

Vintage Rallying



by Rich Taylor

The Vintage Rally Scene

Peter and Gina Starr called up yesterday to enter the upcoming Northwest Passage rally. They were anchored in St. Augustine, living for the winter on the 43-foot sailboat they brought down the Inland Waterway from Maine last fall. Peter and his pal Bob Tkacik are retired Toyota dealers and the world experts when it comes to Toyota 2000GTs. They own something like a dozen of these rare models.

Peter reminded me that in 2003, he and Bob had brought three of their 2000GTs on the New England 1000, plus arranged for Dr. Akihito Saito and his wife to fly in from Japan to drive the famous "James Bond" 2000GT convertible. Dr. Saito brought along eight Japanese journalists to cover the event.

Dr. Saito's father, Tadeo Saito, was one of the creators of the 2000GT, while Dr. Saito was about to retire as one of the top three executives at Toyota Motor Company. So that year, our New England 1000 became something of a celebration for the outstanding careers of these two legendary engineers.

As Peter and I were talking on the phone, we were also both watching on television as Akio Toyoda, the heir to Toyota and new CEO, was grilled about "unintended acceleration" by the U.S. House Energy & Commerce subcommittee.

Like Dr. Saito, Mr. Toyoda possesses the same innate grace that seems to characterize every upper class Japanese businessman I've ever met.

My friend Takaharu Kobayakawa, a Japanese prince who became a Mazda engineer, embodies this same rare mix of grandeur and humbleness, a bone-deep sense of propriety that members of the United States Congress noticeably lack.

An elderly woman was the star witness in the Toyota hearings. She testified that her Lexus took off down I-40 at 100 mph and that after putting both feet on the brake pedal, putting on the parking brake, shifting into reverse and turning off the cruise control, she called her husband on her cell phone and prayed. After 6 miles at 100 mph, her car slowed down all by itself.

What she didn't tell the Congressional Committee is that after this incident, neither her local Lexus dealer nor a NHTSA investigator could find anything wrong. There was no evidence that she had ever applied the brakes or the parking brake, both of which would surely show signs of wear if clamped on for 6 miles at 100 mph. This lady was so busy dialing her cell phone at 100 mph, she didn't think to momentarily turn off the ignition key to stop the engine.

She did admit that she had installed aftermarket rubber floor mats that stuck up in the way of the pedals, but dismissed the findings of the dealer, NHTSA investigators and an arbitration board. I predict she'll join a class action lawsuit against Toyota, if she hasn't already. Her car was sold in 2007 to a new owner who has driven it for three years with no problems.

More than 20 years ago, I got involved when Audi was hit with similar accusations of "unintended acceleration." At Popular Mechanics, where I conducted all the road tests, we ran a number of track tests to prove that any passenger car with normal disc brakes can come to a full stop even from high speed with the accelerator to the floor. Car and Driver's Don Sherman and Patrick Bedard, among other independent testers, proved the same thing.

I thought the whole "unintended acceleration" issue was so stupidly unfair I even went on a short-lived TV show hosted by investigative journalist Morton Downey, Jr. When I tried to defend Audi, I was physically thrown off the stage for my trouble. Morton Downey, Jr., like the rest of the mainstream media, was loathe to let the facts get in the way of a good story. Audi was ultimately cleared, of course, and 60 Minutes, which had started the fracas, ultimately

apologized. But it set Audi back for a decade.

Some people have suggested that learning from the Audi fiasco, the current administration is going after Toyota as a way to boost sales of government-owned General Motors and Chrysler products, while simultaneously damaging non-union Toyota. I don't know about that, but I thought Mr. Toyoda handled himself very well. For starters, he even traveled from Japan in order to appear before this subcommittee. He didn't have to do that.

Imagine for a moment that drivers in China claimed that their Buicks were accelerating on their own and that a group of politicians from the Chinese Central Committee decided to investigate. Would Ed Whittaker, Mr. Toyoda's counterpart at GM, fly halfway around the world to be scolded by politicians for their own ends? I think not.

I'm sorry, but genuine "unintended acceleration" is a myth. Like every racing driver and engineer I've ever met, I'm convinced that if



Toyota 2000GT.

there is a mechanical malfunction—and a truly mysterious mechanical malfunction is a rare occurrence—there is almost always something you can do. It's a matter of making the right decision. As my wife Jean says, "If you were driving 100 mph in a runaway car, would you decide to call me on your cell phone?"

Which brings me back to Peter Starr and his latest decision. Instead of shipping one of his many cars from Maine to Coeur d'Alene for our rally in the Canadian Rockies, Peter bought a car in Seattle which he is having prepped in a shop in Portland. He and Gina will fly into Portland, drive to Idaho, and take part in the Northwest Passage. Instead of a Toyota 2000GT, what would you guess he'd choose to drive? Would you believe a red and white 1956 Oldsmobile Rocket 88 convertible! I can't wait.

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