

# LAW WEEK COLORADO



## FULL THROTTLE

Tom Ragonetti And The Art Of Racing

BY JAMES CARLSON

PHOTOS BY SARAH OVERBECK

Slingshotting around turn 4 at exceedingly unreasonable speeds, I feel my brain separate from my body.

"I like third here," the driver of the Porsche says, his voice even and cool. "And ... pitch the car in." As we bend further into the crescent, air rushes into my lungs, and I involuntarily utter what sounds like a death rattle.

"Oooo! Wooo!"

So much for composure.

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# Full Throttle: Tom Ragonetti And The Art Of Racing

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I'm riding shotgun in the Porsche 911 Turbo of Tom Ragonetti — nationally recognized land-use attorney, race car driver and all-around cool customer. We're at High Plains Raceway, a technical two-mile track with undulating terrain. If we were in his Lotus or one of the nine other actual race cars back at his shop, we'd be taking corners "like cannonballs in drainpipes."

But they're all single-seaters. Instead, he's giving me a narrated demonstration in his high-performance Porsche 911 C4 Widebody, one of only 232 made. It's his daily driver but what out here on the track he calls a "heavy car."

You can forgive the frustration of a man who's spent 40 years saddled inside small rockets. The named partner at Otten Johnson Robinson Neff + Ragonetti knows the sport inside and out. He can talk of late-apex turns and the "red mist over your eyes." And he'll tell you how drivers measure the extremity of racing in tenths.

Back on the track, we straighten out of the turn, and the engine crescendos into fourth gear. Another 10 or so cars are out here today, most of them souped-up factory versions. "We've got ourselves a racing Porsche behind us," Ragonetti says, gauging the car in his rearview mirror. "She doesn't want to go around, so we're going to track back over here." He slides to the inside of the road as we enter a section called To Hell on a Bobsled.

The track dips downhill. He grips the shifter and thrusts it forward. "We'll take this in third." Right curve, then left. I grip the door's handhold like a life preserver. "On the brakes ... into second." Abruptly, he rolls the wheel hard to the right into turn 10. And for the second time in 20 seconds I inhale a string of vowels. "Ooo-eeee!"

Later, as we're pulling off the track, and I'm flush with adrenaline, I ask him how hard he was going. "That?" he says. "That was six-tenths."

### A lifelong love

Racecars are like art and poetry, he told me an hour earlier while standing in his garage. "They don't exist for any purpose other than your pleasure."

Ragonetti, 63, is wearing a green long-sleeved polo, a fleece vest and jeans. His hair is swept over, and he carries a wry smile. The garage out near the Denver airport is a veritable man cave — a



TOM RAGONETTI

spare tire facility with drawers of tools and a wall covered with art of questionable taste. "It's our wall of shame."

Then there are the cars.

Decades of work rest on sets of four tires. Up on a rack is his white Essex Tiga, resembling a go-kart on 'roids.

Below that is his blue Chevron B19, a low swooping car from the future. There's the Lola, the Duetto, his Triumph Spitfire, the Datsun 240z, and the dented vintage Volvo, the racer of his girlfriend, Kristine Lay, a partner at Kutak Rock. With these cars, he's won four national division titles from the Sports Car Club of America, the largest amateur racing body in the world.

His love began decades ago in 5<sup>th</sup> grade when he checked out a school library book named "Mexican Road Race." It was part of a series about Black Tiger, a car that traveled the world racing in exotic locales. In 1960, when Ragonetti was 11, he went to the Vanderbilt Cup on Long Island. He gawked at the shiny cars festooned with decals. He saw drivers donning uniforms and helmets and gloves and boots all to battle it out in a dangerous arena. To a young boy, it was not unlike the pageantry of the medieval knights. He was hooked.



TOM RAGONETTI'S PORCHE 911 C4 WIDEBODY

Fifty-two years later, he still is. You have to be if you want to challenge for top titles around the country. To have a breath of a chance to go to SCCA championships next September, Ragonetti will have to begin building a car now.

Some drivers outsource all of the work. Ragonetti will redo the chassis and the brakes here and will send the engine

and transmission out of state for work. When they're returned, he gets the finished machine to someone else in Ohio who preps it for testing. After testing, he calibrates it further.

It's a careful choreography that for one car costs a bare minimum of \$10,000 each year.

"Clearly, I don't play golf," he said. "I



TOM RAGONETTI'S LOTUS SUPER 7



THE INTERIOR OF TOM RAGNOETTI'S DATSUN 240Z

don't belong to the country club. I race cars, and after awhile it becomes a part of the rhythm of your life."

Minutes later, he tells me that you shouldn't let racing become more than what it is. Before I can ask what he means, he points me to another car in the corner and we're off talking gear boxes and roll cages.

#### Calm, cool and calculating

The biggest myth about race car drivers is that they're hotheads. It's the opposite, he says. They're cold, calm and calculating — sporting surgeons slicing precisely through a high-speed crowd. Lose control, and you've got the red mist over your eyes.

Out on the High Plains track, Ragonetti's eyes are clear. He flings the Porsche into the front straight and guns it up to nearly 70 mph before stomping hard on the brake, dropping to around 40 and banking to the left around turn one.

"Coming into turn two," he tells me as we approach a right-hand U-curve. "Enter a bit wide, late-apex turn, wind the wheel to the inside and ... drift out."

I forget to brace myself and shift wildly to the left nearly bumping his shoulder before I catch myself.

To know a track's fastest line is to know geometry.

Say you're entering a pure 90-degree turn. (He explains this as we enter just such a turn at videogame velocity.) First you brake as late as possible. Common sense might then tell you to hit the center of the inside of the curve, the apex. Instead, you aim to hit just past the center. This is the late-apex turn Ragonetti just executed, and it allows a car to exit most racetrack turns with maximum speed. Of course, this also requires waiting till the last possible second to jump on the brakes and jerk the wheel to the side.

It's just one of many calculations Ragonetti is making every second. And to execute multiple precise maneuvers turn after turn, lap after lap, under chaotic, high-speed conditions ... well, you can't be a hothead. Move slowly in the cockpit, move fast on the track.

#### Keeping his head clear

Earlier, before we left his garage, I

walked by his helmet resting on a stand. On the back is a worn red sticker from one of those cheap label makers. In raised white letters, it reads: "TOM RAGONETTI, D.O.B. 6/11/1949, BLOOD A POS., NO DRUG ALLERGIES."

To be a successful driver, you must master a certain level of denial. There's no place in a racer's mind for the nightmares of what could go wrong. And sometimes, things go comically wrong.

One time, Ragonetti came over a hill on a course, and a wheel just rolled off his car. At another race, he came around a turn, and the steering wheel popped off in his hands. He's had the shifter knob fall off, and he's had the entire gear stick come loose. In those situations, the potential for positive outcomes narrows quickly. You just hope to find a soft spot to crash.

“

Even on a good day, racing is antithetical to the instincts of self-protection.”

Ragonetti's never been unconscious in a car; he can say that much.

Even on a good day, racing is antithetical to the instincts of self-protection. The cars are deafening. They moan in ways that would concern the most laid-back of people. They rattle forcefully, and you are jostled around so much you often wake the next morning with a body full of bruises. And then there are the smells, the burning smells that trigger every survival mechanism in your animal brain. Hot oil, hot gas, hot brakes, melting tires, wearing clutch lines — these are the “sounds and smells of violence all around you.”

#### Revving up

And gosh, on some race days, there's nothing better.

Ragonetti wakes early and walks

around the track in the quiet. Soon, though, somewhere in the distance, the first engine rips into the sky, and his heart speeds a little.

*Ba-bom ... ba-bom ... ba-bom ... ba-bom.*

He returns to his trailer and changes into his uniform of a fireproof suit, fireproof boots, even fireproof underwear. He runs through the course, through how he'll attack each turn. Then he walks to where the cars are lined up. If he's near the front because of a fast practice lap time, he'll linger ever so slightly outside the car. Other drivers look at you. For the moment, you're the man.

In the car, he sees the grid worker outside hold up five fingers, and although he's wearing earplugs and is snug inside a helmet, he knows that means five minutes to go time. When he sees three fingers, everyone in line cranks their ignition. In the crowd, the roar rumbles through their bellies.

*Ba-bom ... ba-bom ... ba-bom ... ba-bom.*

Finally, the grid worker gives a fist, then a spinning finger, and the cars roll out.

The first lap is preliminary as the drivers size each other up. Who's got muscle today? Who's got cornering capabilities? Ragonetti prefers an agile car with good brakes. As they make their first loop, drivers carve S's into the pavement, waking the tires from slumber.

Finally, around the final turn, they see the green flag.

*Ba-bom, ba-bom, ba-bom, ba-bom.*

The flag drops, unshackling the carefully contained adrenaline.

#### Keeping on track

Back on the track at High Plains, Ragonetti navigates the line.

Every course has an imaginary path that follows the perfect points at which to turn in, to apex and to track out. He guides the Porsche through Hell on a Bobsled, downshifts to second and curls around a sharp rightward corner up a hill. “Feel me loading the suspension?” The car’s tilting heavily to its left side.

A small straightaway leads into a tight series of turns called the Prairie Corkscrew. On an earlier lap, Ragonetti was tailing an orange Formula Mazda, an open-wheeled car with the driver's head exposed, when the car missed its line and zipped through the field kicking up a cloud of dust.

Ragonetti has no such problems. He darts left, then right, bouncing off gentle curbs for a “positive side step.” The muscles in my toes flex as they work to stabilize me, and I have learned now how to stifle the noises of glee.

It's theoretically simple: Follow the geometrically dictated path and you find the fastest way around the track. But any seasoned driver discovers it quickly. The art is in adhering to it in the middle of wheel-to-wheel competition, he says. “Circumstances don't always let you stay on the line.” •

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*Editor's note: A multimedia companion story is posted on lawweekonline.com. Please submit any Outside the Law ideas you have to newsroom@lawweekonline.com.*