

West Coast Challenge Season Opener
Infineon Raceway
February 12-13, 2011

The 2011 West Coast Challenge Series season opener was held on the weekend of February 12-13, so it was a brief winter for the "left coast" Challenge Series racers. Series veterans TC McNett, Tom Coon, and Jeff Awender were joined by series newcomer John Teaby, who would run his first official (spec trim) Challenge Series race in his beautiful #88. All racers arrived by Friday evening, and were set up in their garage spaces and ready for battle by early evening. With a few tales of the winter work, and a quick review of the nuances of driving the twisting road course at Infineon, the racers turned in for the evening, with visions of trophies and track records dancing in their heads.

Saturday morning dawned to beautiful, crystal-clear blue skies, with temps forecasted for the high 60's. Infineon Raceway is the kind of track that you'd visit even if you were not a racer. Located in the hills overlooking the lush Northern California Wine Country and just a stone's throw away from the northern reaches of the San Francisco Bay, there's not much to disappoint in waking up in those environs. Spec racers were pleased to be joined by a tremendous showing from the FFR community and forum, including Mark Dougherty, Hank Lopez, Rick Anderson, Carl Critz, Mitchell Pinnix, Joshua Bligh, Jeremy Bligh, and of course, our own Mike Easton serving as NASA lead safety out there on track....Quite an awesome group for sure! Warm up (Combined Groups A, B and C....80+ cars) went off without a hitch for the four spec racers, and they were ready to rock.

Qualifying found TC, Jeff, John and Tom taking to the track in a field of 50 cars. Race Group B was a mixed group of Camaro-Mustang Challenge, Performance Touring, Super Touring, and German Touring Series racecars, and the speed differential spanned some 15 seconds/lap among the field. In a surprisingly awesome "rookie" run, John Teaby (yes, Series newcomer) would set the fast time in the qualifying session, with Jeff Awender (on a freshly re-built motor....more on that later) setting second fastest time, followed by TC McNett, and Tom Coon (who, by the way, made a courageously early return to the track following some health concerns)....The grid was set for Saturday's main race:

Saturday Qualifying Results

John Teaby: 1:56.264

Jeff Awender: 1:56.745

TC McNett: 1:57.258

Tom Coon: 2:04.468

Racers spent the rest of the day preparing for their 3:05 PM race.....However, in a mid-afternoon twist of fate, NASA Race Group B director would contact the spec racers and let them know of a change to the grid regarding the #88. Seems that John had made an inadvertent (unintentional) pass under a waving caution during the qualifying session, and his pole position had virtually vaporized, as he would now be starting last in the group.....John was a true professional about it, and worked things out quickly with the officials.

The four spec racers took the green flag staggered in their own group 10 car lengths behind the ST cars. When the flag dropped, it was Jeff Awender battling with TC, and within a short distance it was Jeff jumping into the lead. TC and John would have a tremendous duel throughout the race, and traffic played a huge roll for everyone. Tom Coon kept the best striking distance he'd ever posted within the group, and with a few local cautions in the mix, the race proved to be a test of who would make the least (or no) errors.

At the checkered, it was Jeff Awender for his first overall race victory, followed by TC McNett with John Teaby close on his heels, and Tom Coon rounding out the field. Spec racers were treated to the traditional awesome NASA BBQ that has become a tradition on Saturday evening, and the bench racing carried on well into the evening.

Saturday Race Results:

Jeff Awender: 1:54.009

TC McNett: 1: 53.119

John Teaby: 1:54.546

Tom Coon: 2:04.156

Sunday morning dawned, and found the racetrack, pits, and garages shrouded in a thick, "Bay Area" fog....The kind of heavy fog you most often see pictured in those legendary images of the Golden Gate Bridge. Needless to say, racers were only too glad to don their fire suits and bundle up for the 8:00 AM warm-up session, which was delayed by a few minutes due to near zero visibility, and completed with the assistance of a pace car.

Following the warm-up session however, Jeff Awender would have one of those "Houston, we have a problem" moments, as his car's temperature gauge pushed to the 250 degree mark. A quick assessment indicated that the "fresh" rebuild that had recently been completed had not completely effected the sealing of the head gaskets, so, in fine Challenge Series style (I don't know of one competitor out here on the West Coast that's not had to change head gaskets at some point to the track), Jeff set about tearing the entire top end off the motor....Mark Dougherty and other Challenge Series drivers and crew pitched in as well.

Jeff's car was not ready for the Sunday Qualifying session, which is traditionally run as a qualifying race out here in the west. So, it would be TC, John and Tom taking the green flag, while Jeff's car sat idle in the garage under repair. At the green, it was John and TC battling for the lead, with John in front going up the hill, but TC taking the lead by the end of the first lap. John would give great chase, while Tom continued to hone his lap times and chip them down to a new personal best.

Near the end of the session, spectators could tell something was not quite right with the #88 however, as John fell 3-, 4- and eventually 10-car lengths back from TC. At the checkered it was TC crossing the

finishline first to take the race victory, with John a distant second, and Tom rounding out the field to take third place for the qualifying race. Later in impound, John would report that he had run out of gas part way through the session, and while he was able to limp in from the track, the #88 had to catch a tow over to his pit area...More on this later.....

Sunday Qualifying Race Results

TC McNett: 1:54.602

John Teaby: 1:55.055

Tom Coon: 2:00.300

With plenty of time to get his car's top end back together (and lots of help from his fellow racers and friends), Jeff's #05 was ready to go by early Sunday afternoon. John made sure he had plenty of fuel, and was looking to vindicate his lost pole position, while TC prepared in earnest to take on all comers. The 3:05 PM Sunday race would be in the same format as the previous day's event, with the spec racers gridded some 8-10 cars lengths behind the ST/PT/GTS cars, but taking the same green. As the drivers approached the start (and you really need to be familiar with Infineon to appreciate this), the GTS/ST/PT group turned the bend and took a flying green before the rest of the group (FFR's included), had even rounded the corner. Well, TC appeared beyond motivated, and truly focused and prepared for the "Green, green green!" that he must have been blaring in the radio from his trustworthy spotter and brother Dave, as he left Jeff and the rest of the field, immediately pulling an eight car lead by the time he was racing up the hill.

John's bad luck seemed to continue, as when the field rounded the corner for the green, the #88 was nowhere in sight, and only pulled up to the start-finishline a good 5-8 seconds after the first wave had left. Spectators and race officials could immediately tell there was something wrong with the #88, as John guided the beautiful white/blue #88 off line, pulling along the outside front straight wall where he stopped, all the while waving his arm in the air to let other racers know that he had a mechanical problem. John can tell the story, but those watching held their breath as the remaining three race groups pulled to the line and took standing and flying green/yellow flag starts to their own races. Racers scattered like quail on the front stretch, with each skillfully avoided the wounded #88. Safety crews arrived in a matter of minutes to tow John's spec racer safely off track, where he had the dubious honor of watching his fellow racers complete the race while he remained strapped in the car.

In the meantime, it was TC showing his driving prowess early in the race, and well past the halfway point, it became apparent that Jeff would have little chance of making up the ground TC had snaked from him at the start. It seemed like a run to victory lane was surely in TC's future....That was, however, until Lady Luck stepped into the picture. With less than four laps remaining, it appeared that Jeff was gaining ground on TC. By the lap leading to the white flag, Jeff was actually making a run on the #33 coming down the 100+ mph hill to the big 180 at Turn 11. Jeff was catching TC!

At Turn 11, Jeff's #05 moved alongside the #33, and TC made a swashbuckling move to hold off the pass coming to the white flag. But alas, in his efforts to save the positions, the #33 spun, and Jeff motored

into the lead. All the while Tom Coon was relentlessly pursuing the two spec racers ahead of him and was now closing the distance on 2nd place. However, TC recovered before Tom could catch up (but not by much), and set off to chasing Jeff, but at that point it was clear that unless Jeff had a mechanical, or an on-track driving error (not likely), the top spot on the podium had slipped away.

When the spec racers crossed the finishline, it was Jeff Awender taking the victory, with TC in serious pursuit, and Tom Coon making his best race finish ever. Nice driving Tom! Big kudos and congratulations on a successful return to the track after what became a very eventful off-season! For those who don't know, Tom is truly committed to driving excellence, and has demonstrated his commitment to the Series and on-track talents by finishing on the podium in the West Coast Challenge Series two years in a row...Tom's also one of the world's leading knee surgeons, and also one of the nicest people you'll ever know...A true testament to the quality of individuals attracted to our Series.

Following the race, as Jeff was celebrating his two victories in one weekend, TC would tell the tale of driving a Challenge car for four laps with the driver's door falling off!!! Yes racers, it seems a skilled spec driver can actually hold onto the door to keep it from being blown off in the slipstream when screws fall off, and still drive the car!!! It seems it's a little difficult to maneuver Turn 11 however, while holding onto the door, and shifting all at the same time and with Jeff in relentless pursuit, Jeff won that battle. Call it Lady Luck, racing karma, or ?, but true racers know how quickly the twists of fate can turn out there on track. A follow-up with John Teaby indicates the #88 had to be towed to the pits due to a failed fuel pump. :(

Sunday Race Results

Jeff Awender: 1:53.935

TC McNett: 1:53.875

Tom Coon: 2:00.545

John Teaby: DNS, fuel

Next event for the West Coast Challenge Series: Infineon Raceway, March 19-20, 2011 (North/south crossover event).....See you guys at the track!

Karen