

## **COTA 2020 Club Race Report**

### **By Joe Still**

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What: PCA Club Racing - Clubsport series

Where: Circuit of the Americas, Austin, TX

When: Feb 28, 29, March 1, 2020

Traveled: Delta thru ATL to Austin

Stayed at: Kimpton/Vanzant downtown and then Fairfield Inn, Buda, TX

The last weekend of February through March 1, 2020, my hard-core racer friends Grady Willingham of BHM and Juan Porro of Miami and I went to Austin, Texas, to race with Porsche Club of America. The event is named *Carrera of the Americas*. Being a fun destination, my wife Susan agreed to join us.

Circuit of the Americas (COTA) in Austin is about 9 years old and was purpose-designed by F1 design legend Herman Tilke and built to host the F1 races in America. We have been there every year but one (the year it rained torrentially; didn't miss much).



**Aerial view, COTA, Austin TX**

The track has 20 turns and some are multiple apexes, so it could count closer to 30 different techniques or presentations. There are a few “no lift” turns like T10 that is just a high-speed kink that doesn't really count. Track designers will number

any misalignment, but from a practical point of view, if it is taken flat out it is not a corner per se. Like T9 at Road Atlanta some of you may know, it's numbered but not many cars lift for it.

There was no Driver Education event prior to our event so it was the standard three-day PCA Club Race weekend. We arrived, however, Wednesday night to play Tommy and Tammy tourist on Thursday.

The night before we headed out to Texas, we attended a wine-pairing dinner at The Bottle with neighbors. After mixing six varieties of red and white wine over the evening I was "less than sharp" crossing the door threshold at home. I tripped, fell flat on my face and broke my glasses frame. Susan right behind me found our four devoted dogs caring for me on the floor. "How sweet! They are worried about you," till she realized they were just licking up the blood from my busted eyebrow.

Susan cleaned up me and the floor (not in that order) and pronounced, "You don't need stitches." Triaged by one tough chick! I had no symptoms of a concussion (wood floor) but my glasses were so deranged they would not stay on. I had a spare set of frames with dark-tinted glass, so I took both sets to Austin in hopes of having vision lenses transferred in Austin. To finish that episode, we walked a mere 300 yards from the hotel to a great eyewear shop in Austin that did the swap in 5 minutes for nothing. They were so nice, Susan bought a pair of Chanel frames for her future glasses. That will teach them to be nice to strangers!

We stayed downtown the first two nights at the Kimpton Vanzant, which is an ultra-modern mid-rise and only a few years old. It is right on Lady Bird Lake and Susan was sure to book a two-sided room that faced the lake and sunset to the southwest and the skyline to the northeast. Some may remember my oldest daughter spent 4 years here with Susan, visiting with her often. We love the town in many ways, though traffic is decidedly NOT one of them.

My older brother Jim's family from Phoenix (with Texas roots) came to town to see us race. His widow, son, and son's wife were all there and they are some of our favorite people. We lost my older brother 4 years ago to a car crash and we all miss him. He wanted very much to come watch us race (back then it was just

HPDE's) and just as most of us do, he assumed we had time. We all miss him very much. His wife Donna still talks to him and chews him out for leaving her, and I often hear some of the wise advice he gave me over the years. He was a lifelong motorhead and would have loved this hobby, but juvenile-onset diabetes held him back from most performance-related hobbies over the course of his adult life. Too bad, as he was always faster at go-karts, dirt bikes, street bikes, etc., than I was as kids.

First night's dinner was at Swifts Attic, a very trendy tapas place in the heart of downtown with a great menu. There were eight of us, so we let the chef pick the menu and we were stuffed even before the final two dishes.

Friday morning started COLD!!! BRRRRR! Mid 40's. Déjà vu of Sebring in December when I spun on cold tires on a cold track into wet grass and took the left side off my brand-new car! I resolved not to be that guy again. Sure enough, I got to T3 on the FIRST lap and someone has totaled their car in a barrier wall. You may not know but COTA has a ton of run off almost everywhere. I have joked you need a map to find something to hit.....this guy had that map.

Started Practice 1 at 2:21, same as FTD (Fastest Time of Day) in last year's car, so "leisurely" would describe the pace. "Pedestrian" would not be inappropriate but would be less kind 😊.

I used old-ish tires from Sebring all day as until technique catches up with car capabilities, sticker tires are a waste. If I keep running the same times on aging tires, that indicates improving technique.

Practice 2 showed some good improvement to 2:18. Coaching doesn't cost, it pays.

Practice 3 held the 2:18, but the tires were going away fast.

The VBox onboard data and video worked flawlessly for the first time since we installed it late last year. Some sort of software update did the trick as it had been

shutting down in the middle of sessions, frustrating our attempts to compare coach laps with mine as the ultimate teaching tool.

I did not run the Fun race/practice starts Friday evening as there were enough rookie candidates to “entertain” each other on the starts without needing me to aim at!

Saturday warm-up produced no real times so mostly we just got focused for Qualifying mid-morning.

Qualifying with new (finally!) stickers, I set a new personal best 2:17. That one-second improvement probably moved me up 10 spots on the qualifying grid.

Sprint 1, I started 8<sup>th</sup> and held through the race. Maybe a spot gained and lost here and there but finished P8. There was only one other C7 car in my class, so as long as I had him behind me there was nothing else to gain. We battled a while, but after my last pass he dropped off the pace. I lost focus about halfway through and started making mistakes. I kept on track to the end but I was slightly dazed. My Coach, Bryan Sellers, who I had been with me all day, started recounting what I had eaten (or not) that day and came up with about the same amount his 3-year-old daughter eats. A full stomach is not an asset in a hot race car slamming around the track, but low blood sugar is worse. After some food I felt much better. And held on to first in class!!!!

I had some good passes back and forth with a C6 car (same as mine less a few HP) well driven and with lots of corner speed. Turned out to be a young lady from California named A--- (name left out for her privacy). My family had seen her in street clothes and all pronounced her as gorgeous. I had no idea or I would have sucked in my stomach when passing her 😊. I talked with her the next day and complimented her, but her “no old men” shields were up and the chat was short. Can’t say I blame her; I am sure my daughters have had similar experiences. Also, I noticed she kept her fire suit on all the time, which since my family had described her as a 20-something blonde surfer goddess, she attracted a little less attention that way.

Now that whole passage can be read as sexist and if it is, it is because of my Neanderthal upbringing--- no disrespect is meant to either her or women in general. “I love Women, my Mother was a woman, that helps” (Chris Rock quote). Most men at the track are enthused to see women join in. Until of course they get passed, and then it matters little man or woman, you just don’t like it! But the women who do race are, in my experience, there for the exact right reason, to beat you heads-up. If you imagined some sort of “you first, no you first, really,” conduct you couldn’t be more wrong.

Sprint 2. Because I lagged in Sprint 1 and lost focus, I asked for new tires again for Sprint 2. Usually we use one set all thru Qualifying, Sprint 1, and Sprint 2 before calling them done. I felt I needed the performance cushion sticker tires provide. I started in 8<sup>th</sup> and battled forward. I did much better gaining positions and getting through the lappers and finished 4<sup>th</sup> overall. That is a personal best in PCA Club racing for me, but it is the quickest factory stock race car class, so some improvement was expected. The new tires absolutely made a huge difference as, while everyone started aggressively, I was two seconds a lap faster than all but the top two runners by half way through. I caught up with third place just as the checkers flew. Still first in class!!! And my coach felt it was the best race he had ever seen me run.

Enduro Day had to wait until 12:00 to race. COTA Enduros run 1 hour, which means you still have the 5-minute mandatory stop, but NO REFUELING allowed. Mid-morning, someone managed to knock a hole in a guardrail, so that delayed us another hour to 1:00. Waiting is my least favorite part 😞.

I missed morning warmup. My race mechanic, Adam, tells me he did front pads overnight and depended on me doing the warmup to bed the front pads. I slept in...too late for that now. Here I am starting 4<sup>th</sup> and have fresh front brakes? Not optimal. I drug them all around formation lap, but at go-time they still were not quite there.

I went from 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> on first lap before the brakes were 100 per cent, so I held station for a little while after that. For the next several laps, I did what I needed to clear my rear bumper. Also, many will remember when I tried to stay clean and finish, initially I had top three overalls for those years. The year I got competitive, I was 4<sup>th</sup> nationally and on probation for rough driving, so I can learn, apparently. I challenged very few on the opening lap.

As the race progressed, many of the 2:17/2:18 guys lost a little pace due to tires going off. I had nursed my tires early on, anticipating such and was able to stay 2:17/ 2:18 and was gaining about 2 seconds per lap toward the end. One by one, I came back up to 5<sup>th</sup>. After pit stops and late in the race, I made a pass for 4<sup>th</sup> under-braking in T1. I missed the line on exit and the guy came back on the outside in T2. I could have tracked out and put him in the marbles, but I prefer to leave racing room—and importantly, he was not in my run class. I was resolved to pass him again on the back straight under braking when a red flag came out just as I got around and had to give back the position. There were only 4 minutes left and someone was upside down in the next-to-last turn. After the red flag, which means stop safely on the edge of the track, they brought us back to the pits and threw the checker, so I missed my top four by about one long straight and a hard-braking zone, which is where the new car excels. I am learning this car is less about power and more about braking. I was turning 163 mph at the braking point on the back straight and braking at the 150 marker and still leaving room for more. I used hard braking zones extensively for my passes as the weekend progressed.

We were done at 2 PM and scattered to catch various flights out that night. My sister-in-law, Donna, and family had a great time. They liked it so much in the moment they said they might make another event.

So, it was a successful weekend with three wins in class, two top-10 overall and one top-5 overall. A perfect antidote to my mid-pack 4<sup>th</sup> places at Sebring. A pro slumming at Sebring got so many first-place and bonus points at that race, he is still in first overall after one race for him and two races for me. But he has never run the full season, at least not in prior years.

I am now, by some unilateral decision of PCA, in a subseries of PCA Club Racing called Clubsport. It was created as an outlet for the GT4 Clubsports (Cup Cayman if you like). Participation with those cars has shrunk so they moved the top two big Cup cars C6 and C7 to that series to give them some numbers. The first two years after its inception, it cost more to opt in that series; this year they unilaterally moved my class. Best I can tell, the net effect is I get real trophies and better tire contingency from Pirelli. As a Clubsport racer, I get two tires for each first place (Sprint only) regardless of how many cars started. So, I netted four tires (rears are \$600 each) and got two really nice trophies to add to the Toy Barn décor. And of course, Pirelli hats which, while special at the time, don't really represent how much time, money, and effort went into it after you leave the podium.

This year at COTA we had racing last year's IMSA Cup Challenge Platinum Masters (over 45 y/o) Alan Metni running non-stock, so he was in GTA-3. He had an FTD of 2:12 to my FTD 2:17. Since COTA is about 40 percent longer than Road Atlanta, when IMSA time comes, I hope to only be off a few seconds and then chasing always does wonders for me. This guy usually runs top 5 overall, so it is a tall order just to be on track, but I want to try.

Next stop, Road Atlanta in a few weeks.

Respectfully submitted,

Joe Still