

Peculiar Fishbowl

Meet Zippy, the one-owner, 300,000-mile 1977 AMC Pacer built for towing

Words and photography by Daniel Strohl

Imagine, if you will, a cross between a Porsche 356 and a Valiant station wagon. In your mind's eye, well, the result likely deserves euthanization, but to Buddy Turner, the result was not only his ideal automobile, but also exactly what he discovered in 1977 at the AMC dealership in Marietta, Georgia. That's when he first realized that he needed to buy a Pacer.

"The appeal was primarily in the looks of the car," Buddy told us. "At the time, I owned a 1965 Porsche 356C and a slant-six 1964 Plymouth Valiant sta-

tion wagon, and the Pacer had the best of both worlds: the unique body style and roundness of the Porsche and the six-cylinder reliability of the Valiant." So Buddy decided to replace the Valiant, his everyday vehicle, and sat down one day that May at his local AMC dealership to order a new Pacer—without ever actually test-driving one.

Starting with a basic white Pacer sedan, Buddy kept the base 232-cu.in. straight-six, then he optioned up a four-speed and a 3.08-gear Twin-Grip limited-slip rear differential. "I kept the

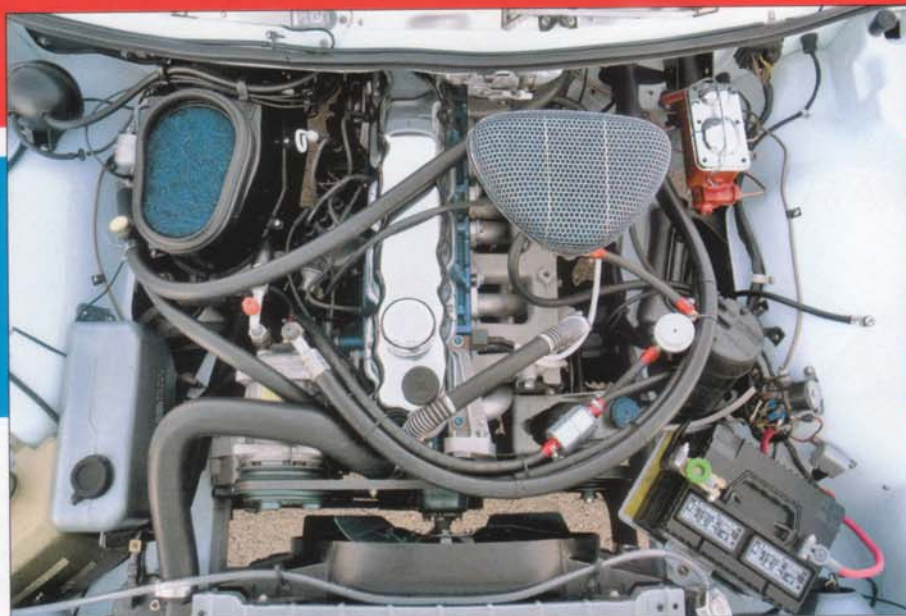
232 engine for mileage, but I wanted the Twin-Grip because I anticipated getting stuck in the mud a lot," Buddy said. We'll get to the reason why in a moment.

In an effort to squeeze the most mileage possible out of the Pacer, Buddy specified manual brakes, manual steering and no air conditioning. That's right, no air conditioning in a Pacer in Georgia. And no window tint either. However, he also specified the heavy-duty suspension and heavy-duty cooling package.



Would you call it a chick magnet? It worked for Buddy Turner. Though Buddy's Pacer sedan, nicknamed "Zippy," started out all white and with hubcaps on steel wheels, Zippy now sports two-tone blue paint and aluminum five-slot wheels from an earlier Pacer X.





Original 232-cu.in. straight-six has long since given way to a 258-cu.in. version from another Pacer. A Weber carburetor replaced the original Carter two-barrel.

"Well, my original specifications were a little peculiar," Buddy said. "But I knew I'd be using the Pacer as a tow vehicle. I road-raced motorcycles at the time—750cc Nortons—and I don't recall there being a tow package on the Pacer order sheet, but I knew the Pacer would be capable as a tow vehicle if I combined the heavy-duty suspension and cooling packages. The clear glass I ordered only because I'd be driving at night, both to and from races, and I wanted to see better at night." And, of course, the pit areas at races weren't always on pavement—thus his anticipa-

tion of getting stuck in the mud.

Only one hitch arose when the Pacer arrived at the dealership six weeks down the road: Due to a dealer miscommunication, the car had white vinyl bucket seats, not the individual reclining seats covered in the so-called "Navajo" printed cloth that Buddy ordered. "I threatened not to take the car, I was that upset," Buddy remembered. "In desperation, I walked around the dealer's lot and found a Pacer with the interior I wanted. I recall I paid \$150 in shop time to have the two interiors swapped."

Buddy said the Pacer performed



Perhaps dual remote oil filters on the 258 are overkill, but the Pacer didn't make it to 300,000 miles on luck alone.

admirably as a tow vehicle. "The only problem I ever encountered was when I'd have to stop on an uphill grade. With the trailer, it was hard to get restarted. I'd have to slip the clutch a lot, and that didn't make me feel good."

Along with ferrying Buddy and his Nortons to and from races, the Pacer also took him to and from work as a graphics engineer for Norfolk Southern. In those years, the Pacer earned its nickname, "Zippy." "He was always kind of peppy for a six-cylinder-powered car," Buddy said. "Or, at least, he thought he was fast."

Around that time, Roberta Mistretta, the woman who would eventually become Buddy's wife, entered the picture. "I tease her that she really married me for my Pacer," Buddy said. "Zippy's a great chick magnet." In fact, in a show of devotion to either Buddy or to Zippy, Roberta once visited all the area junkyards in an effort to find a spare Twin-Grip rear axle when it eventually became evident that Zippy's was on its way out. Buddy returned home that day to find a \$75 parts car, a 1976 Pacer they eventually named "Zippette," sitting in the carport.

"At that point, Roberta made the mistake of asking me how long you can really keep a car going," Buddy said. "This was at about the 15-year mark, when most cars are retired from daily service. I told her that if you're determined, then you can keep a car going forever."

So that's what Buddy decided to do. He had Zippy freshened aesthetically with new paint, carpet and upholstery, and decided then to be a little more meticulous with repairs. Another parts car—nicknamed "Zippo"—entered the picture and Buddy decided to start upgrading Zippy here and there. "I wanted to keep driving Zippy, so I intentionally decided on certain upgrades so I could maintain him myself," Buddy said.



Count the options: Zippy originally came with a four-speed manual transmission and sports steering wheel, but Buddy has since added AM/FM, accessory gauges and tach.



Buddy demanded Navajo-print cloth seats, even after the Pacer came with white vinyl. He's since reupholstered in saddle tan.



It's not called a fishbowl for nothing: All those windows allow anybody to see your stuff, so a cargo cover made sense. But all those windows also let in plastic-destroying UV rays, which makes the cargo covers an incredibly rare find today.

Zippo donated a 258-cu.in. six-cylinder—installed in a single weekend—along with air conditioning. Buddy added power steering, only because manual steering racks didn't seem to hold up as well as their power counterparts, while a Weber two-barrel carburetor replaced the troublesome stock Carter two-barrel. Originally equipped with steel wheels and hubcaps, Zippy now sports aluminum five-slots from a 1975 Pacer X.

A second, more recent, aesthetic refurbishment brought along a subtle two-tone blue paint scheme as well as a two-tone black-and-tan interior that includes a rather rare Pacer option: a cargo cover, meant to keep items behind the backseat from frying under all that glass.

Even as he upgraded and maintained Zippy, Buddy continued to press the Pacer into everyday service

through 2002, when he retired. By that time, Buddy and Roberta had started to take Zippy to AMC shows all over the country, unashamed of the 303,000-plus miles they've logged on it so far.

Nor do they show any signs of capping that mileage figure. Buddy said he's since replaced Zippy with an Eagle SX/4 as a knockabout car ("I'm retired, so there's no longer a daily driver around here," he said), but he still takes Zippy out as often as he can justify.

"And it's still a chick magnet," Buddy said. "It's amazing at car shows how many women want to come up and look at it, even over some flashy muscle car down the row. I think it really bugs the heck out of some guys that women love it so much."

Is that perhaps because it kinda, sorta looks like a puffed-up Porsche? 🐣

“Roberta made the mistake of asking me how long you can really keep a car going... I told her that if you're determined, then you can keep a car going forever.”



Hard-won original cloth seat covers deteriorated rapidly under sun exposure, so Buddy chose vinyl when reupholstering.



Black-painted door panel inserts and map pockets complement the black piping on the seats and the black carpeting.

