



Team Tinyvette

What do you mean it's not a Corvette?

Racing 130 Other Cars for 700 miles in 27°F Weather in a 42 Year Old Car that Cost \$200 – the 2011 Arse-Freeze Apalooza

In it's six races since we rescued the Tinyvette, a 1969 Opel GT, from an orchard in Oroville, the car, and our team, have surprised ourselves. We had never raced or built a car before, yet we built this one and then went from barely surviving our first race to winning our class twice and bringing home four trophies, in our first year. When we do run into trouble that sets us back we still finish in the respectable 20s, in races that typically field 150 to 190 cars and run for 16 to 24 hours, covering 700 to 1,000 miles. Well, the downside of our success was that LeMons started to feel that we were dominating C Class so the judges kicked us out, and up, into A Class, and later back into B. Now we are racing against various V8-powered transplant recipients and fast BMWs. Yeah, good luck with that.

Last October's race at Infineon had been our best performance yet. Everyone drove well on that difficult and dangerous track, showing that we had learned a thing or two in the roughly 4,700 miles the team has raced in the past 18 months. And the car, after over a year of trying to get it right, was finally right, and it was a blast to drive. The result that weekend was a top 20 finish, 17th overall in a field of 164 cars, our best result to date.

With the last race of the year coming up in a few months we sat down to figure out where to go from there. Since we can't spend money on these cars our only option was to improve our strategy. Alan (Brattesani) worked out a way to save us time in our pit stops and I studied the data from the previous



TeamTinyvette, from left to right: Zep Brattesani, Craig Lowe, Alan Brattesani, Mike Meier, Geoff Straw.

race and worked out a way to make fewer pit stops. Combined, these improvements would gain us 12 laps, enough to get us into the top 10. So that would be it, our new strategy and our new goal, get a top 10 finish at Buttonwillow in December.

Zep Brattesani, Craig Lowe, and I would be driving the car at Buttonwillow while Alan, not fully recovered from a recent bicycle racing accident, would be supporting the effort and conducting Friday's testing. Geoff Straw would be wrenching for us and spotting and regretting that he had not signed on to drive, while Bernhard was stuck in Germany taking care of his karting business and missing all of the fun.

It got down to 27°F on the morning of the start of the race and it was still cold when Craig took the green flag for his first time ever on this track. Craig settled in quickly and before long was turning some quick, for a Tinyyvette, laps until on a particularly fast and fun section of track the thrill of it all mesmerized him just long enough to result in a spin. Craig, a Unitans bus driver, had spun in a turn called the *Bus Stop*. Ironic, and harmless, except for the penalty and the precious time it would cost us. Then on the way in he got hit. Our poor little car got it's door smashed in, it's first damage in seven races. The cage did it's job, Craig was OK, the damage was mostly cosmetic, and the judges were lenient, so we swapped drivers and before long Zep had the car back out on track. This was only a minor setback. It was early and this is a long race. We can still get that top 10 finish.

Zep has raced here before. He knows what he is doing out there and he was ticking off the laps for us. Then without warning the throttle linkage fails. Zep drives the car off the track and waits for a tow. Back in our pits Geoff dives in and fixes the problem within a minute and Zep goes right back out and starts ticking off even more laps.

I got into the car in the early afternoon and after a few laps had settled in and found my pace. But before long I started smelling gas and the smell was getting stronger. It was clearly our car. Then the car started



The door looked bad, but the car drove great! (Photo by racinricpix)



Craig getting t-boned in *Sunrise*, then visiting the Penalty box because of his spin.

losing power, as if it had run out of gas, then would recover again. I brought the car in and the guys had the hood off and were digging into the engine within seconds. It wasn't the carburetor, which it had been during our first race. This time it was the fuel pump and gas was pouring out of it. It was time to get out of the car, now! Someone grab a fire extinguisher! Our pit neighbors grabbed a drain pan and shoved it under the car as Geoff started jacking it up. He had the leak stopped and the fuel pump swapped out within a few minutes. We still had a half hour of racing left in the day and as I was getting back in the car I noticed the trail of gasoline behind the car leading all the way back out to the track. Maybe we were lucky, or maybe it wasn't actually that bad, but fuel leaks are always bad. Well, we'd have to deal with that later because right now the guys were strapping me in and my mind was turning back to driving. I knew that our top 10 finish was getting away from us. Let's aim for another top 20.

There was still frost on everything when Zep took the green flag on Sunday morning. He drove a perfect stint, and a long one, almost three hours long. That is quite a workout, physically and mentally, but by the time he was done he had moved us up into 31st place, 16 places higher than where we started the day. A top 20 was definitely a possibility, especially when you consider how many cars retire as this long race takes its toll on such old and dubious equipment. We just need to stay out of trouble and keep ticking off those laps.

I took the car out at around noon. It was really fun to drive, and much better than the coughing and bogging and overheating car we had brought the year before. Everything was going great, that top 20 was attainable, and I spin. It turns out that corner and the long straight after it had been doused with the oil from one of those late-race "retiring" cars. After a brief visit to the penalty box where I was told to "go and spin no more", I was out again, ticking off the laps.

Then I BF'ed. Black flagged. I screwed up by paying more attention to the car I was currently drag racing down the front straight than to the flagger stand up ahead and I blew through a yellow flag. That meant another trip to the penalty box, more delays, possible shame and humiliation at the hands of LeMons Justice, and greater difficulty getting that to 20 finish. I radioed in to meet up in Penalty, and



The throttle linkage broke during Zep's Saturday stint. After getting towed in it was quickly fixed.



Mike's spin in *Sunset*.

bring the GOOPBF card.

Jay Lamm, chief perpetrator of this series, was surprised to see the car in again. We never give them trouble. I figure he was either about to announce our punishment or express his sympathy for our having to drive this tired old car when Zep presents the Get out Of Penalty Box Free card. I was sent on my way without having to lead the team around the paddock doing the YMCA dance or providing some other disgraceful entertainment for the other teams.

Craig takes the car out to finish our weekend. We're back in 31st place at this point and by now a top 20 finish is something of a stretch so his instructions were to just drive clean and finish the day for us. He does that and we are moving up through the field, or rather, cars are dying left and right. Probably both, but more importantly, a top 20 is still within our grasp, if barely. Then he spins, in the *Bus Stop*, again. Cold late-day track? Brain fade? Low sun in the eyes? Another speed induced altered state of consciousness? It didn't matter, really, because in addition to the spin the car wouldn't start. He'll need a tow, and tows are painfully slow.

Back in the penalty box, where the tow truck dumped him, Craig is enduring the jokes the LeMons judges are making at his expense. That's a good sign, they are in a good mood, and instead of grounding



Driver change in the Team Tinyvette pits. (Photo by racinricpix)



We're done. We made it. Craig brings the car in at the end of a 700 mile long race.

us they send Craig back out to “finish spinning out”. But the car still won't crank and the judges have to push start the car for him.

We finished 25th overall. Not bad. Not what we were originally shooting for, and not quiet our fall-back goal either, but it was a good solid finish and no one felt bad about the outcome.

It was a great weekend, in spite of getting hit, spinning three times, two time-eating mechanical issues, and getting a BF for passing under yellow. The car ran great and we got through the penalty box each time with minimal humiliation and delay. We raced, as a team, and in that respect we had won.

A 25th place finish isn't bad. Really. This isn't NASCAR where they field only 42 cars. We've got around 500 drivers in 131 cars, and 50 of those cars did not even made it to the finish line. It's not only merely that these cars are pretty crappy to begin with, or that a number of the drivers have little or no experience on the track. The thing is, these races are long! We road raced 700 miles this weekend! Heck, the whole field logged over 67,000 miles. That's equal to over 2½ times around the earth, nearly a third of the way to the moon, and 0.07% of the way to the sun! That's a lot of racing!

This team has really gelled. Geoff is a great driver and is priceless in the pits. He's always thinking ahead and never backs off on a task until it is done. Unitrans is going to miss him. Craig is a solid driver. We've given him some tough assignments and he gets them done, recent spins aside. He hasn't a clue what is under the hood or chassis so we won't go there. Zep can do it all, and whenever the car comes in weak or wounded he dives right in, or under, gets dirty, and gets it done. Alan is our stabilizing force, a clean and steady driver who keeps us calm and focused when there are decisions to be made. Plus he provides the all important trailer and tow vehicle. And, me? I wrench and drive and video and write about this as much as I can. I'm having a blast, with this car, with LeMons, and with this team.



Other Event Facts and Details

Race: Arse-Freeze Apalooza, and 24 Hours of LeMons race
Date: December 3-4, 2011
Track: Buttonwillow Raceway Park
Length of Track: 2.550 miles
Field: 131 cars, of which 50 would not complete the race.
Overall Position: 25th, finishing in the 19th percentile, 51 laps back from the winner
Class: B, "The Bad"
Class Position: 11th in a field of 43, 34 laps back from the class winner and 14 laps ahead of the C Class leader. (Congratulations, Pete!)
Total Laps: 274
Total Distance: 698.7 miles (A total of 67,233 miles was raced by all teams.)
Average Lap: 2:58.866 (51.32 mph), includes pit stops and penalties
Best Lap: 2:22.469 (64.44 mph), set by Zep in lap 153

The Car

Make/Model/Year: 1969 Opel GT
Purchase Price: \$200 (eBay)
Engine: Opel 1.9L CIH inline-4, iron block and head, carbureted, estimated 100 whp and 110 ft·lb torque
Transmission: Opel manual 4-speed
Wheels: 205-50-15Z Falken Azenis RT 615K on 15x7 Diamond Racing wheels
Brakes: Stock front disc and rear drum brakes, race pads and shoes

The Team

- Alan Brattesani, retired chemist and business owner, resident of Davis. Co-owner and co-captain of Team Tinyvette
- Zep Brattesani, Alan's son, driver and part-time wrencher, attending college in San Francisco
- Craig Lowe, recent UCD graduate, programmer at UCD, former Unitrans bus driver
- Mike Meier, retired UCD, resident of Davis. Co-owner and co-captain of Team Tinyvette
- Geoff Straw, manager of Unitrans, resident of Davis, race support
- Bernhard Wagener, owns several karting facilities, wrenches and drives for us, is currently away in Germany.