



# Car of the Month



## How I Came to Own Two 1969 GTO Judge Convertibles

By Scott Hudler



I am the proud owner of 2 of the 108 GTO Judge Convertibles built in 1969. I found both cars during an almost 4-year search to replace the “one that got away” back in the mid-1980’s.

The first car is Palladium Silver with a black top and black interior that was built with many of the options I was looking for: 4-speed, Rally Gauges, Safe-T-Track, Hood Tach, and Console. It was Concours restored in the late 1980’s/early 1990’s and is still looking very nice. This car has been a work in progress since I got it with a combination of small improvements and larger projects over time to keep it a Concours level car.

The second car is Carousel Red with a white top and black interior and was built with even more of the options I was looking for: 4-speed, Rally Gauges, Safe-T-Track, Hood Tach, Console, Hide-A-Ways, Power Steering and Power Disc Brakes. This is a project car that was removed from the junkyard in the late 1980’s and I got it lacking many of its parts that a previous owner decided to sell instead of leaving with the car. After 14 years this car is just beginning a slow but long-awaited Concours restoration.

Everyone has a story about how they came to own their current cars. I am no different though mine had some unusual twists and turns along the way. This is my story.

### **The Day I Found the Car**

I remember the day I first saw it like it was yesterday, that summer evening during July 1986. Two to three nights a week I traveled to a friend’s garage about 50 minutes away to help with the frame-on restoration he was doing on my 1971 Firebird. Along the way there, I passed



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this country garage & used car dealership combo at the intersection of two state routes, literally in the middle of nowhere. He had mostly late model cars there for sale but there were almost always at least one or two muscle cars available also.

On this evening, as I was coming up on the intersection, I could see what looked like a 1969 Carousel Red Judge. As I got closer I noticed it had a black tarp tied around the middle of it. I wondered why that was there as I drove past. Curiosity got the best of me, so I turned around after a couple miles to go back and investigate. I lifted the tarp up and, to my great surprise, it was covering a black convertible top that was very well worn! Based on the clues I could see, the somewhat faded original paint, worn Judge stripes and decals, rear spoiler, and the Judge emblem on the glove box, this appeared to be one of the very rare Judge Convertibles!

I couldn't believe that I was standing next to a car I had admired and thought I would only ever see in magazines! I had to find out what the situation was with this car. Was it for sale and, if so, for how much?

I stopped by the car lot the next day and spoke to the owner. He told me the car wasn't for sale, yet, but it was going to be his next restoration project and he expected it would be done by the following summer. He already knew the asking price would be at least \$10K once it was done. That was a lot of money back then and I doubted I could come up with that amount, but he offered to call me once it was done, so I gave him my name and number and left.

Meanwhile my Firebird restoration was finally completed but there was a problem. The engine rebuild, which was completed just before the restoration began, apparently had not been done correctly since bearing shavings were found in the oil. It ended up needing to be rebuilt 5 more times before the issue was finally identified and resolved, and it happened after the restoration was completed which made it more challenging and more costly. Of course, I now needed a daily driver, so that was another expense. These things added up and ensured that I would never be able to come up with the money for that Judge convertible.

After all this I honestly hoped he wouldn't call me about the Judge but a year later, in July 1987, the phone rang. It was him letting me know that he didn't end up restoring the car and instead it was for sale as it was when I last saw it. The price was much less than the restored \$10K estimate but still beyond what I had available after the Firebird restoration plus the extra expenses that followed. Not willing to just give up, I asked him if I could have a few days to see what I could do to come up with the money and he agreed.

It felt like there was still a real opportunity to get this car, so I spent the next 3 days selling everything and anything I could live without to come up with the money. I sold car parts I was keeping and even sold my home and car stereo units - I wanted this car! After 3 days I was able to come up with over half of the cost of the car, so I called him and asked if he would take a 60% deposit and give me 4 weeks to come up with the rest. (I had already figured out how I could get extra hours at work to come up with the extra money I needed so I was confident I could do this in 4 weeks.) He agreed, so I met him the next day to give him the deposit. He showed me the title, gave me a receipt, and even had a surprise for me - he said "my car" was running and waiting for me to take it for a drive! I drove it up and down those two state routes for about 20 minutes. What a thrill that was and a day I would never forget. From that moment on I was hooked!



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The next 4 weeks went as planned. Long days, 7-day work weeks, but the goal was in sight and I just kept remembering how it felt to drive the car to keep my motivation going. A few days before my 4 weeks was up, I had the remaining money I needed, so I called to make the arrangements to complete the deal. That is when the problems started.

Over the next 2+ months I made every effort to meet with him to complete the deal but there was always something that would come up. He would cancel appointments or just wouldn't be there when I showed up at the agreed time. It was frustrating and as time went on I began getting a very bad feeling about what was happening. Early in September the situation finally became clear – the car owner closed the garage, I found out that he sold the car to someone else and he filed for bankruptcy. This was the worst-case scenario – I somehow lost the car, and, because of the bankruptcy, I lost my deposit also. I was crushed and couldn't believe everything that had happened. In the end the disappointment of losing the car ended up pushing me out of the hobby.

For the next 13 years life went on and I filled my car hobby void with other interests. After a while I didn't miss it at all. I changed jobs and moved a few times dragging the Firebird around with me. I couldn't get myself to sell it though since my Aunt had bought it new and I was the second owner. I never drove it, other than when we moved, and I am not proud to admit that I basically used it as a shelf (for non-heavy things) since it took up a lot of space in the garage. I did keep a cover on it as I was mindful of the restoration effort I had done to it years ago. I didn't know what I would do with the car in the future, but I was certain that I would never return to the hobby.

## **eBay Brought Me Back to the Hobby**

Then one day everything changed. I saw a banner ad for eBay Motors. I had been using the eBay auction site for years and was amazed what you could find on there. For some reason it had never occurred to me that there may be classic cars and/or parts available on there also. I decided to do a quick search for something I could never locate for the Firebird 15 years earlier, a functional Formula air cleaner assembly. To my surprise, there were many to choose from! I spent several hours searching through eBay that evening looking at all sorts of cars and parts. I was amazed at what was available and it didn't take long for that car interest I had been keeping inside to come back in a major way. Yes, unexpectedly, eBay brought me back to the hobby and I was quickly ready to go all in.

I now had many questions and a decision to make. Do I continue where I left off on the Firebird? Do I buy a 1969 Judge? If so, should I look for a convertible? How likely would it be to find one in 2000? And perhaps the most important question, how much would a convertible cost now? There weren't clear answers to all my questions but there was certainly enough information to be found on the Internet to give me the direction I was looking for.

## **The Search Begins in Earnest**

After finding some answers to my questions, and giving it a LOT of thought, I realized that searching for a 1969 Judge convertible was the only real option for me. If I didn't do that, I would always regret not trying, so I knew I had to look for one. Once that decision was made I felt I needed a plan, so I came up with the following:

First, try to find my old car.



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Second, try to find a similar car that was Carousel Red with a 4-speed.

Third, try to find a 4-speed car in any color.

Fourth, if I couldn't find a convertible after a reasonable amount of time, I would then look for a car from my "Plan B" list.

What was my "Plan B" list? It was basically a list of cars that I found during my convertible search that I would have been interested in owning. This list was a work in progress and changed often. The key to this list was that, unlike the Judge convertible I was seeking, these cars were more obtainable.

So, with a plan in place, the search finally began. I managed to locate the VIN from my original car. I assumed the car could still be "in the area", or possibly in an adjacent state, so I initially focused the search there. I quickly found out that it wasn't possible to do a nationwide VIN search but I was able to get a search done in PA and the adjacent states. Unfortunately, it wasn't found in any of them.

I eventually was able to locate the guy that got the car instead of me back in 1987. Turns out he was a car flipper. He told me that after he restored it, he sold it to a collector in AZ (who later moved to CA), but after a few years he lost contact with him. This helped explain why I couldn't locate the car locally since it was likely on the West Coast. Based on this information I decided that it was time to stop trying to locate my original car and move on to





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the next step of my plan to try and find a similar car.

When I started this adventure, I thought that I would search for a year, maybe two at the most, and then go with a "Plan B" car. The problem with that plan was that I underestimated my determination to find a Judge convertible and my willingness to do whatever it took or spend as much time as needed to find one. As a result, this search went on for almost 4 years. I made phone calls on an almost daily basis. I found many current and past owners of these cars and estimate that I located between 40 and 50 convertibles during this time. I only stopped looking when I finally found my silver car.

## **Finally...A Car is Found!**

One day I am visiting a friend who had been trying to help me find a car almost from the very beginning of my search. I gave him the latest search update and then he said something about it being too bad that the silver convertible didn't work out for me because he thought for sure the guy was ready to sell it.

My head was spinning, what silver convertible was he talking about?? I didn't remember him mentioning anything about that car. I would have for sure if he had.

After some discussion we figured out that he \*thought\* he had told me about this car, but actually he never did, and luckily it was owned by someone he knew. An introductory email to both of us and a phone conversation later that evening confirmed the owner still had





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the car and, yes, it \*might\* be for sale. He wanted to know why I was looking for a car, so I told him my story, and then I got to hear a lot about his restoration journey with this car.

He wasn't certain yet what he was going to do but he was considering selling it to fund other restoration projects. He wanted time to think about it and he would get back to me.

I waited patiently, which was difficult, but after a couple of weeks I got an email asking me to call him. When I called, he told me that he had decided to sell it but wanted to make sure it went to someone that would really appreciate the car. He had talked to our mutual friend to make sure my "story" checked out. Confident that he found the right buyer, and with his decision made to sell it, he offered it to me that night, and I agreed. I couldn't believe it, after all this time, I was finally going to own a Judge Convertible!

## **It is Home...Now What?**

The next few months went by quickly. We finalized the deal, money was sent, a signed title was received, and arrangements for pickup and delivery through a commercial carrier were made. The car arrived just before Christmas in 2003. Without a doubt it was the best present I ever got myself!

Now I had all Winter to stare at it but with snow in Ohio there wasn't much else you could do. I sat in it and started it up from time to time. For many months it felt like I was storing someone's car for them. It didn't seem real.

Friends stopped by to check it out. Everyone was impressed with how nice it was. One of my best friends, who owns a Carousel Red Judge convertible, looked it over and said to me "this is a Concours level car, you should show it". I had to admit it was much nicer than I realized now that I had time to pour over it. Maybe he was right. I had watched the Concours judging process at the GTOAA's and it looked daunting but after thinking it over awhile it seemed like something I wanted to do.



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## Let the Improvements Begin!

The challenge was that the restoration on this car had started almost 20 years before I got it and finished almost 15 years before I got it. In Concours years that was a long time. More details about these cars have been learned since the original restoration was completed so



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there would be a lot of things, both small and large, that would need to be done to get the car closer to the current judging standards.

The previous owner told me that he took the car to at least one or two GTOAA meets and 8 different POCI events. He said the car was a silver Concours winner with the GTOAA and a Gold Concours winner with POCI. Although he hadn't shown it in at least 5 years before I bought it I felt better knowing it had some good results in Concours already.

I made plans to bring it to the GTOAA convention in Louisville, KY in 2006. To prepare, my friend and I went over it and documented some of the easier changes that needed to be made. My brother and I spent a lot of time replacing items that were on the list. I felt pretty good about the car when I left for Louisville and then I got there and saw the other cars. I became worried. The car ended up getting a high bronze award and now I had a (long) list of things to focus on improving for the next show.

A review of my Louisville judging list showed there were big things like body and paint and (many) smaller things like tires, hoses, clamps, worn items, repro items that were not correct, and many other detail items throughout the car that needed addressed. I made the decision that body and paint would have to wait for a future restoration but I could focus on the other things in the meantime.

Over the next few years, with the help of friends and my brother, I slowly improved the



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car. At the GTOAA Nationals in Columbus in 2007, the car earned a Silver Concours award. In 2009, at the GTOAA-POCI Co-Vention in Dayton, the car took home a Gold Concours award. Most recently, I had the car at the 2014 GTOAA Nationals in the Pittsburgh area. It received a Silver Concours award there and only missed Gold by about 20 points. I knew the judging standards had changed quite a bit from the last time I showed the car in 2009 so I was pleased with how well it did plus I now have a new list of items to work on.

## What's Next?

A year after getting the Silver car, one of the Carousel Red convertibles I found early on, that wasn't for sale at the time, later was offered to me so I ended up buying that one also. It is a rough project car but I am looking forward to the challenge of fully restoring it over the next several years. I consider the experience that I am gaining doing Concours level improvements on the Silver car will benefit me while restoring the Carousel Red car.

Once the restoration is complete, I will likely stop showing the Silver car and just drive it. The Carousel Red car can then take over as the show car. In the meantime, I will continue showing the Silver car and working to improve it until the other car is done.

While I was writing this, I found out that the original car that started it all for me, the "one that got away", was being offered in the 2019 Mecum Kissimmee auction. I poured through the photos they had of it online and remembered back to the day in the summer of 1987 that I drove it. This was the car that made me want a Judge Convertible. Although I couldn't afford to buy it there was a satisfaction in finally finding it and the realization that, through all the twists and turns, things ended up working out just fine in the end.

