. For as wide as the 400GT is, your left arm is still touching the closed door. The driving position is the most extreme variant of the so-called "Italian style" driving position we've yet seen: Though there seems to be a deep footwell for the passenger, the driver's legs are bent nearly at a 90 degree angle, which interferes with the steering wheel. The worn bucket seats hit your tester in all the wrong places--in the small of the back, and between the shoulder blades. Whether it's their design or the notion that they're 40-year-old seats remains undetermined. The gauges remain large and visible--the ancillary gauges dotted across the middle of the dash are a particularly nice touch--but the leather-covered panel beneath them, with all manner of toggle switches, feels distressingly dodgy. (The leather itself remains supple, however.) The glove box feels no better.

Idle sets in at a steady 1,000 rpm, according to the gigantic Jaeger tach; the Miura S-spec cams allow an aggressive lope. As you might suspect from an elderly four-cam V-12, all-out torque isn't its strong point: Unless you drop the clutch at redline, you're not going to get that head-snap that is often part and parcel with what you'd expect a V-12 to be.

But this isn't an American V-8, and the truth of it is that where most domestic eights run out of breath, the 400GT just gets started. It wants to rev and run: Though we restricted our drive to Southern California highway speeds, the 400 was more comfortable with itself the faster we ran. Every thousand rpm on the tach introduces new layers of sound into the mix: A soaring, high-end shriek slinks in as the bassy rumble of the exhaust pounds lower in the

auditory spectrum. Around town, the rear axle gearing means that you can putter around with ease and little recrimination from under the hood, although you can almost hear the engine wondering aloud why you're not hitting its sweet spot with any regularity. At triple-digit speeds, the 400GT must be an unfettered delight--we confess, we didn't get it quite there.

Steering, not monstrous around town despite Pirelli P4000 tires slightly wider than the stock belted Cinturatos, lightens up nicely above 30 mph, with enough feel to keep you in touch without becoming tiresome. It also sports a turning circle that is far tighter than its size would indicate. The suspension is more comfortable than a lot of more contemporary cars with four-wheel independent suspension, perhaps partly as a result of its generous 100-inch wheelbase. But that size does no harm in the handling department: It's calm and controlled at higher road speeds, managing to be firm without being harsh. It feels light on its feet, certainly more than its sheer presence would indicate. The brakes were having a booster issue the day we were behind the wheel, so all-out stopping took a good deal longer than was to be expected from those four-wheel discs. These things happen. "They need a full-time mechanic," current owner Mansfield admits.

Ultimately, it could have been used as a flowerpot in a garden somewhere and it wouldn't matter. This Lamborghini 400GT 2+2 is a considerable slice of Lamborghini's thin competition history--and, restored or not, running or not, patina or not, nothing can ever take that away.