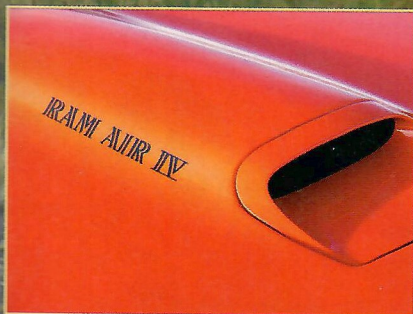
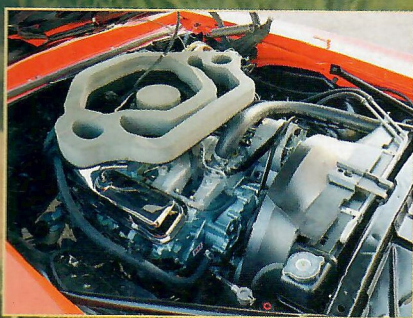


# GOODGUYS 2021 BILLET SPECIALTIES MUSCLE CAR OF THE YEAR

## RARE AIR



WORDS: TODD RYDEN • PHOTOS: DAMON LEE

**N**ot only is the 2021 Billet Specialties Muscle Car of the Year an example of a painstaking restoration and exemplary example of its era, it also holds a rich history. This 1969 Firebird, owned by muscle car collector Phil Mitchell, is rare for several reasons: its original owner, the engine selection, and its unique list of factory options.

The Firebird was special ordered by Pontiac racing guru Nunzi Romano from Alpine Motors in Brooklyn, New York. Nunzi helped Pontiac make its mark in drag racing, such as being the first to run in the 11s in legal trim in a '62 Catalina. He was also first in the 10s with a '67 Firebird, not to mention his help in R&D on a number of Pontiac-specific parts and for top aftermarket companies.

Since this Firebird was going to a hardcore Pontiac racer, it made

sense to fill the engine compartment with the top-of-the-line Ram Air IV backed by a stout M21 transmission. What's intriguing is the list of other options, starting with a deluxe bench seat, power antenna for the AM/FM stereo (with rear speaker), power steering, power front disc brakes, and the Rally Gauge package. There is also a rear window defogger, which actually makes sense since Nunzi lived in Brooklyn.

The Ram Air IV was based on a 400c.i. block conservatively rated at 335 horsepower. The engine had a steel crank, better breathing heads, 1.65:1 rocker arms, an aluminum intake, and a hood with two small scoops directing air into a unique induction system feeding into an 800cfm Holley.

With a shop full of Pontiac race parts and cars, Nunzi's Firebird was left stock and used as a daily driver, though it's fun to assume that there



**PHIL MITCHELL  
PUYALLUP, WA  
1969 FIREBIRD RAM AIR IV**

were a few stoplight challenges. In the early '80s the Pontiac was sold off and turned into a street machine with a wild, multi-color paint scheme. It's unsure what happened in the next few years, but it appears the car was parked for a long while and basically forgotten.

Eventually, the Firebird ended up in the hands of muscle car collector Steve Shauger, who knew the car's pedigree and started the restoration process. Phil is a friend of Steve's and a big fan of rare Pontiac muscle cars, even though he sells new Chevys and Fords. (Phil credits his first car, a '79 Trans Am, for his fondness for the Chief brand.) Eventually, Phil ended up with the Nunzi Firebird and had Mike Mancini finish the restoration and apply the special-ordered Carousel Red paint.

With any factory-correct restoration there are challenges, even when

starting with a lower-mile foundation. Phil knows these cars inside and out and understands the importance of sweating the details and locating correct NOS parts when needed. The original drivetrain was completely rebuilt to factory specs and the interior still features the original seat materials, door panels, and hardware, which was all detailed and reinstalled.

Unlike its Camaro cousins with their SS stripes and RS badging, Ram Air Firebirds were mostly low-key and subtle. They didn't flaunt their brute torque. Sure, there was an HO stripe package, but most followed the walk softly and carry a big stick mantra. Thankfully, Phil Mitchell took the effort to restore this important piece of muscle car history to show enthusiasts the Pontiac way with its first generation of the Firebird. 