

# Remembering John Kelsey



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The ONLY All-Pontiac Magazine

## "The Cleener" Darrin Magro's 1968 GTO



Special Section: Mike Huffman's Amazing  
Super Duty Pontiac Collection



Full Event Coverage:  
2023 Ames  
Performance  
Pontiac Nationals

# The



**This '68 GTO doesn't  
leave any evidence  
behind when it  
murders its competition.**

Cleaner;

Clee-nr

(Cleener) Noun

1) Assassin, Annihilator, to eliminate,  
to finish, to leave no remains.

2) "They are sending in the Cleener."

**I**n the world of spies or contract killers, a "cleaner" is someone who is called upon to "clean up a mess" when things didn't go quite according to plan. A cleaner usually looks mild-mannered and tries to not call attention to themselves as they ... dis-

pose ... of anyone who might – but shouldn't – still be around.

Darrin Magro bought this 1968 GTO from a friend, way back in the 1980s. Like most old New England-based muscle cars at the time, the GTO was a bit rusty around the edges.



# Cleaner

Story and photos by  
**Jason Scott**

Given its somewhat run-down appearance, most folks didn't give Magro's Goat a second look when he'd show up on the Berlin Turnpike, which was well-known at the time as the place to go if one were looking for a little street racing action in

southern Connecticut.

Being so easily overlooked, the GTO was the perfect, mild-mannered machine with which to clean-up against its competition on the streets.

There was just one problem: when he got it, the GTO could hardly get

out of its own way.

Under its hood, the GTO was powered by a worn-out, smog-era Oldsmobile "Rocket" 350 that had been installed by a previous owner just to keep the car on the road. It wasn't going to win any races with



This is why Nitemare Performance's Darrin Magro put so much time, money, and effort into rebuilding *The Cleener*: so he could enjoy driving it, every chance he gets.



The Cleener's engine is a 455 HO block with heavily-ported Ram Air IV heads making 664 horsepower and 545 pounds-feet of torque. Note the lack of nitrous, a turbo, or a blower.

that under the hood.

Fortunately, as the founder of Nitemare Performance, Magro knew just how to turn the clapped-out GTO into his own automotive version of a "cleener" to eliminate its competition: The Cleener.

The short version of the story is that Magro gutted the GTO — pulled the body off the frame and rebuilt it from the ground up. But that was then. But to get to the car as you see it now, he tore it all back apart and did it all over again. Better than before.

During the first go-round, the body rot was addressed with new GM quarters and patches where appropriate, then it was sprayed in a custom-blended version of Palladium Silver

for a sophisticated yet understated color, compared to more attention-getting hues. After all, a flamboyant color wouldn't let The Cleener blend in and get away, as one should. And despite the body and paint being done roughly 25 years ago, that work didn't need to be re-done.

Before the body could be set back on the chassis (again), the frame was media blasted and powder coated for a lasting finish, then fitted with an assortment of updated, premium suspension and brake system components to enable The Cleener to not only do well in straight-line acceleration, but also on roads and courses that have turns, too.

The front end received Global West upper and lower arms straddling second-generation Firebird spindles,



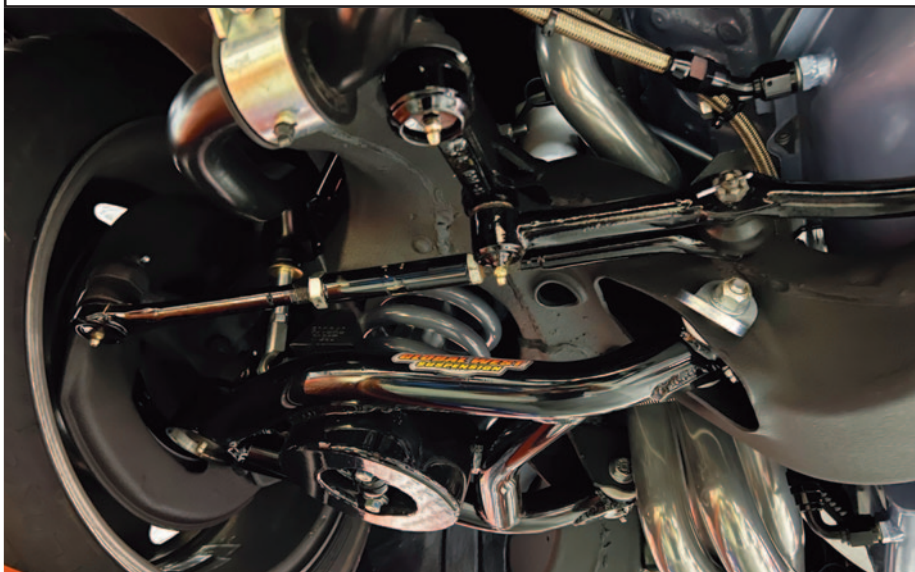
A fitting emblem for a killer GTO – the legendary Pontiac arrowhead.



With the doors shut, you'd almost never notice that the interior sports a roll cage, upgraded seats and five-point belts, and one of Magro's favorite items: a factory Hurst DualGate shifter controlling a beefed up 4L80 automatic transmission.



No, '68 Goats weren't available with a Ram Air IV, but Magro couldn't resist the factory decals, given what's under that hood.



The Cleener sports a bunch of front suspension upgrades — Global West tubular upper and lower arms, second-gen F-body spindles, discs and calipers, Hotchkis springs and sway bar, and Varishock double-adjustable shocks to fine-tune the handling.



Okay ... so, he really likes the Ram Air IV decals ... and it does look pretty killer on The Cleener's roll cage. Don't you agree?

which improved suspension geometry for better handling. Hotchkis springs are countered by double-adjustable Varishock gas dampers that allow Magro to tailor their performance to best suit the road or track needs. A Hotchkis 1-3/8-inch stabilizer bar minimizes body roll through corners. The F-body spindles also made it easy to install larger-than-stock (for '68) 12-inch front disc brake rotors, while battle-tested factory single-piston calipers provide ample clamping force. Mickey Thompson 275/40-17 Street Comp tires wrapped around old-school Centerline wheels fill the fenders and provide plenty of grip, no matter which way they're pointed.

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**-JASON SCOTT**

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Out back, a heavy-duty 12-bolt rear axle assembly was treated to high-speed-friendly 3.08:1 gears and an Eaton TrueTrac limited-slip differential to maximize power delivery to both wheels. The housing is held in place by Hotchkis adjustable upper control arms and custom-fabricated lower arms fitted with Heim joints at both ends for optimal articulation but



While the hood scoops provide cool air into the engine compartment, The Cleener has real ram air drawn from an empty headlamp bucket through a gargantuan hose direct to the K&N air filter assembly.

minimal deflection. Magro used his own Nitemare Performance springs to hold up the back, and another pair of double-adjustable VariShocks allow for almost infinite ride tunability. A custom anti-roll bar resists body lean. Stopping power comes from oversized GM 11-inch drum brakes, and massive 315/35-17 Mickey Thompson ET Streets take up every available millimeter of usable space in the non-tubbed rear wheel housings.

The engine is one area that's seen significant improvements. Originally, Magro built a race-ready but still-streetable Pontiac 400 and backed it up with a Richmond manual gearbox. But the combination wasn't nearly as "lethal" against its competition as Magro wanted The Cleener to be, nor



Magro outfitted the factory dash with enough Autometer gauges to keep tabs on a nuclear powerplant ... all neatly arranged in a factory dash.





*Don Keefe's*  
**PONCHO  
PERFECTION**



## "The Cleener" Specifications

<b>Body:</b>	1968 GTO
<b>Engine:</b>	462 cid, "455" HO
<b>Cylinder Heads:</b>	Ram Air IV (ported)
<b>Camshaft:</b>	.750-inch lift, 285° @ .050-inch lift, solid roller (custom-developed profile)
<b>Crankshaft:</b>	Sonny Bryant, forged steel
<b>Connecting rods:</b>	Carillo, forged steel
<b>Pistons:</b>	Venolia, 14:1, forged aluminum
<b>Intake:</b>	Edelbrock Torker I (modified)
<b>Carburetor:</b>	Quick Fuel 950 cfm
<b>Ignition:</b>	MSD distributor, coil; Moroso Ultra 40 wires; AC spark plugs
<b>Exhaust:</b>	Doug's Headers, 1-7/8-inch, metallic-ceramic coated; 3.5-inch oval pipes; SpinTech mufflers
<b>Suspension (front):</b>	Global West upper, lower A-arms; Hotchkis springs, stabilizer bar; Varishock double-adjustable shocks
<b>Suspension (rear):</b>	Hotchkis adjustable upper arms; custom lower arms; Varishock double-adjustable shocks; custom stabilizer bar
<b>Brakes:</b>	12-inch disc, single-piston aluminum calipers (front); 11-inch drum (rear)
<b>Wheels:</b>	Centerline aluminum, 17x9-inch (front), 17x10-inch (rear)
<b>Tires:</b>	Mickey Thompson Street Comp, 275/40-17 (front); Mickey Thompson E/T Street Radials, 315/35-15 (rear)

as enjoyable on the street. So, during the re-rebuild, he pulled out all the stops and built a 664-horse, 545-pounds-feet, naturally-aspirated pure Pontiac.

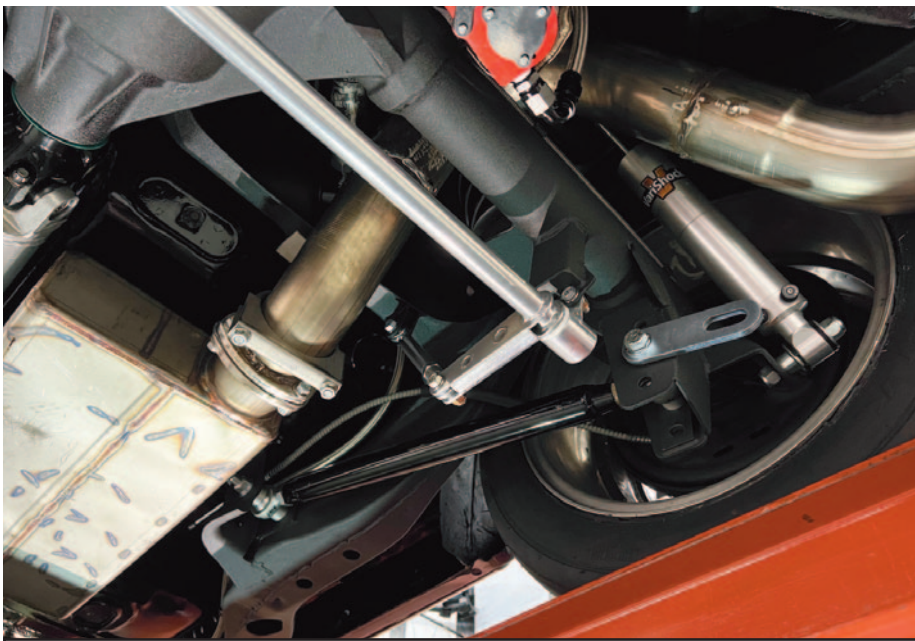
The engine was featured in the February 2023 issue of *Poncho Perfection* story "Good Things Come..." so we won't go into all the details again here, but in case you missed it, the new engine started with a factory 455 HO block that was stuffed with a Sonny Bryant forged crank, Carillo forged H-beam rods, 14:1 Venolia forged pistons, a custom .750-inch lift, 285-degrees of duration solid roller cam, plus a plethora of parts from Nitemare's catalog for a bullet-proof bottom end. But the real magic is in the heads: Ram Air IV castings that Magro meticulously hand-ported to flow an astounding 318 cfm on the intake side and 215 on the exhaust — improvements of 29 and 19 percent over stock, respectively.

A highly modified Edelbrock Torker I intake is topped by a 950-cfm Quick Fuel carb, an MSD ignition lights the fire, and coated Doug's headers expel the left-overs through custom 3.5-inch oval pipes to SpinTech stainless mufflers for a stealthy soundtrack.

Since the new engine makes so much more power than the old one, Magro needed to replace the Richmond gearbox, too. While Magro loves a good manual box, he opted for an automatic during the re-rebuild because they offer consistency benefits when drag racing and they don't really have any drawbacks these days on road or autocross courses, Magro decided to go with an ultra-strong 4L80 four-speed automatic and managed to adapt the factory



The undercarriage is clean enough to eat off. The frame was powder-coated, the ceramic-coated Doug's Headers flank the engine, a 4L80 automatic, and feed into 3.5-inch oval pipes and SpinTech mufflers.



The rear suspension features a 12-bolt with 3.08 gears and a TrueTrac limited slip, Nitemare Performance springs, Hotchkis adjustable upper control arms, plus custom lower arms and a custom anti-roll bar.

DualGate shifter to control it.

Inside The Cleener, the stock dash is fitted with Autometer gauges to more accurately cover all the usual in-

formational needs — speedo, tach, water temp, volts, and fuel level — plus Magro equipped the car with several more to keep tabs on oil pres-

sure and temp, trans fluid temp and pressure, plus a fuel pressure gauge neatly tucked into the hood tach shell. The six-point cage with five-point harnesses keep the driver and passenger securely seated in the generously-bolstered bucket seats that Magro salvaged from an import sports sedan and had reupholstered to better match the stock rear seat, which Magro admits is rather difficult to access now, with the cage in the way.

It has taken Magro nearly 30 years and two body-off-frame restorations to get The Cleener right but it's finally just the way he likes it. And if you're ever cruising around southern Connecticut and come across a deceptively stock-looking '68 GTO ... think carefully before agreeing to run against it. The Cleener might just be there to eliminate you. **PP**

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