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Smoking
GUNS

2006 SPORT AUTO TUNER GP & DRIFT CHALLENGE

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Smoking Guns ■■

he first time the Sport Auto Tuner Grand Prix took place in 1994, it was a closed event where journalists and a bunch of German tuners ran a timed shootout at Hockenheim. After the results and pictures went to press, however, people were already asking if they could attend and the event grew from there.

Today, as many as 10,000 enthusiasts turn up for the event and a big bonus is that entry is free; you only have to pay for parking.

As the Tuner GP matured, event organizers started an amateur section for the Drift Challenge element and participants began attending from all over Europe. In recent years, even Japanese drivers have taken part in the Drift Challenge. The fastest lap time posters, and therefore the Tuner

GP winners, have traditionally been Porsches. But as the Hockenheim Club Circuit is a handling course as much as a power one, normally aspirated GT3-based cars have beaten turbocharged 911s packing more than 200 bhp more.

Winning this event brings tremendous kudos and translates into sales. With such high stakes, it was no wonder that some of the cars were thinly disguised racers. In 2004, a new set

of rules relegated such cars to the Open Class and the rest had to abide by road-legal, TÜV-approved parts that a customer could buy and have certified for road use.

As usual, a Porsche won the GT Class of the 2006 Tuner Grand Prix. Up until last year, victory in the GT and Open Classes usually came down to either Gemballa or TechArt. But for the first time since the event started 12 years ago, Gemballa did not field an entry. And last year, a rainswept Hockenheim produced a new winner, Cargraphic, whose 435-bhp GT3 RSC 3.8 was better able to deploy its power than the more powerful turbocharged 911s.



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Just to prove that the superior-handling GT3-based car is also faster in the dry, the same Cargraphic car, again piloted by Marc Basseng, took the honors this year. Not that dry weather was a given. The whole of northern Europe had suffered uncharacteristically cold and wet weather for nearly two weeks before the event. Snow even fell in some parts of southern Germany, unheard of for the end of May.

Friday's practice found the sun shining, with temperatures creeping up to the low 70s (degrees F). Entrants who made it for this session were able to get some quick laps in to help their final setups. Participants and spectators alike were greeted by more warm sunshine on Saturday morning, and the event kicked off to the sound of revving engines and screeching tires as the first group out got some heat into the tires and wasted no time pushing the envelope for good lap times.

In the past, each class was separated from the rest. But this year, to save time, it was decided (since

cars are timed according to their own class) that mixing cars from different classes in the four sessions was to be allowed. This approach produced some interesting upsets, as it quickly became apparent that some of the lower-powered Open Class cars, which are closer to full-blooded racecars, were as quick if not quicker than some much more powerful road cars. The 25-year-old VW Polo racecar from Sorg Motorsport had only 136 bhp, but, weighing next to nothing by today's standards, it was catching and passing 500-bhp Porsche Cayennes coming out of the bends. Timers clocked it at 72.69 seconds, branding it as seriously swift for such a low-powered car.

It is always useful to have a benchmark when comparing lap times. If you consider that a professional driver pedaling a BMW M3 will lap Hockenheim's Club Circuit in around 77 seconds (or 73 seconds in a Porsche GT3 RS), anything close is fast. A normal road car dipping under 80 seconds is impressive. The

1.63-mile-long track gives little advantage to cars with humongous power or high top speeds. Automatic-only Mercedes are at a disadvantage. Even the spectacularly rapid SL55 AMG is handicapped by the effort of shunting its 4,299 pounds through the many bends. Here, acceleration, braking and handling are prerequisites for a fast lap, and lighter cars with manual gearboxes will show an advantage. To make sure they get the best results, most teams hire professional race drivers. In recent years, big names like Jochen Mass, Claudia Hürtgen and Kurt Thiim have been fielded by some of the major players.

The Cargraphic GT3 romped home with an amazing 69.36-second lap on street tires. All the more amazing, since a 1999 GT3 RS Le Mans racer on slicks can only do a 60.08 here. Not content with the GT Class win, Cargraphic also took the top spot in the Coupe/Cabrio Class with a 382-bhp Porsche 997 S Cabrio, which was timed at 73.15 seconds with Marc Basseng once more at the



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