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RECLAMATION INSPIRE

This Meticulously Restored '78 S/E T/A Put Its Owner in Business

BY THOMAS A. DeMAURO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR

CHASSIS AND "BEFORE" PHOTOS PROVIDED BY BRIAN KOTARSKI

It can be said with little argument that Y8+ S/E T/As are very special vehicles. But are they the most popular Pontiacs?

Though owners of other Trans Ams, GTOs, Judges and Super-Dutys would probably take you to task on this assertion, the '77-'81 S/E Trans Ams have two things that the others do not—a pair of *Smokey and the Bandit* movies that elevated their pop-culture status like nothing else seen before or after in Pontiac history. This '78 Y8+ S/E has yet another attribute—it was the inspiration for launching a business for its owner that has flourished for 20 years.

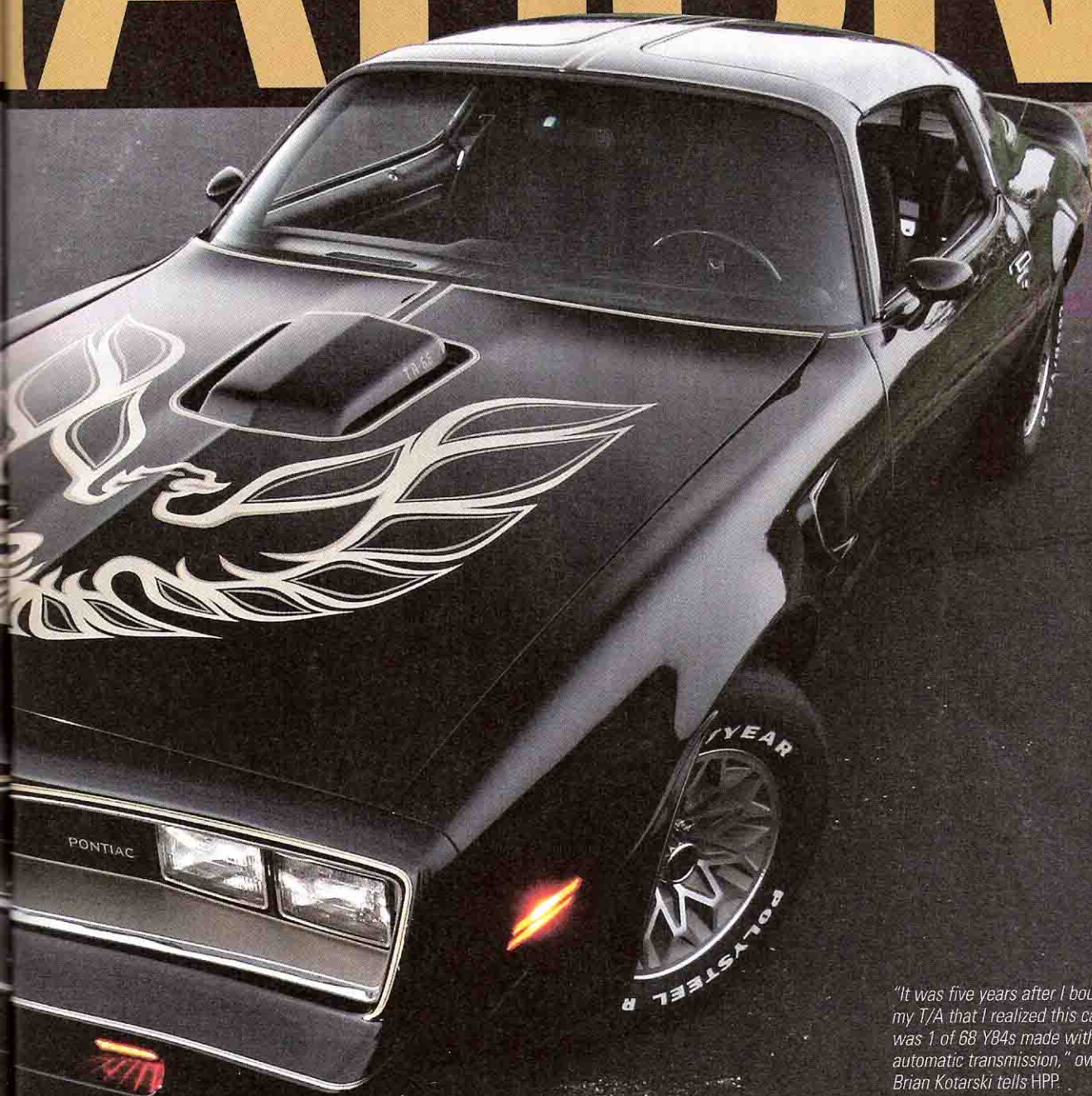
When 23-year-old Brian Kotarski set out to find a Trans Am in 1984, he had \$5,000 of hard-earned cash in hand. "My brother and I searched for nearly a year when we finally saw this one in the newspaper," Brian tells *HPP*. "After driving to Phoenix, we saw it sitting under a huge shade tree in the owner's front yard, wearing 60-series, low-profile tires. I wanted it!"

After much negotiation, for \$5,300 he became the third owner. He returned the T/A to his hometown of Scottsdale, where it was originally delivered to Bud Beck Pontiac from the Van Nuys plant. This was also the home of the first owner.

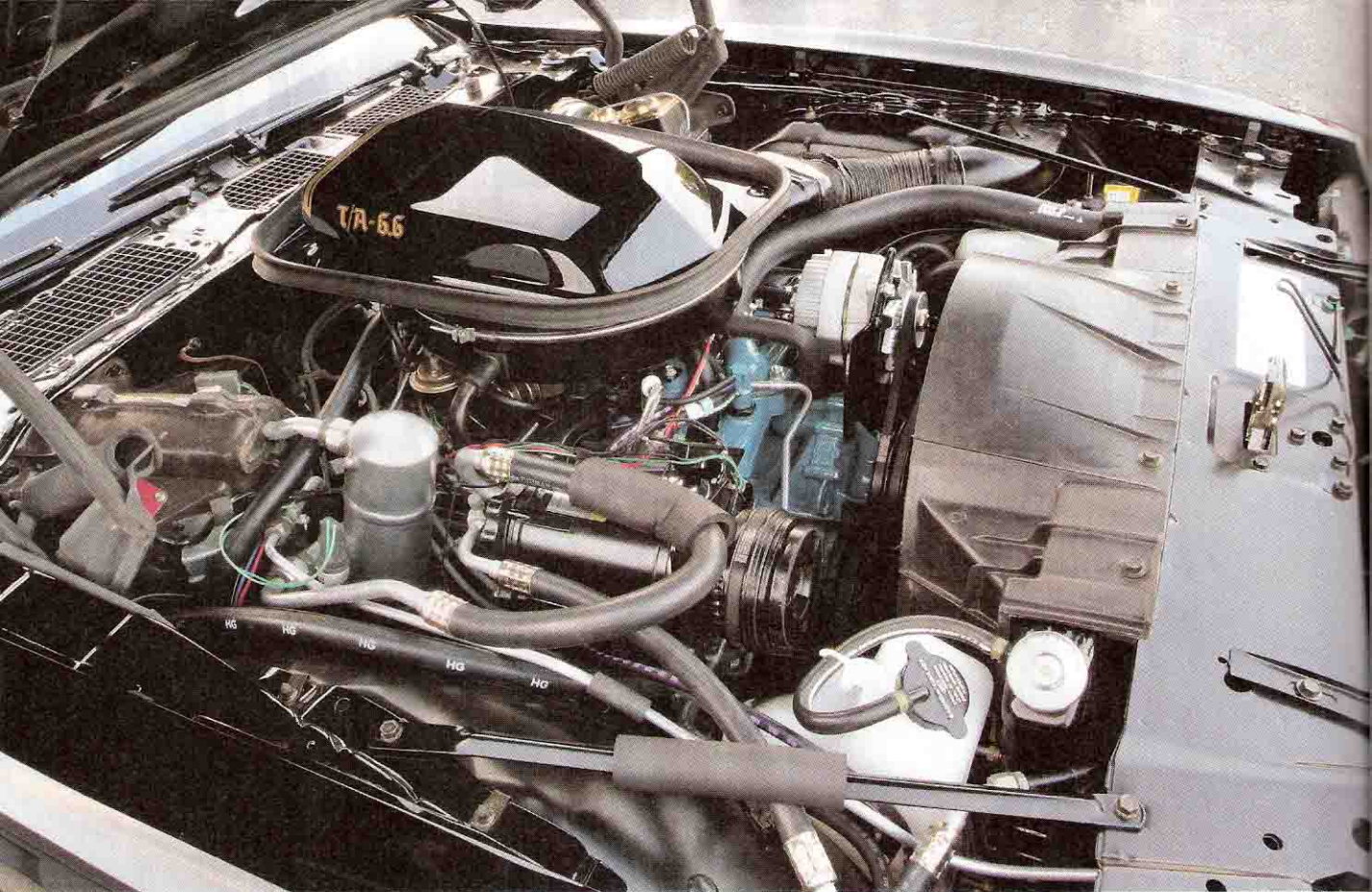
Look, it's a dark and moody photo. Can you tell we took photos of this car until it grew dark?



ON BREEDS RATION



"It was five years after I bought my T/A that I realized this car was 1 of 68 Y84s made with an automatic transmission," owner Brian Kotarski tells HPP.



The W72 engine was upgraded with an 0.020 overbore, forged pistons, 9.3:1 compression, bowl-ported heads, and a hotter cam. Nyle had Dupont match the engine paint to the factory paint located in a concealed area of the flexplate. He also relates that some engine compartment components have a higher gloss black than the subframe because they were higher gloss when the T/A came apart.

The base price was \$5,799 in 1978, but options added \$2,411 to the tally, topping out at \$8,573 with a \$363 destination charge. Said options include: the W72 6.6-litre 400 T/A engine, A/C, Soft Ray glass, door edge guards, the lamp group, power door locks, power windows, the radio accommodation package, tilt wheel, the custom trim group (velour), GR70x15 WL tires, and, of course, the Y84 Special Edition Package. The Y84 S/E option brought with it gold exterior graphics, blacked-out exterior trim, gold interior trim, gold Snowflake wheels, and T-tops.

"After a new set of tires and replacing a broken pull strap, the S/E was perfect in every way," Brian recalls. "For over two years, it was driving bliss." Then he discovered GM's replacement cost for the S/E graphics. "Sold individually, these 44 pieces cost \$960 wholesale (\$1,900 today)," Brian laments. "Was I the only one who had to choose between food or decals? Probably not. In an effort to ease both my and others' pain, Phoenix Graphix was born."

Over 20 years later, the company philosophy is still "to provide the best products at affordable prices by producing user-complete kits." A dedicated staff offers 350 kits for many makes and models.

In 2000, after 16 years and 100,000 more miles of enjoyment, the T/A still looked great, but



The attention to detail on the engine can be seen much better with the shaker removed. How were all of the vacuum hoses done? Nyle says, "We studied schematics to get the colors and markings for the hoses, and then we hand-painted them. Some are original pieces and others we matched at a local parts store." M&H made new wiring harnesses using the originals as a guide, matching the gauges, colors, and connectors. The belts are not correct. "We can't get GM belts date-coded after 1976," says Nyle. The original No. 17058266 Q-jet was restored and dialed in by Jim McGowan at the Quad Shop.

Brian wanted more. "I realized that only polishing the bolts and other reachable parts was not sufficient for this perfectionist's 164,000-mile friend," he says. "I decided to do a concours restoration, and the hunt for parts began."

Following an exhaustive four-year search for a restorer, Brian entrusted his T/A to Nyle Wing of Wings Auto Art (www.wingsautoart.com) in Ionia, Michigan. Though there was a two-year waiting list, once the project ensued in August

2006, it was a full-time effort with no delays. "This T/A was so well preserved that we were able to document many things as we took it apart," Nyle explains. "Brian has a vast knowledge of Trans Ams, and I have lots of experience with them, as well. All that combined with diligent research enabled us to restore the S/E to the best of our abilities. During the process, I had a new career of 'concours researcher,'" jokes Brian.

BODY

After teardown, aircraft chemical stripper followed by media-blasting removed the old paint. The T/A was in such good condition that no body panels had to be replaced. Even the original spoilers were repaired and smoothed to remove the factory waves.

Nyle says, "After final stripping with a DA sander, the body was etch-primed with Dupont products and then smooth-coated using Marsons Platinum Plus body filler on every panel. This was followed by blocking with 80-/100-/180-grit paper, in succession. Then it was primed and long and short-board blocked with 100- and 180-grit. This process was repeated until the body was straight.

"Next, two coats of Dupont primer filler were applied and wet-sanded with 220-, 320-, and 600-grit. Just enough Dupont sealer to get color on the car followed; then four coats of Chroma Premier G9900S Super Jet Black base (code 19, Starlight Black for Pontiac), and four coats of 72500 urethane clear were applied. Wet-sanding the clear was done with 1,000-, 1,500-, 2,000-, and 2,500 grits.

"A three-stage buffing process that employed an extra cut, mid-cut, and fine-cut using the 3M Perfect It system followed. A wool pad was employed for the extra cut, and a waffle pad was used on the last two cuts."

CHASSIS AND SUSPENSION

Since this S/E is not equipped with WS6, its gold Snowflake wheels measure 15x7 instead of 15x8 and differ in appearance. Brian says, "The 15x7s are prettier with the snowflakes' lathe-turned edges protruding into the face." Regarding the wheel code on the buildsheet, "YJ indicates gold, but the stamping on the wheel is KJ and the gold is painted on," he explains. The stock 1.25-inch front and 0.625-inch rear stabilizer bars were retained. Though the suspension was rebuilt to stock using NOS and reproduction parts, the shocks were upgraded to Konis and painted to appear correct.

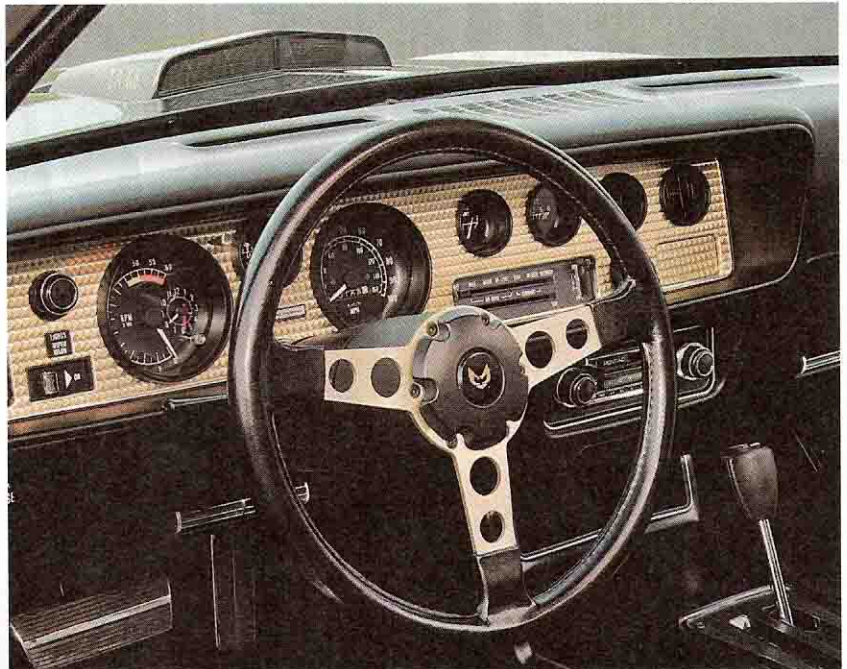
ENGINE AND DRIVETRAIN

Brian's original code-X7 220hp W72 400 engine was rebuilt by Chris Felice of Felice Automotive in Ionia. It was bored 0.020 over and fitted with Speed Pro forged flat-top pistons, reconditioned stock rods, and a polished stock crank. The 6X heads were bowl-ported, the valves were upgraded to stainless-steel Ferreas in the stock sizes of 2.11/1.66, and dual

valvesprings, Crane pushrods, and Harland Sharp 1.50:1 roller rockers were installed.

Compression was increased to 9.3:1, and a Comp 212/212-degree at 0.050 cam with 0.440/0.440 lift was chosen to increase power, yet provide a smooth idle. The original Q-jet

was rebuilt, restored, and dialed-in to the combination by Jim McGowan at the Quad Shop in Rockford, Illinois, and the original HEI was rebuilt as well. On the dyno, the engine produced 394 lb-ft of torque at 2,600 rpm and 310 hp at 4,700 rpm.



The gold-spoke Formula wheel, gold-winged Bird in the horn button, and gold engine-turned dash fascia (which was restored) were all part of the S/E package. Brian polished the original gauge lenses, as he found that the NOS and reproduction pieces both showed prism distortion. The stereo is an aftermarket Autosound with cassette.



The cabin features the code-19B1 Lombardy custom trim group (velour) upholstery, and the seat covers were re sewn with OEM material. Brian said that it was a nine-month wait for Fryers Upholstery, but the results were well worth it. An inch of additional hushmat-type insulation material was added, as well as package tray and trunk padding.



HIGH PERFORMANCE
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A stock-replacement converter was bolted in ahead of the rebuilt MK-code Turbo 350 trans. The code-2PX 3.23 Posi differential was set up by DTS, and Nyle assembled the rear.

THE RESULTS

Eight years after Brian made his decision to restore his T/A—but just two years after the work began in May of 2008—it was completed and the results are outstanding. Is the S/E over-restored? “Every car is overrestored, and this one is no different, especially in the body and paint department,” Nyle says. Let’s be realistic, very few people would want to recreate factory flaws such as misaligned or wavy body panels, or runs in the paint. There is also the issue of protecting what are supposed to be bare metal parts from rust and corrosion. In the case of Brian’s T/A, paint was used in these areas to replicate a factory appearance, while protecting the metal.

Brian says of Nyle, “He is a lot like me: Compulsive, a perfectionist, communicative, patient, knowledgeable, and attentive, and he expects nothing less from those around him.” Both owner and restorer are very pleased with the results. The S/E took First Place at the Detroit Motorama and was a hit at the T/A Nationals last year when Brian displayed it at the Phoenix Graphix trailer.

Many companies build cars to promote its products. While Brian’s S/E T/A may aptly serve that same purpose, he was a Pontiac guy first; then turned his passion into a career. To that end, his Bird also has the distinction of being the inspiration for the company’s very existence. Not a bad resume for one of Pontiac’s most revered models. 🐦

Brian would like to thank his beloved wife, Anne; Nyle Wing; Bill Harris; Adam Burns; MGH Electric; Felice Automotive; Steve Gregori Brake Boosters; InlineTube; ACC; and Original Auto Interiors for help with his project.



In this “before” photo, evidence of its 164,000 miles is obvious.



“(Mine is) one of the first Fisher T-top cars,” says Brian, “and one of the last adorned with the now-legendary looping-style hood bird.” As you may imagine, all of the graphics are from Phoenix Graphix. But what you may not know is that “all of the assembly line tags, emission, and oil filter decals were painstakingly reproduced and are now offered by Phoenix Graphix.”

► *Special gray powdercoat was used on the stabilizer bars to replicate a forged appearance. The spindles were shot with cast-iron Eastwood paint, and steel paint was used on the coil springs.*



It took plenty of labor hours to get the chassis this clean and detailed. The exhaust manifolds were high-temp ceramic-coated in a natural cast finish, and the exhaust system is a used original that was purchased and restored. It was glass-beaded and received a high-temp powdercoating. “Its finish is a bit bright, but it’s the closest we were able to get to bare steel without leaving it raw,” Nyle says. The resonators came from an old muffler shop that matched the part numbers. Semigloss black was used on the subframe, and the steering linkage was sprayed with Eastwood steel paint to replicate bare metal. According to Nyle, all of the nuts, bolts, clips, and screws on the T/A were taken off, glass-beaded, and replated in the correct finishes at Midwest Plating in Grand Rapids.



Nyle had the Dupont red-oxide primer matched to original primer that was well preserved under the dash; then single-stage urethane clear with flattener was applied to preserve it, so it’s a bit shinier than stock. Large paint daubs on the differential were faithfully recreated. Nyle says, “The rear center section from the factory is bare cast iron (now cast-iron painted), the axle tubes are bare steel (now preserved with Eastwood steel paint), and the backing plates are raw (now steel-painted). The backside, however, was oversprayed with 60 percent gloss black on the assembly line, so rusty parts didn’t show.” That was replicated here. The brake lines are reproductions from Inline Tube, and the rear springs were restored and powdercoated in gray.