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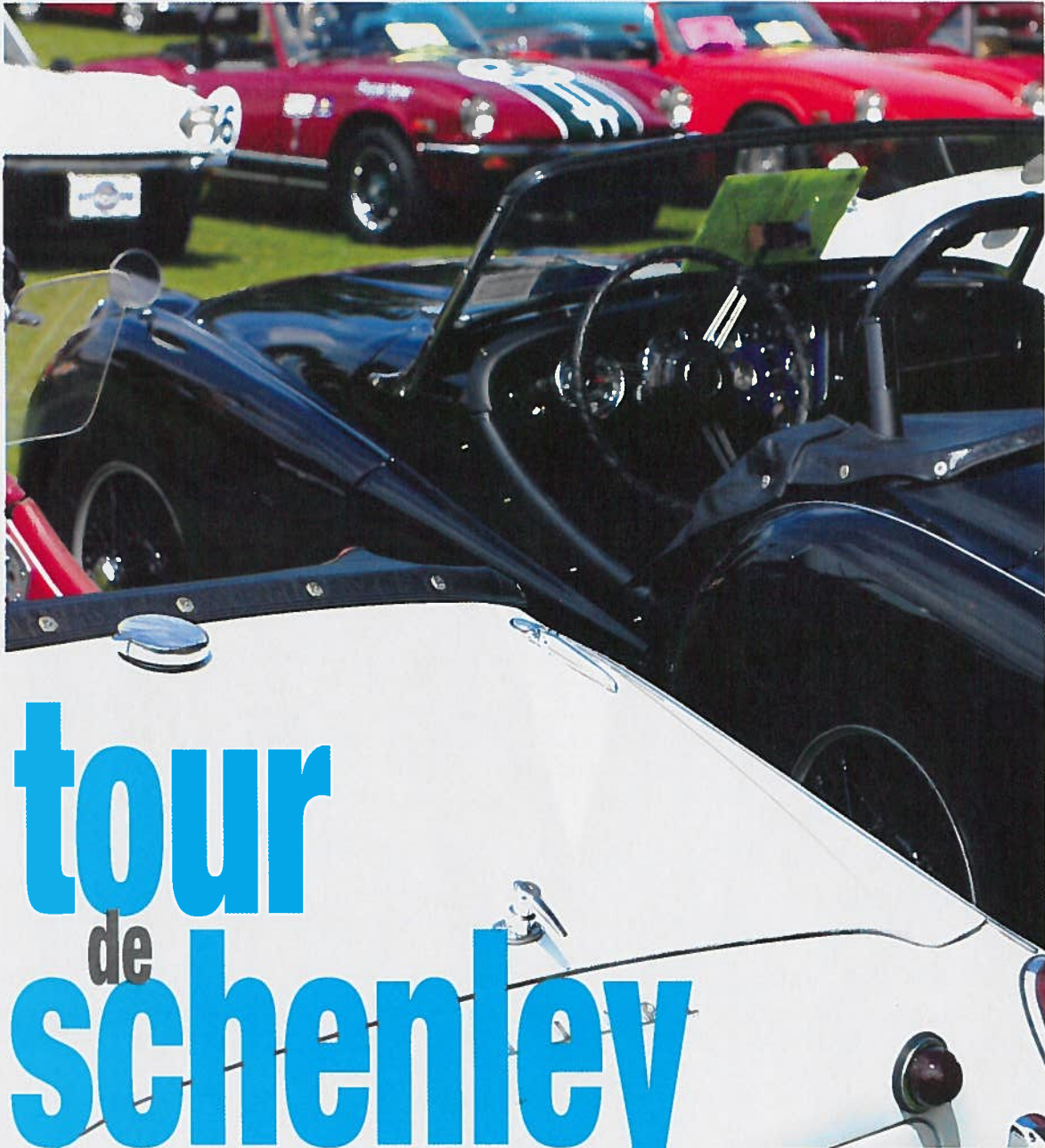


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S P O R T S



tour de schenley

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The annual **Vintage Grand Prix** charity event provides an
automotive spectacle unmatched in North America.
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BY JOE BENDEL | PHOTOS BY MATTHEW LITTLE

The serenity of Schenley Park awakens each July to the purrs of spellbinding driving machines. Super-brands sizzle through a twisting 2.3-mile race course. Jaguar. Porsche. Austin-Healey. Triumph. The list may seem endless; the optics are breathtaking. “This is a celebration of vehicles,” says longtime classic car owner Mike Price.

This is the Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix, a showcase of automotive artistry and ingenuity. For three decades, Pittsburgh has been at the epicenter of the vintage car universe. No other town in America holds such an event on city streets — an undertaking so immense that it requires upwards of 1,200 volunteers to pull it off.

Mere hours before the call of “Gentlemen, start your engines,” men and women strategically place mountains of hay bales throughout the uneven course, shielding fire hydrants, utility poles and parking meters. Miles of fence pop up along hillsides and hairpin turns to accommodate spectators. For those volunteers, no detail is too small, no sacrifice too big.

“This is Pittsburgh; it’s what people do,” says Bernie Martin, who serves in multiple capacities for the PVGP — all on a volunteer basis. “Other cities have tried this, and nobody has been successful. If you want to see another vintage race on city streets, you have to go to Monte Carlo.”

This ever-growing Pittsburgh extravaganza spans 10 days and features everything from a black-tie gala to a downtown parade. All proceeds go to the Autism Society of Pittsburgh and Allegheny Valley School, which provides homes and vital services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Donations have reached \$3.9 million on the strength of sponsors, charitable events, generous visitors and those selfless volunteers.

The 33rd iteration of the PVGP runs from July 10-19, culminating with races on the final Saturday and Sunday. In total, 2,000 cars will be on display; 150 will race.

“It’s an automotive Mecca,” says Dan DelBianco, executive director of the PVGP. “People from outside of this area make their plans around this; it is their vacation destination. And the one thing that I’d say to Pittsburghers who haven’t been here in a while: Come and

A Porsche 914 tears around a turn during the 2014 Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix.



see it again because it just keeps getting bigger and better.”

Last summer, 200,000 spectators descended upon Schenley Park’s Bob O’Connor Golf Course for a free-admission weekend of races, auto showcases and — a favorite pastime of this great city — Herculean tailgate parties. Where else can one sip an Iron (or a pinot grigio) while watching snappy cars whip past oak trees?

It does not take an aficionado to appreciate the poetry-in-motion panache of a rare 1969 Abarth Scorpione SS — powered by a strumming, 100-horsepower Fiat 124 engine — or a 1953 Nash-Healey Le Mans, shapely and refined in appearance.

“Mind-boggling,” DelBianco says.

The wow factor could kick into overdrive this summer as the PVGP celebrates “The Marques of Italy,” a salute to the dazzling vehicles representing that nation. In most years, only one marque — the French term for brand — is recognized. But why say arrivederci to the likes of the Alfa Romeo, Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati, Fiat, Siata, Stanguellini and so many others? More than 400 of those Southern European gems will be on hand; the highlight is an all-Italian race on the final day.

The steady rise in popularity of the PVGP is testament to the vision and devotion of Art McGovern and Mary Beth Gmitter, two of the event’s founders. The city granted the duo

permission to stage a race in 1983, provided all monies raised went to charity. The PVGP’s decision to approach the Autism Society and AVS was a stroke of genius; the son of sportscasting legend Myron Cope resides at AVS to this day, and Myron himself championed the cause. Then-Mayor Richard S. Caligiuri quickly got on board. Ditto for corporate sponsors, insurance companies, a sanctioning body, course designers and volunteers.

At the time, Autism Society of Pittsburgh President Dan Torisky was pragmatic in assessing the future of the event: “Even if this falls flat, a lot more people are going to learn what autism is all about,” he said then. Torisky never could have predicted its impact 33 years later.

Per Torisky, proceeds from the PVGP — nearly \$2 million — have enabled the Autism Society of Pittsburgh to incorporate a number of cutting-edge programs. One encourages autistic students to pursue college degrees in science, technology, engineering and math. Another trains legal and correctional professionals who work with autistic youth in the juvenile-justice system.

At AVS, hundreds of families have been affected by ever-improving therapeutic programs and facilities, thanks in part to the nearly \$2 million the PVGP has donated.

“This event means so much to so many,” Torisky says. “We are extremely fortunate that it happens right here in our city.” PM