

Old Cars

Vol. 54, No. 1 | January 1, 2025 | www.oldcarsweekly.com

Showy Buick

1970 GS 455
factory show car



Big, Bad & Blue

Finally, a 1969 AMC AMX

Hurst/Olds by Chance

*1975 4-4-2 owner lands
matching H/O*

Rare Runabout

1978 Pinto is a unique survivor



Showy Buick



1970 GS 455 is a lethal blast from the past — and living in an unlikely spot!

STORY BY ANGELO VAN BOGART; PHOTOS BY AL ROGERS

Currently tucked among the varied treasures inside the National Auto and Truck Museum in Auburn, Ind., is a 1970 Buick GS 455 that's a little more grand than others of its ilk. Not that there isn't anything already grand about the 1970 Buick Gran Sport, a brutish performance car that bucked Buick's rep for building conservative "doctors cars." Available with a 315-hp, four-barrel 350-cid V-8 as the GS 350 or either the 350-hp or Stage 1 360-hp 455-cid V-8 as the GS 455, the midsize 1970 Gran Sports showed Buick's wild side amidst a showroom of earth-tone Electra 225 and LeSabre behemoths. By installing the 350- and 455-cid V-8s from these full-size Buicks into the midsize Skylark, Buick created a tire roaster that could make an Electra 225 or LeSabre blush.

The Buick GS 455 inside NATMUS isn't just out of character for a Buick, but also for a Gran Sport. It's hard not to notice its unique Fireglow Red Pearl exterior paint, and then its likewise one-of-a-kind pearl white interior. Indeed, this Buick GS 455 Stage 1 was specially built for go *and* show.

Buick swings from mild to wild

When Buick brought back the Special name in 1961, it

was on a new compact with a small, cast-aluminum-block V-8 good for 155 hp. By 1964 — the year General Motors launched a new midsize A-body line for its Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile and Buick divisions — the Special successfully graduated to the new and bigger body. It was the start of even bigger things to come.

During the middle of the Special's comeback year, Buick added a plusher Skylark Sport Coupe to the compact car line to complement the base Special and better-trimmed Skylark Deluxe. All three were carried over to GM's new A-body for 1964.

Despite the midsize A-body being a corporate GM platform, each division's car cleverly resembled its full-size counterpart more so than its corresponding midsize competitor from the other GM divisions. For the 1964 Skylark and Special, that meant a handsomely square profile with a formal roof and body edges tailored to gentle curves, much like the full-size LeSabre and Wildcat, the latter being Buick's version of a "Super Sport" LeSabre.

With the new A-body redesign of 1964, GM's bargain and mid-priced brands brought out performance versions. At

Chevrolet, that meant the Malibu SS while over at Pontiac, the GTO made its famous debut. Seeing the value of the GTO hype, and already having a performance reputation of its own, Oldsmobile followed suit mid 1964 with the 44-2. With performance heating up across the industry and adding more and more sales potential with each increase in horsepower, even Buick – GM’s brand for those seeking luxury and quality without the ostentatiousness of a Cadillac – joined the melee with performance models.

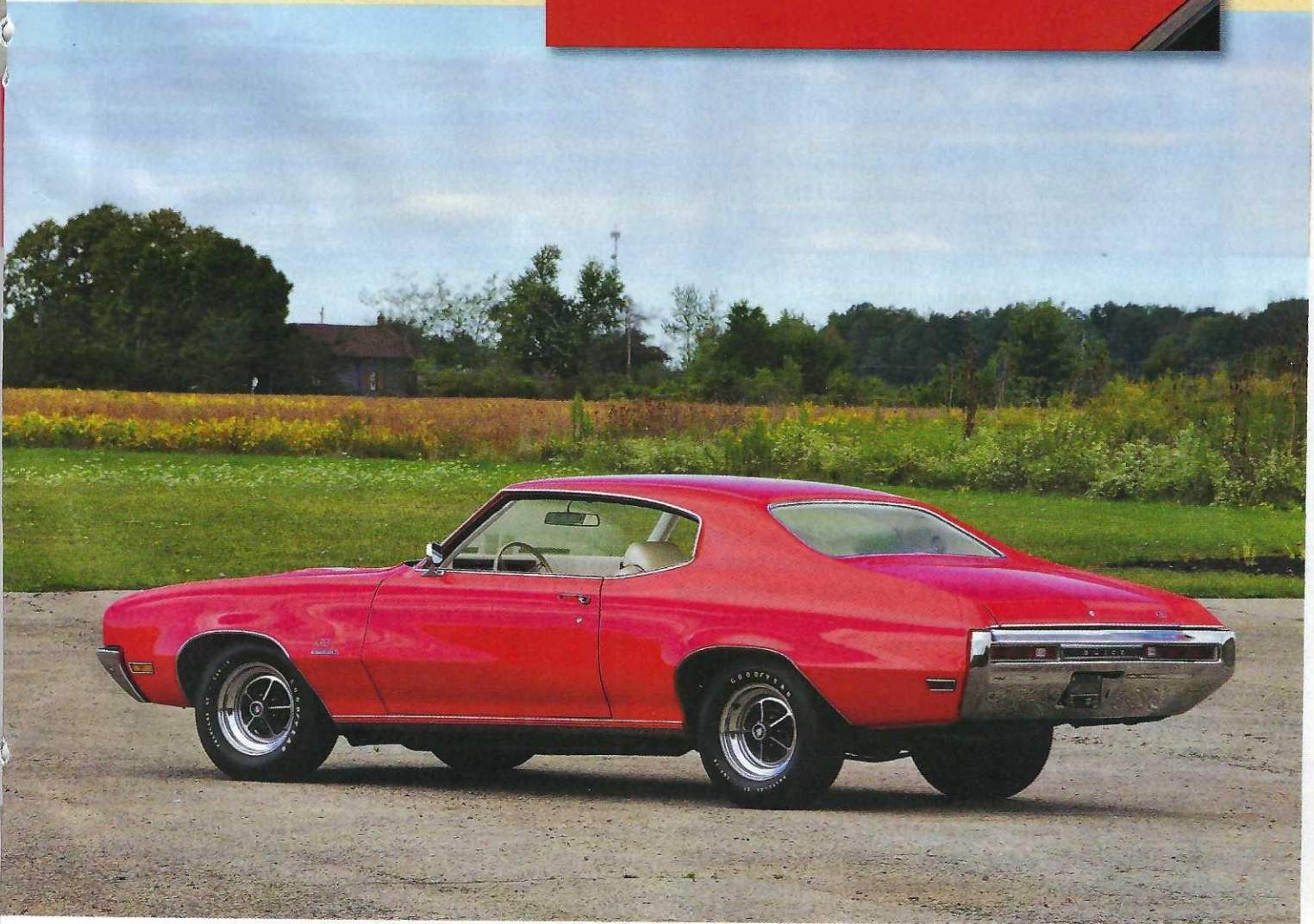
In mid 1965, the Gran Sport option became available on the Riviera, Skylark and Wildcat. The racing heart of the Skylark GS package was a 325-hp “Wildcat” 401-cid V-8 with a 10.25:1 compression ratio and a single four-barrel Carter AFB carburetor. The athletic engine exhaled through dual exhaust, and to give the package added street cred, GS badges were mounted inside and out.

The GS continued on the updated 1966 A-body with more muscular looks that included

blacked-out exterior components and the addition of hood scoops. Obviously seeing more potential with the Gran Sport, Buick split the Gran Sport into two lines for 1967 with the addition of the new GS 340 powered by an engine of that displacement. 1967 also marked the arrival of an all-new, truly 400-cid V-8 in the GS 400 that no longer had to skirt GM’s displacement limit. This new 400-cid V-8 had 340 hp, which compared favorably to the standard 335-hp, 400-cid V-8 in that year’s GTO.

The GS 400 maintained the “fast with class” image of the previous Gran Sports by using much of the bright Skylark

Buick’s show division modified this 1970 Buick GS 455 Stage 1 for show duty with a unique orange paint color and pearl white interior.





The engine compartment of the show car is standard GS 455 Stage 1 with the functional hood scoops. This powerful engine remains tops in the muscle car hierarchy with an honest 360 hp and 510 lb.-ft. of torque at 2,800 rpm.

trim, but the new GS 340 had an increasingly more typical muscle car image with red body stripes on the sides and atop the hood scoops and a red-accented rear deck molding.

By this time, a few savvy racers had noticed the power of the Buick Gran Sport. Among them was Lennie "Pop" Kennedy, who had been racing Buicks since the mid 1950s. He stayed with Buick on the strip through the 1960s and beyond, driving cars sponsored by Reynolds Buick of West Covina, Calif., and gaining the attention of Buick brass as he and fellow racer Jim Bell worked to improve and develop Buick engine components for better quarter-mile times. The pair eventually formed Kenne-Bell to sell those parts.

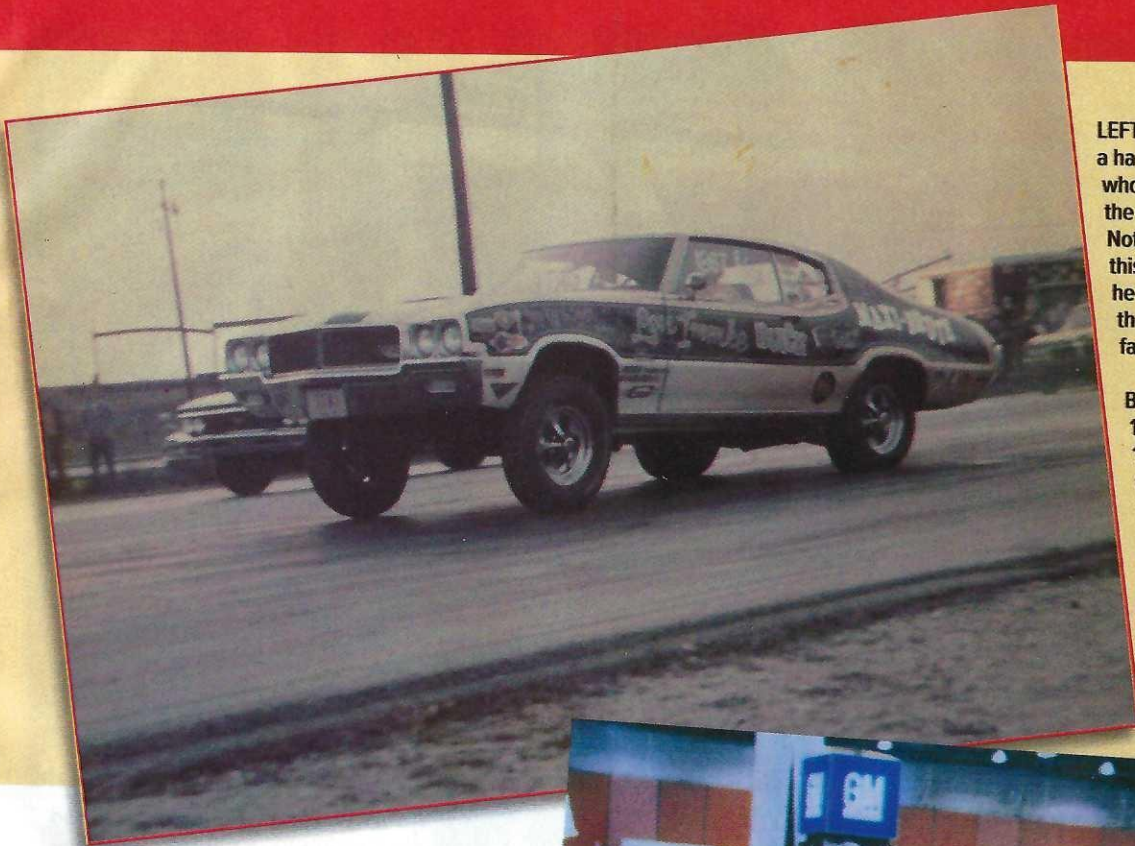
When the Gran Sport was born, Pop was there, racing the first 1965 GS 400 delivered to the West Coast, likely obtaining it so early because of his past with Buick and success racing their cars. Once Buick's new 340-hp 400-cid V-8 came out in 1967, Pop raced that engine, too.

When GM restyled the A-body into more of a fastback for 1968, the Gran Sport returned to the exploding muscle car wars. Again, a new engine became available in a Gran Sport when the 260-hp 340 was replaced with a new Buick four-barrel 350-cid V-8 of 280 hp, but the GS 400 was back with



no changes to the one-year-old engine. Again, Pop Kennedy raced the new Buick GS 400, running times as fast as 117 mph in 11.40 seconds. Pop's GS ran some of his experimental hop-up parts for the Buick 400-cid V-8 (notably, better heads, a more efficient intake manifold and a different carburetor). Using Pop's input and experience, a factory-installed Stage 1 package was offered for the engine of the GS 400 in 1969, as was a more aggressive Stage 2 package that was available over the counter at Buick dealers.

GM divisions moderately updated their A-bodies for 1970, and again Buick paired the new-looking car with a new engine. After the 455-cid V-8-powered Hurst/Olds cars of 1968 and 1969, GM's 400-cubic-inch limit for its divisions' intermediates was in the rearview mirror. Now GM divisions were running their largest engines in their midsize muscle



LEFT: Len Immke was one of a handful of Buick dealers who sponsored drivers and the Gran Sports they raced. Not only did Immke sponsor this 1970 GS 455 race car, he was the original owner of the featured GS 455 Stage 1 factory show car.

BELOW: The featured 1970 Buick GS 455 Stage 1 as pictured at the 1970 Chicago Auto Show. Note the brilliant white pearl interior that appears blinding under the lights; Buick may also have used interior lighting to help highlight the unique interior.

cars. At Buick, that meant using the new 455-cid V-8 in the Gran Sport. The car was logically dubbed the GS 455, while the 315-hp GS 350 continued to be offered alongside it.

Without question, 1970 marked the peak of the muscle car era with bright paint options, wild factory graphic and decal packages, top performance engines and catchy acronyms for names, and Buick ran with the best when it introduced its new GSX. Essentially a slightly dechromed GS 455 with front and rear spoilers, select painted trim and a decal package, the GSX was a decidedly youthful and in-your-face Buick that took the GS 455 to the extreme. Available in Saturn Yellow or Apollo White, it could be had with or without the Stage 1 option of the GS 455 upon which it was based.

The new GS 455 and GSX for 1970 offered 350 hp and another 10 hp with the Stage 1 package (a Stage 2 package was again available over the counter). Those numbers may not appear to be competitive against a 425-hp 426 Hemi or a 450-hp LS6 Chevelle SS 454, but with 510 lb.-ft. of torque, the Buick GS 455 Stage 1 could match — and even beat — a Hemi GTX or a SS 454. On lists of the fastest muscle cars of all time, Stage 1-equipped 1970 Buick GS 455 cars always rank at or very near the top.

The GS 455 and GS 350 lasted through the 1970-1972 styling cycle and even slightly beyond when GM's A-body was completely redesigned for 1973, but as with all muscle cars, the power was never as great as it was in the first year of the disco decade.

Pushing go and show

In early September 1969, shortly after the Buick Division



of General Motors began minting its new 1970 models, two identical white 1970 GS Stage 1 two-door hardtops were pulled off the assembly line the same day to be converted into show cars for the auto show circuit. The "top dog" Gran Sports were identically optioned and close together in production sequence (their body numbers were just two digits apart). One of these Stage 1 Gran Sports destined for show duty became a GSX show car sometimes mistakenly referred to as a prototype, and the other was converted into a specially painted and trimmed GS 455 intended to "light your fire," as advertisements generally claimed for the GS. Both made their debut perched atop circular stands at the 1970 Chicago Auto Show, held at the International Amphitheater from Feb. 21 to March 1.

Not surprisingly for show cars, the Shows, Displays and Exhibits Division of Buick had each Gran Sport well-equipped. They both featured the Stage 1 package, an automatic transmission, a console, bucket seats, 3.64 Positraction rear differential, Rallye Ride Control Package, G60-15

Even the steering wheel and gear shift handle were made white. The carpet was originally white, too, but has since been replaced. Otherwise, the interior remains original on this low-mileage former show queen.



The show car's pearl white interior would have required driving with sunglasses at all times – maybe even at night!

Goodyear Polyglas GT tires, chromed five-spoke wheels, tilt steering, power windows, power locks, full instrumentation, power steering, disc brakes, Soft Ray-tinted windshield and the Rallye steering wheel. The GSX show car received the parts unique to the model, although some of them differed from production components, while the GS 455 Stage 1 show car underwent its own changes. Its body color was changed to a one-of-a-kind, bright orange Fireglow Red Pearl color, and the pearl white-upholstered interior received a unique white shag-type carpet with non-production, orange-colored experimental front seat belts that complemented the body color. The tinted glass – even the windshield – was also removed from the car and replaced with untinted glass.

Alliance, which now holds title to the car. "It's quite striking when you see it."

A photo of the car at the 1970 Chicago Auto Show shows the interior glowing, and without the window tint, the white is pure and oddly bright without a blue tint cast upon it.

It seems Buick had a thing for metallic orange show cars, and the Fireglow Red Pearl 1970 GS 455 Stage 1 was not its first. In 1966, a Wildcat convertible painted a non-production metallic-orange color appeared on the auto show circuit with an exclusive orange front-and-rear bucket seat interior. Two years later, Buick displayed atop its stands an orange 1968 Riviera and a white 1968 Gran Sport, the latter having a one-of-a-kind white interior with a shag-type white carpet.

"The windows were not tinted, because it was felt that any tinting would not properly demonstrate the appeal of that white interior," said Alan Oldfield of the Buick Heritage

RIGHT: Buick five-spoke wheels were so handsome that the general design was used for decades on new Buicks.

MIDDLE: Part of the horizontal theme adopted by Buick for the midsize Special/Skylark/GS models was a more upright rear bumper with a strong horizontal theme between the horizontally slit taillamps and their connecting trim piece.

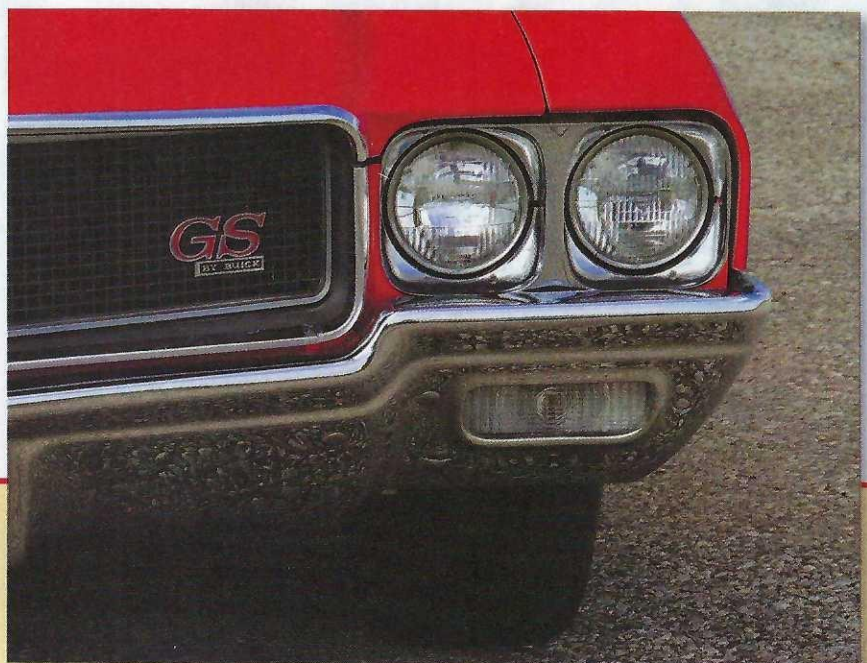


Like the preceding orange Buick show cars, the white 1970 GSX and Fireglow Red Pearl Gran Sports were supposed to disappear, but Columbus, Ohio, Buick dealer Len Immke, a rabid fan and collector of Buicks – and himself a sponsor of a 1970 GS 455 race car – stepped in.

“They were retired and supposed to be crushed,” said Oldfield. “Len Immke convinced Buick to sell the cars to him with the promise that he would not sell them, but one time, when he was out of town, the cars got sold and they went into private hands.”

The first owner of the Fireglow Red Pearl GS reportedly raced it into the 1970s, racking up about 13,000 miles on the odometer. However, he ran steep gears for racing so the actual mileage is likely lower. That owner reportedly raced the car hard enough to blow the original engine and transmission. Today the car has a replacement engine block with many of the important original components, such as the carburetor and cylinder heads. It still shows about 13,000 miles.

Racing kept the Fireglow Red Pearl GS’s body rust-free, and by the time it went into a collector’s hands, the original paint had cracked and the car’s rock-solid sheet metal deserved a re-spray. The car then swung from owner to owner with one of them replacing the white shag carpet with a production-type black rug. However, the rest of the interior remains original.



When the GS badge appeared on a Buick, you were warned that you weren't racing your grandma's Skylark – especially when the badge appeared on a GS with the Stage 1 engine.

The show car reflects the updated Skylark/Special/GS styling for 1970 that eliminated the 1969's swoopy body lines and replaced them with more muscular horizontal lines. Notice this show car's untinted windshield, without even the blue-tinted strip across the top, which makes it appear there's no windshield at all in the car.



In 2023, the car went to its forever home when it was donated by Ralph Jenkins Harding III of Odessa, Texas, to the Buick Heritage Alliance, a non-profit corporation dedicated to the preservation of all things Buick, from literature to the cars themselves. The BHA's literature collection is housed at the AACA Library & Research Center in Hershey, Pa., while it loans its cars to museums across the country. Oldfield said the Fireglow Red Pearl 1970 Buick GS Stage 1 show car will continue its show car duties at NATMUS for the foreseeable future, where it can be seen by all. **OC**

MORE INFO

Buick Heritage Alliance
www.buickheritagealliance.org

NATMUS
1000 Gordon M. Buehrig Place
Auburn, IN 46706
260-925-9100
natmus.org

