

THE FORGOTTEN GRAN SPORTS

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Take yourself back to the beginning of the year 1973 for a moment. For those that were around, it was the beginning of the end for the American Musclecars. America's economy was cooking in high gear, unemployment was at 4.9% and a barrel of crude oil was going for a paltry \$3 per barrel with gasoline prices at 25 cents per gallon at the pump!

All that was about to change in America. A carefree lifestyle was coming to a close real fast. It was time for us to grow up and face the realities of world economy in which we had little choice.

What was happening on the home front in 1973? Our brave fighting men were returning home from the end of the Vietnam War, Elvis was playing in "Hawaii", the "Godfather" took the Academy Award and who can remember Pong? For those who can't, Pong was the very first electronic video game, way before computers, beepers, cell phones and even Al Gore's claim of creating the Internet. Most of all, who can forget Richard Nixon taking the heat for Watergate which led to his resignation.

All of this is interesting history, but what does it have to do with Buicks?

Well, with the start of the Yom Kippur War, the United States and other western allies supported Israel. As a result of this support, several oil-producing Arab nations imposed oil embargos on the supporting countries. In a flash, the price of a barrel of crude oil jumped from \$3 per barrel to over \$12 a barrel. Now for those who were not around back then who asked, what was the big deal as today a barrel is above \$70? Well think back to the fact that in 1973, the average household income was just over \$10,000 and most vehicles in America got well under 15 mpg. Just fill it up you say? Well in 1973 it would not be that easy. First we'd have to check the last number of our licence plate - is it odd or even? If we have the correct number, we can go to the gas station. Now we would have to wait in line for at least one hour before getting to the pumps. OK, now we are here. What do you mean we can only put in 10 gallons? My car takes at least 15 gallons! That means we would not be able to fill up the tank and would have to start the whole process over the day after tomorrow when it would be our turn again! Oh, and don't forget the prices which jumped from a quarter to well over a dollar a gallon just about overnight! The American Automobile Association recorded that 20% of the country's gas stations had no gas!

One of the biggest long term effects was the massive change in cars due to the oil embargo. In Detroit the production of giant, gas guzzling cars was halted. Cars with big engines and large heavy bodies were no longer made in order to boost the economy. Detroit was forced to increase fuel efficiency of all its cars thus creating those ugly cheap quality econo boxes. The lack of quality fuel efficient cars opened the door for the Japanese import car market and in

flooded the Toyotas and other foreign makes. The American Auto industry was forced to meet the Federal standards and reformulate its cars in order to compete.

For Buick there was a total redesign of the Gran Sport and most of its line. One new addition was the 5 mph crash front bumpers that were mandated by Federal safety guidelines. With the end of the Skylark based GS, the GS banner was carried on by a GS option on the 112 inch wheelbase Buick Century coupe. This was distinguished by discreet decals, blacked out headlamp surrounds and grille, fat wheels and tyres, and the only manual transmission option in the Buick lineup for 1973. Gran Sport engine options started as low as a two-barrel 350 cid V8 producing a mere 150 bhp (net), but started to get interesting with the 225 bhp (net) 455 cid V8 option which was available on any Century coupe. Exclusive to the Gran Sport however, was the 270 bhp (net) Stage 1 455, which had camshaft, carburetion and air cleaner changes and came standard with a Positraction limited slip rear end. Few cars for 1973 were faster than a Stage 1 455 Buick GS, which shows how far performance had fallen by this time. Only 728 Stage 1 GSs were sold in 1973, it was Buick's last gasp.



Comparing today's Muscleder demand, the 1973 Gran Sport is on the bottom of the list. Prices are still within the grasp of most people, unlike the high price of what a 1970 Stage 1 commands. In time though, the 1973 GS will get the last laugh. Not many are around as most were junked back in the fuel crisis days and these cars are starting to climb in demand.

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