

# Porsche 356 Registry







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## Contents

Upcoming Events	7
The Miscellany File	
President's Letter	Gordon Maltby .....10
Portugal 356 International Meeting	Bob Garretson .....12
Young Gentleman Racer	Diane Morrill .....14
Bonjour Santa Fe	Alex Dearborn .....18
356 Down Under	Cédric Chirat .....26
The Ultimate Tour	Graham Lister .....30
An Alternate 356 Meeting	Rich Becherer .....32
Chasing Cones	Edwin Schweitzer .....33
356 #1: Simpler Times	Sean Cridland .....34
Original Owner	Roy Lock .....38
North Meets South 2014	Louis Lee .....40
UK 356 Day	Duane P. Maracin .....42
Posters	Fred Hampton .....44
Barn Finding	Tony Singer .....46
Speedster: What's In A Name?	Adam Wright .....48
Years Ago	Don Bartlett .....50
Marketwatch	Jim Perrin .....52
Net Worth	Prescott Kelly .....54
Book Reviews	Sebastian Gaeta .....58
Tech-Nique: ZF Steering Boxes II	Paul Christensen .....62
356 Wiring: Turn Signals, Brake Lights	Greg Bryan .....66
Stroke, Spark and Springs	Bruce Smith .....68
Tail lights	.....74



Cover: John Hearn photo at the Estoril 356 International Meeting.

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# Chasing Cones

Story and photos by  
Sean Cridland



**Joe Almers** has been autocrossing his C coupe for years, improving its performance - and his own - in the process.

Autocrossers in New Mexico know the silhouette as soon as it draws near to the vast seas of cones they frequent throughout the year to challenge themselves and their machinery. The little red car has been showing up to events for two decades. As it comes up to the starting line, it sounds just a little beefier than expected, but definitely not 911ish. With its wide, sticky tires and steep angles of negative camber, it looks like it means business. Once you watch it take off and rip through the first slalom and the following set of off-sets, you know its driver has done this before. Ask anyone who attends those events and they'll tell you in an instant: that's Zia 356er Joe Almers and his 1965 356SC.

Originally from Charleston, South Carolina, Joe came to Albuquerque in 1971 to take classes in architecture at the University of New Mexico. He landed a job while still in school and replaced his interest in hot-rods - he owned a '57 Chevy 283 V-8 with three two-barrel carburetors - with a love of early Porsches when one of his colleagues introduced him to the joys of the German air-cooled marque. Soon after, Almers had his first 356, a 1959 coupe. It was

a bit of a fixer-upper, but he enjoyed the challenge and loved the car for its simplicity and ease to work on. Eventually he sold the car, graduating to a 911, but he never really got over the 356 allure.

In 1989, he bought this car, his second 356, as a daily driver. The car had originally been purchased by legendary New Mexico Porsche enthusiast Don Janssen. It was in excellent condition and became his daily driver for many years to and from the office.

Over the course of the next few decades, Almers took on his hobby with quiet determination and an enthusiast's zeal. Long before this writer met him, I was regaled by a story from a friend who had rented an apartment from him in college. He remembers: "I went over to his house to sign the lease and there was a 356 case on his kitchen table. I knew he would be a great landlord!" That basic curiosity and passion has translated into Almers owning 12 different Porsches in his lifetime, all of them beautifully restored and maintained by himself.

As an architect, he was taught to always try to fix something yourself before you hand it off to someone else





and that's always been true of his experiences with his automotive hobby. He taught himself to do bodywork, engine building, diagnostics and repair, even attending one of Bruce Anderson's seminars. He's also proficient with his industrial grade Consew sewing machine with walking pedal—which he says will sew through half-inch thick leather—to repair and restore upholstery. Almers usually does all the work on his cars - except for paint, which he reserves for the experts who have the proper tools and space to lay down restoration-quality finishes. Though, if you ask him, it's a topic he researched thoroughly enough to tell his painters exactly what he's looking for.

Being a Porsche enthusiast is much more than taking an interest in torque-values and upholstery stitching. Like many Porsche owners, Almers would occasionally attend a PCA or SCCA autocross, just to see what the buzz was about. After watching a few times, he took the leap, had his first run through the cones and the fever took hold. So begins the story of the "slippery slope" so many of us go down when we get the feeling of a well-designed car being driven in the way intended by the engineers. The first couple of times are fun just for doing it. Then, the competitive urge kicks in. With a curious mind and a capacity for solving problems, we eventually want to make the car perform more to our own tastes and experiences - and to see our times get lower.

For Almers, the first changes to the suspension were a set of Koni adjustable shocks. Then came the 19mm front sway bar. Not too long after came the Vic Skirmants camber-compensating front spindles. Then the Z-bar rear stabilizer. Though toe-in is still at stock settings, he's adjusted both the front and rear to 3.5 degrees of negative camber. These changes contributed to a firmer center of gravity, less body roll, increased traction in the corners, and sharper steering.

Getting the handling sorted, he also thought about in-car safety, control and comfort. The big spindly steering wheel was replaced with a Momo 15" wheel with a little more girth for a firmer grip and easier control. The original seats were replaced with Design 2000 racing seats and a Simpson 4-point racing harness to better hold both driver and sometime student rider in place as the car twists and

turns rapidly through the cones. Whether it's the latest Formula 1 high g-force handling or simply a "spirited" drive through the countryside in a low-tech car like the 356, driver positioning, seat support, and comfort play a big role in car control. Throwing a car around at 30 mph in the cones requires enough concentration that you don't want to think about how you're going to brace yourself or what you're going to hold onto. A good set of seats with sidebolsters and a good harness system to hold you in place can do wonders for car control, maybe even the best money spent for increased performance.

Would any of us be completely honest if we didn't acknowledge our lust for more power in any car we drive? Almers fulfilled that need for speed by storing the original SC motor and replacing it with a 912 motor he built at his own bench. The crank and case and most of the exterior bits are stock 912 parts, but he added a Skirmants cam and a NPR big-bore kit bringing total displacement to 1750cc. Exhaust gasses flow through Bursch headers and a Supertrapp racing muffler to make an undeniably flat-4 sound, but with an authoritative growl. He figures it's putting out about 112 hp. Combined with the car's light weight and up about 17 hp over stock, this car has enough power to be a strong contender through the cones... the tighter the better for this little monster.



**Opposite from top:** At Albuquerque's Motiva Speedway, portions of the course allow higher speeds for a good workout. The 912 motor Joe built is massaged for performance and clearly not meant for concours presentation. The suspension has been tweaked to work with fat, sticky tires but like everything else on the car, could be returned to stock if desired.



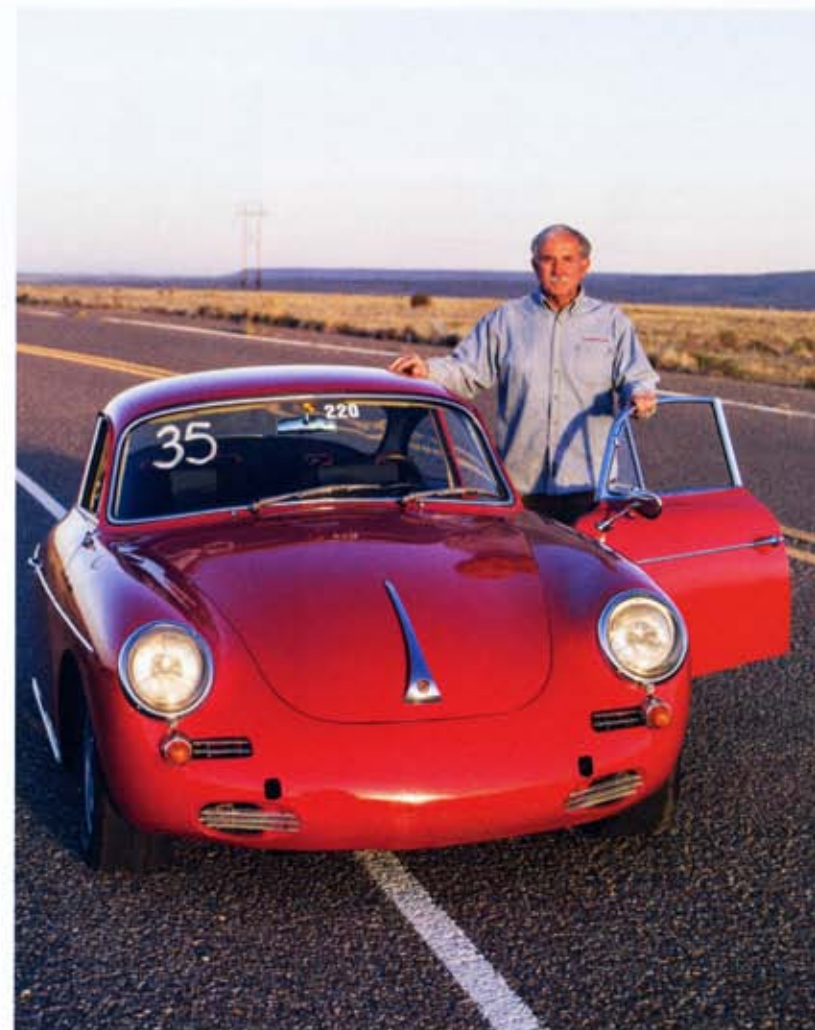
**Above:** Big bolsters on the sport seats help Joe stay in one place while he's sawing at the wheel - in this case a smaller diameter, fatter Momo for better control through the tight turns. How tight? Responding to driver input, the 356 will hike an inside front wheel even at moderate speeds.



*Continued*

If you're thinking about competitiveness, the best money spent after keeping the driver stable and comfortable are tires. To keep the car glued to the road, for autocrossing he runs the biggest tires he can fit under the still-original fenders; 205-55/15, sometimes running on 911 Fuchs and others on ATS Cookie-Cutter wheels. Over the years he's run Falken Azenis and Yokohama 008 sticky tires, but right now he favors the Nitto NT-01, which he claims provide both great grip and decent longevity. Says Almers: with a car as light as the 356, the tires usually harden way before they wear out.

Even with all this, he's quick to emphasize that he's done nothing to his car which couldn't be reversed with a



Long time Registry member Joe Almers and his 356.

day or so of work. Put the SC engine back in, de-tune the suspension and re-install the stock seats and steering wheel and it's right back to being a bone-stock, all-original car.

While some might balk at the thought of taking their investment-quality 356 through the cones, Almers demurs. After all, these cars are Porsches, designed and built for performance and fun. Plus, he says, there's a great deal to be learned from autocrossing these cars. With their great power-to-weight ratio and nimble, short wheelbase, 356s are great autocross cars. Especially once you set them up to handle well. Once you get used to driving a Porsche with the rear-end hanging out a bit, it becomes more and more fun.

Though he's never attended a professional drivers school, he's learned a great deal about driving from autocrossing. Sure, there are many books and videos on racing technique - and he's read and viewed many of them, but seat-time is the best thing to do for increasing driving skill. Going through the cones, even at a relatively low speed like 30 mph, requires mental preparation, course inspection, memorization, analysis, forethought, and strategy, even for a 30 second run. That's not even taking into consideration reflex development and personal fitness training. On the pairing of driver and car, Almers credits his experience as a regular autocrosser - as many as ten a year - for his intimate knowledge of the car's capabilities for turning and braking. Because he drives and works on it so much, he knows exactly its strengths and weaknesses.

You might think this is all a bit of overkill for just taking your car out for a drive, but with today's crowded streets and all the potential distractions that so-called "modern" drivers have, the more driving skill and mental acuity a 356 owner has, the better it is for preserving both self and car. He credits autocrossing for the skills he uses every day in driving the streets of ever-growing Albuquerque and in the varying weather conditions on the mountain roads of northern New Mexico.

In addition to his own mental acuity and driving skill, autocrossing has contributed to his technical knowledge of the cars. In any older car there are always things to maintain, replace, or upgrade. Looking at oil during changes or inspecting tires for wear patterns or changing brake-pads or tuning suspension bits or building his own engine in search of power has led to lots of reading, research, and conversations with other enthusiasts about how to fix or improve this or that aspect of the car.

Unlike more serious-minded wheel-to-wheel track competition, which requires lots of spares and sometimes results in body damage, flinging a car through the cones in an open parking lot lets its participants play at whatever level they like without the risk of fender-to-fender contact. Whether it's just the occasional run through the cones with a daily driver or show car as a social experience, or all the way up to a fully dedicated cone-killer like Almers has created, autocrossing raises a driver to a different level of awareness.

Does Almers ever see the "red haze" so many competitive drivers talk about? Not really. He is competitive, but more in the sense of looking to get the best out of himself and his car. He doesn't think about beating his fellow competitors or even about personal bests. Instead, he looks to how well he's prepared the car for the course surface, then at how well he's concentrated on the task at hand and whether or not he's responded well to the demands of any particular course.

A good result for Almers is one with which he's happy at the clarity of his thinking, his physical response to a certain set of corners, and his symbiosis with the car he's been working on for 25 years. Of course, it turns out that when all those things line up just right, he usually finds himself in the top group of most autocross events, mostly among cars (and drivers) which are 40 years younger and have considerably more power and technology driving them. And, yes, that brings a smile. 🚗