PROJECT GNX

Exclusive! Across the desert in America's quickest musclecar

This article originally appeared in Car Craft Magazine, September 1987.The layout of the article has been kept as close to original as possible, with the omission of advertisements, etc. It is also obvious which picture covered two pages. The article was all black and white. The pictures were not scanned at a high resolution in order to conserve file size and download time.

PROJECT GNX

A 2000-Mile Validation, Calibration, and Celebration

By Paul Garson

"Mounted high atop the barbed wire fence, television cameras scan back and forth across blunt angular silhouettes shrouded beneath thick, gray tarpaulins. Something dark, something Secret lays hidden, and carefully watched, in the quiet Michigan community of Livonia. . . Project GNX."

These images, sounding like a "60 Minutes" expose popped into my head when. I got the word from the boss: "The GNX trip is on!" Little did I know what was in store for me as I began packing my Minolta spy camera and the CIA-replica sunglasses for what was officially designated the "GNX Validation Ride." Who would have guessed that a dream assignment behind the wheel of America's Number One performance car would involve a mud wrestling contest and a final showdown with a nuclear-tipped RF-1O1C Interceptor.

I'd be joining a select crew of ASC/McLaren and Buick engineers and designers in a cross-California/Arizona shakedown cruise to evaluate the final calibrations, and if necessary, de-bug any minor glitches prior to the GNX's production run. But who are these guys at ASC/McLaren that Buick would hand them the GNX project? ASC Inc. is a maker of limited-edition vehicles with headquarters in Southgate, Michigan. They've worked on the 1982-85 Riviera convertible, and designed GNX's trick bodywork and interior layout. McLaren Engines Inc. of Livonia, Michigan, worked with Buick on the development of the 1985 Indianapolis 500 pole-winning car, and on the futuristic Wildcat concept car. McLaren was responsible for all the GNX engine/suspension performance development.

Was I excited? Did I sleep in my clothes with three cameras around my neck? No, but I did duct-tape my radar detector to my forehead.

GNX DAY ONE—On a sunny SoCal Friday afternoon I flew north out of the hubbub of L.A. to the quiet serenity of Santa Maria, and immediately bumped into Dean Battermann, project manager for McLaren, who had flown in to pick up the GNX validation ride, which had already set sail earlier in the week from the Mesa, Arizona, GMC proving grounds. We shared a taxi to the Santa Maria Holiday Inn and came upon an awesome scene. Side by side sat two silver Buick T-type Turbos and two very black, very bad-looking GNXs, 16-inch super meats, shark gill "bun burner" hood vents, trunk-mounted CB antennas, and all. Did they look "Fed."

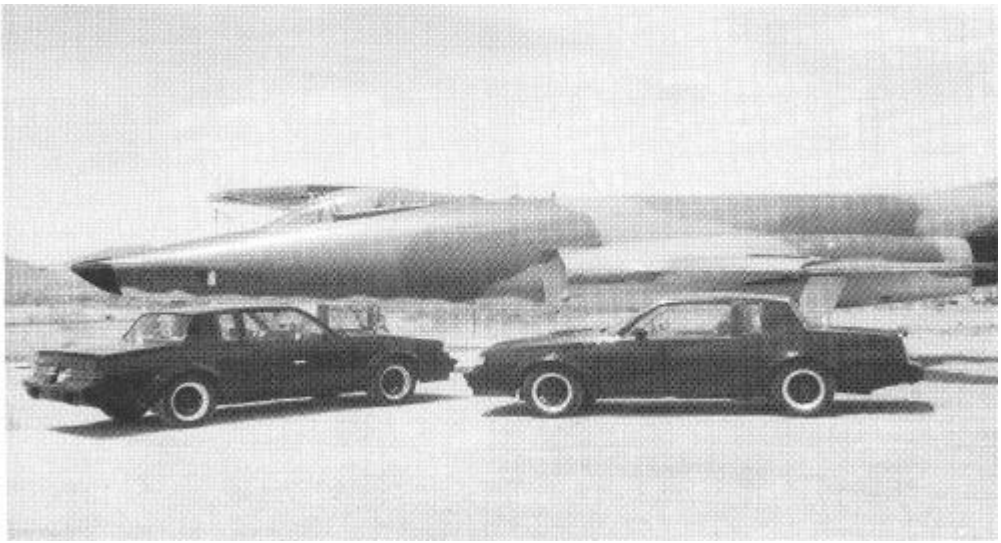
View from the canyon top, courtesy of GNX, was spectacular as was the Buick's handling.

Grouped around the cars were the "flight crew," the validation enterprise headed by Mike "Capt. Kirk" McQueer, McLaren Project Manager; Mike Doble, Buick Advanced Concepts Manager; Tom Yakes, McLaren Car Build Supervisor; Chuck Jensen, Buick Engineer; Lou Infante, McLaren Director of Corporate Planning; Joe Fitzsimmons, Buick Car Line Manager; Greg Bryem, ASC Comptroller; Chris Riffle, McLaren Project Engineer; and Dean Battermann, McLaren Project Manager. Actually, it would be Mike McQueer and Chris Riffle of McLaren who would be operating the calibration equipment, twisting the switches and reading the dials on the NASA-style monitoring devices attached to the test vehicles. The other members of the crew would be conducting a combination subjective/objective real world evaluation of the GNX to make certain that Buick, ASC, and McLaren would feel confident signing their name to the final product prior to its release to the customer.

A quick glance into the trunk of one of the T-type Turbos revealed about 300 pounds of monitoring and telemetric devices, part of the calibration equipment linked to the GNXs. Riding the GNX's dash was a standard GM Instrumentation Interface Unit, with a multitude of digital readouts which linked up with the car's ECM (Electronic Computer Module). This device helped keep close tabs on the intercooled turbo'd V-6's performance throughout the trip. It was also important for evaluation of the recalibrated PROM (Programmable Read Only Memory) In the ECM designed to improve full-throttle operation. In addition, the GNXs carried multichannel thermocouple probes which were tapped into various parts of the engine and engine compartment where they fed back data on 10 to 20 different operating temperatures including ambient, oil, and exhaust. A bank of pressure probes were plumbed into the manifolds, turbo-chargers, and intercoolers, and relayed information to a cluster of gauges mounted on the dashboard of one of the T-Types. Mike had also brought along a lap-top computer that could interface with the various instrumentation carried aboard the test vehicles.

What do you do on a Friday night when you're driving a prototype GNX? Go dirt-track racing, of course. Mike, with Lou riding shotgun, took the GNX on evasive track maneuvers. Tom Yakes piloted second GNX "entry."

The GNXs caught up with a pair of fighter bombers in the middle of the Arizona desert.



THE ULTIMATE AMERICAN MACHO MACHINE?

The most exciting American car since the Cobra? That's the general consensus with the arrival of the Buick regal GNX. It's big, it's black, and it's bad, blistering 0-60 mph in 5.4 seconds, and clocking 13.4-second/104-mph quarter miles. More than a straight-line rocket sled, the GNX is suspension-tuned to hug the corners like a Grand Prix car.

The GNX was developed from the Buick Regal Grand National, a car built to commemorate Bobby Allison's efforts in Grand National racing with a 1983 Regal. The car stirred up a storm of auto-sport interest. It was the hottest car on the new block, a real "musclecar" in the old tradition of the Pontiac GTO, the Z/28 Camaro, and the Dodge Hemi. Even the FBI liked them so much that they bought 100 Grand Nationals for their agents.

Then Buick decided they wanted something with even more muscle and hotter looking than the already very hot Grand National. They wanted to make automotive history. Thus was born the very limited edition GNX, an instant legend, already demanding collector status and skyrocketing purchase prices.

Developed by ASC/McLaren Engines, the GNX concept car features a modified Buick turbocharged and intercooled 3.8-liter V-6 producing 300 horsepower at 4400 rpm (compared to 245 for the "standard" Regal Grand National). Dressed all in tuxedo black like the Grand National, the GNX differs from its progenitor in several ways, including the improved turbo and intercooler combined with recalibrated engine control computer technology for more boost and top-end performance. Major improvements to the suspension include the addition of a longitudinal torque bar and panhard rod to reduce wheelhop and improve hard launches and handling. TheGNX also sports fender flares, 16-inch alloy wheels (the Grand Nationals wears 15-inchers) and Eagle GT tires, plus dual exhausts, and Stewart-Warner analog instruments. You could call the GNX a luxo-super-sport, because along the with the sizzle you also get power steering, power window locks, AM/FM/cassette radio, and air conditioning so you stay cool while the GNX burns up the pavement.

The Buick GNX by ASC/McLaren will be the first U.S. production car to use a turbocharger employing a lightweight, high-performance ceramic rotor. The unit was developed by Garrett Automotive of Torrance, California. The special rotor reduces mass for quicker acceleration response.

Originally, only 200 GNXs were scheduled for production, but customer interest (rather, customer frenzy) bumped that 547, the cars to be hand-built at the McLaren plant in Livonia, Michigan. For all practical purposes, all the GNXs have been sold. In fact, although the original sticker price was $26,000 ($8,000 above the "regular" Grand National's price), dealers have reportedly been paid $40,000 and more for one of the rare GNXs. At least one dealer is planning an auction, with 500 invitations sent out. A $100,000 GNX? Perhaps. We know that one customer already offered $400,000 for 10 GNX's months before a single one had been built.

Is the GNX worth it? Like they say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and performance is at the end of the driveshaft. With the GNX you get both brutal beauty and beautiful performance. Sadly, only a very lucky few will enjoy the GNX experience,and so the GNX will enter auto history as part machine… part myth.

Another trick piece of test equipment was the fiber-optic probe the McLaren engineers insert into the turbo to test the new lightweight ceramic turbine while in motion. In other words, there was enough high-tech electronics to outfit a lunar module.

I also learned that all this testing helped create another historic first for the GNX. This very limited production specialty car also boasts not only high - output turbo boost, but an OEM-backed 12-month, 12,000-mile warranty, and is serviceable through your local Buick dealer. This is the result of the rigorous OEM-standard quality, durability, and EPA testing conducted by the pro's at McLaren. It didn't come easy. Seven prototypes were built, and run through the wringer including a high-altitude test in the Rockies, a 36,000-mile EPA evaluation, and several 10,000-mile chassis/transmission checks, each 10,000-mile test translating to 100,000 miles of real world driving. The nearly 2,000-mile Phoenix-to-Phoenix loop on which we were embarked would be the last leg of the validation series as the GNX, 98 percent ready for the customer, would get its final fine-tuning and calibration adjustments, if needed.

Greg and Joe were leaving the trip at this point, flying back to their Midwestern offices, and we had a long ride to San Diego scheduled for the morning, so I thought it would be an early-to-bed, early-to-rise night. It made sense. It was logical. It was boring. However, after dinner, someone mentioned there was Friday night circle trick racing at the nearby Santa Maria Speedway. "Let's do it," was chorused, and four turbo-packing Buicks blasted off into the night, the gung-ho GNXs taking point.

The "Buick Bunch" descended on the raceway, the ground already shaking beneath our feet as Sprint cars dug holes to China on the third-mile dirt track. The grandstands and hillside overlooking the course were overflowing with fans. Midget racers and full-blown Modifieds were slip-sliding around the boggy oval, the sky raining clods of dirt. Ducking for cover, we soon decided it was safer out on the raceway than in the stands.

Moments later, two GNXs rolled onto the track, the announcer identifying the mysterious barnstorming Buicks. The sound of several thousand people shouting and yelling can be unnerving, especially when you don't know if they're hostile or friendly. Then Mike, with this writer as passenger/photogra-

pher, nailed the pedal to the metal, and the GNX dirt-tracker was born. Ninety miles an hour through hard-packed sludge can be a real test of traction, but the GNX hung tough, and the first lap was handled with rip-snorting ease.

I got out to take some action shots, and before I could say "Fuji" film, a roar went up from the crowd. I glimpsed a black blur revolving and spinning at the end of the back straightaway. A little voice in my head screeched, "Please, not the retaining wall!" My fears proved unfounded as Mike and co-pilot Lou Infante pulled up in front of the grandstands, flesh and metal unscathed. We could now rest assured that Mike's "controlled doughnut" had indelibly imprinted the GNX on the Santa Maria map.

GNX DAY TWO-Mike and the crew assembled at 7:00 a.m., and initiated "cold start" testing procedures during which the GNX's ability to start-up cold, warm-up, stop, start, and restart again while cold was evaluated. The Grand National had experienced some cold start glitches, but McLaren had obviously rectified the problem, as the GNX performed flawlessly in the cold start category. After a hot breakfast, we hit the trail for Los Angeles where we dropped off Lou Infante, who had to fly back to his office. We also picked up some Sunday cruise time on the famous Pacific Coast Highway, drifting in the sea of beach traffic. The Midwestern guys seemed especially to enjoy the drive along Malibu and Laguna, alternately checking the battery of onboard GNX monitoring gauges and the bikini-clad beachgoers.

But the twisty canyon action of Mulholland Drive in Los Angeles was the real highlight of the day. The hills echoed with the shrill roar of battalions of Ricky Racers tearing around the blind curves on hyper-quick motorcycles, sharing cliffside thrills with a smattering of Porsches and Corvettes. They found some unpopulated stretches and warmed up the gatorbacks, while I ping-ponged around in the backseat trying to take photos.

From mountain goat to luxo-cruiser, the GNX next took us freeway flying as we headed south to San Diego, passing scenic attractions as the California State Fruit Fly, Illegal Alien Check Point, and the San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant (why did all our radar detectors start whistling the theme "Gone With The Wind?").

GNX DAY THREE – Back on the road again, we proved "the shortest distance between two points is a GNX." I climbed behind the wheel and practiced "passing maneuvers" and "long-term maximum operating temperature test runs" when the opportunity arose, not to mention some radar detector evaluations. We would flick on our headlights, clip on our dark shades, and buzz, obeying the speed limit, in tight formation like a CIA convention through local towns. More than once, law officers followed us, at a distance.

"Winning by Intimidation" took on new meaning on the interstates as slower-moving traffic, noting our four cars, tended to pull over to the shoulder for unscheduled rest stops. During the cross-desert cruising, the GNX's new PROM computer chips were evaluated, with special attention given to hot-weather spark testing. Not a knock was to be heard as the GNXs whirred turbine-smooth through the shimmering heat waves.

We pointed the GNXs toward Phoenix, stopping only when we chanced upon a pair of camouflage-painted McDonnell-Douglas RF-101C Interceptors sitting alone and untended in the middle of nowhere. We snapped a few photos, looked for Tom Cruise, and then Mike led the way to Phoenix.

Once we arrived at Phoenix, the GNXs now very close to the Mesa GM Proving Grounds, the votes were taken and the preliminary calibration data evaluated. Aside from changes to the instrument panel to allow for clearer reading of the turn signal indicators and gauges, no major changes were deemed needed. The new computer chips had checked out, all operating temperatures and pressures had been spot on. In other words, the GNX had passed with flying colors. Besides all the technical information gained on the trip, the GNX had given this CAR CRAFT staffer one of those rare memories, we shared good-byes, and a mutual consensus that ASC/McLaren and Buick had made automotive history. We raised our glasses and together toasted the GNX. . . America's quickest factory musclecar.