

# How the Monaro became the Pontiac GTO



Norm Darwin ©

The beginnings of Holden's export of the Monaro to America perhaps started in mid-2001 with a phone call from GM senior engineer, Carl Welborn from the Detroit Technical Centre, to Holden's Planning Director, Ian McCleave. Welborn asked if Holden could send a Commodore SS and a Caprice to Detroit so they could be evaluated in the vehicle fleet.<sup>1</sup>

Holden's push to volume exports came with the release of the VT Commodore. In August 1993 GM's International Strategy Board approved funding for increasing sales by over 20,000 units by exporting LHD cars to the Middle East and Asia.<sup>2</sup>

The appointment of Peter Hanenberger to Holden as Chairman and MD in June 1999 was to further Holden's export drive. Hanenberger had spent time at Holden in the 1970s, on assignment from Opel, he regarded exports as critical for Holden's survival.

In 2001 Bob Lutz, former retired automobile CEO, returned to the auto industry, hired by GM to "fix" their product lineup. Lutz was appointed head of the GM Product and Development group with considerable power to make changes.<sup>3</sup> Hanenberger believed Lutz held the key to the door to the American market and as Holden were then the Corporation's best operating division, returning a profit against investment, the two-door coupé in Holden's forward program that cost just \$60 million to tool and pocket money in US terms, was an excellent platform to sell to the USA.<sup>4</sup>

Lutz's interest was piqued after he spied the two Holdens in the GM Detroit garage and arranged to drive them, his wife fell in love with the Caprice, and they had difficulty getting it back. Lutz described the car as a magnificent vehicle and better than any other (American)

VT LHD Lumina SS crosses Utah desert.

Wheels Aus.



Richard Ferlazzo's concept sketch of the GTO.

GM Corp.

GM car.

It was Lutz's view that Pontiac should mimic BMW's direction in the US using a rear wheel-drive vehicle, at Holden McCleave thought the Holden Commodore SS would fit well in GM's product line.<sup>5</sup> At the same time two American engineers on assignment in Australia, Jeff Jennings, and Jay Fitzsimmons, located in Holden's Vehicle Systems Analysis & Synthesis group concluded the yet to be released Holden Monaro would make a great Pontiac GTO. Jennings, the group's manager had read Lutz's book, "Guts: The Seven Laws of Business that made Chrysler the Hottest Car Company (1998)" and recognized someone who would listen; he fired off an email:



“As part of your mission to revitalize the car line-up for North America, you should consider an existing GM car platform that is already generating much passion and increasing sales within its market: Holden..... We also invite you to visit Holden, meet the team and see for yourself if our ideas are achievable.”<sup>6</sup>

This seems a bit cheeky, but Lutz responded quickly and with some enthusiasm for the idea.

Lutz was primed and recalled a “Car & Driver” road test on the Commodore SS, where the tester claimed it to be “The best GM car ever – bad news is you can’t buy it”.<sup>7</sup> The test may have come about by “Wheels” magazine taking a specially built V6 SS LHD Lumina (Commodore) to America in 1998.<sup>8</sup>

Hannenberger commissioned an export feasibility study and appointed engineer Brett Vivian as Program Manager Export Programs. Vivian targeted the Monaro, still in development, as a US Coupe. The Monaro volume was planned to run at 7,500 per annum and an export program would add a further 20,000 plus units. This added the problem of moving the model from low volume production to high volume.

Specific changes were identified in addition to LHD, the fuel tank needed to be relocated, instruments heated for cold climate and body protection against salt in snow areas was required. As part of this study three Monaro’s were airfreighted to the US Canadian GM Kapuskasing testing facility in January 2002. Three more followed a month later to Detroit for evaluation.<sup>9</sup>

While Lutz was enthusiastic for a Holden sourced Pontiac GTO, he found GM North America as a whole was not.

“The reasons not to do this program came pouring in, mostly around the fact that it wasn’t ‘our car’.”<sup>10</sup>

To allay concerns about Holden Lutz took the GM Strategy members to Australia to look at Holden’s product and operating methods. The US team included Jim Queen, GM chief engineer, Tom Stephens head of powertrain development, Larry Burns of Advanced engineering and Tom Kowaleski the product com-  
Holden’s VR studio. GM Corp.



Bob Lutz and Peter Hannenberger ride in development V2 Monaro at Holden’s PG in February 2002. GM Corp.

munications manager. It was natural that Holden had the Monaro front and center, with a ride session at the Lang Lang proving ground and presentation by Jeff Jennings.<sup>11</sup> It’s clear Lutz was thinking the Monaro would suit Pontiac’s model line-up, he apparently sketched a Pontiac front on the Monaro as he listened to Jennings’s briefing.<sup>12</sup>

Lutz admits he went to Australia with the specific purpose of driving the Monaro and discussing the potential of the (GTO) program with Holden. He had already canvassed Pontiac asking, “What would you think if we could get a rear drive V8”<sup>13</sup>

From this February meeting at Holden the project to export Monaro’s to the US accelerated quickly. In April 2002 GM approved the plan and a combined effort of Holden and Pontiac engineers began a 17-month program to make it happen. On 21 June Holden announced they would build the next Pontiac GTO and that the program would cost A\$60





million, \$20 million of it for design and engineering, considerably less than a more traditional approach would have required.<sup>14</sup>

A major hurdle was the American Auto Workers Union who eventually gave approval when it was pointed out the car had an American drivetrain and was essential for Pontiac's short-term survival.<sup>15</sup>

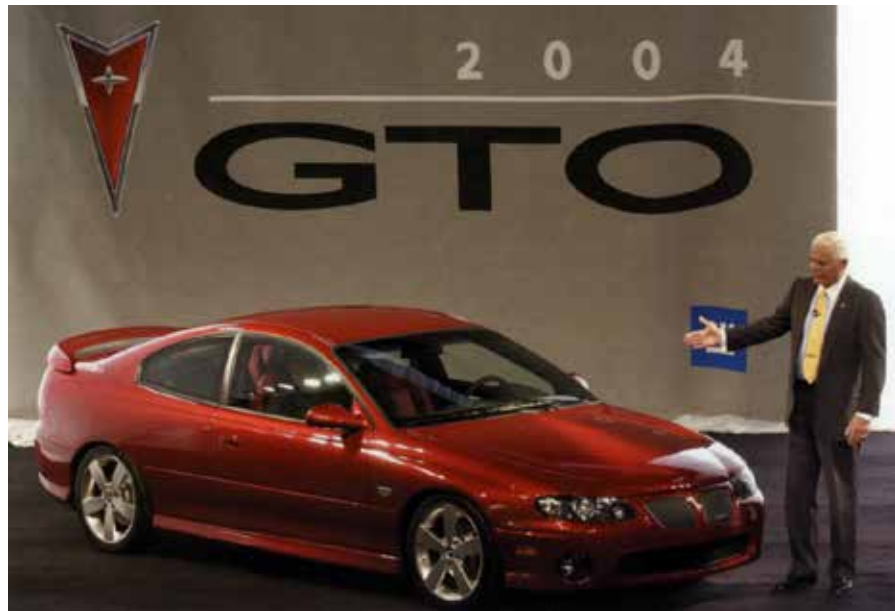
Once the program was underway social differences between the US and Australian team began to appear. Cultural training was introduced to smooth differences, this, and the fact that the Australians worked their day and the Americans followed in the different time zone moved the program along quickly. In addition, the use of a Virtual Reality(VR) studio, commissioned in April 2001, meant engineers and designers could view multiple proposals simultaneously on both sides of the world. The VR studio was first used on the Pontiac GTO program.<sup>16</sup>

Cultural differences were further tested with tension between the two teams, fostered by Lutz telling the Holden team "don't change a thing (other than legislative reasons and service)" whereas he directed the Pontiac guys to "Go down there and make it a GTO". Holden Program Manager Laura Thomas said Hannenberger supported the Holden team 100%.

"It may appear to the Americans that we were un co-operative, but the Holden team had been given autonomy to make decisions to ensure that the program was delivered on time, on budget. Firm and tough decisions had to be made to deliver the program."<sup>17</sup>

Later the Australians realized Lutz intentionally created the tension, Lutz said, "conflict is a necessary ingredient in any successful organization, without tension and conflict you don't get anything done."<sup>18</sup>

Richard Ferlazzo, Holden's head of design, short-circuited tension between the designers by predicting what the GTO needed. Early in the program his team studied the original GTOs, noting cues, the bonnet scoops were essential



Bob Lutz launches the GTO at Los Angeles Motor Show.

GM Corp.



The Pontiac GTO as released in 2004. Image from Brochure. Pontiac MD



The Appearance Pack from 2006 that provides a far better looking muscle car.  
Pontiac MD

but had to wait for the 2006 model, a GTO badge on the fender was needed but where to place it, turned out the side blinker marker was not required in the US, so a GTO badge was made to fit the hole. The trim embroidery finish was created from the original GTO.<sup>19</sup>

On the 21 June 2002 Peter Hannenberger announced that Holden would export the Monaro to America. Later that year 10 US journalists were invited to Holden to drive the Monaro, in an *Age* newspaper story one, Matt De Lorenzo said the redesigned Monaro would face opposition from diehard Pontiac fans:

“Who can’t countenance a Pontiac GTO coming from a country whose cultural contributions included Paul Hogan and Men at Work.”<sup>20</sup>

This glib remark did not transpose to other American journalists, although the announcement at the Los Angeles Motor Show in Jan 2003 failed to generate excitement, of the big three magazines only “Road & Track” put the rebirthed GTO on the cover, and then it was a small image.<sup>21</sup> To counter De Lorenzo’s negativity, “Los Angeles Times” journalist John O’Dell when asked about the car’s origins said it wouldn’t matter, “Not at all. American buyers aren’t that sophisticated.”<sup>22</sup>

The Los Angeles and Chicago motor shows used cars air freighted into America, the first shipment of 800 GTOs left Australia on 20 October 2003 and arrived in Ventura, California 21 days later, these were part of 1,800 dealer sales orders. In all 40,745 GTOs were sold over three years, double the initial plan.

It was almost 12 months from announcement before the new GTO was road tested, “Car & Driver” and “Motortrend” used cover photos and both write ups extolled the car.

“Yes, it is the fastest, most appealing GM muscle coupe in memory. The cabin has sporty elegance of a BMW. The new GTO looks nothing like a jute box on wheels. Fit and finish are the finest we’ve seen on a GM vehicle in decades. The muscle is certainly there. Drivers reported that they had driven few other coupes so poised, so well-balanced, so confidence-inspiring when you’re in full-hustle mode.”<sup>23</sup>

“Pontiac’s new Australian-sourced GTO brings lusty, affordable performance while disguised as a phone-company



The first shipment of Pontiac GTOs is loaded.

GM Corp.

fleet car. The best seats in any GM product ever. It doesn’t look like the old goat. That’s the harshest indictment we can make against this new Pontiac GTO.”<sup>24</sup>

By the numbers the reborn GTO ran less HP than the 1968 version, 350@5200rpm vrs 360@5400rpm, less torque, 365lb-ft @ 4000rpm versus 445 lb-ft @ 4800rpm but was quicker 0-60mph 5.3 secs versus 6.5 secs and 13.62 @ 104.79mph ¼ mile versus 14.8 @ 96mph.<sup>25</sup> The 2006 updated GTO was even faster recording a ¼ mile of 13.2 secs @ 106.84mph.<sup>26</sup>

How did the new GTO fare in the market? The production was based on sales of 20,000 per year and a model life of 3 years, Holden produced 26,797 2004/5 MY and 13,948 2006 MY, for Holden this was a significant boost to the Monaro’s volume of 15,910 over four years of production. A further 990 were exported to the Middle East and UK.<sup>27</sup>

The planned GTO profits dipped when the Australian US exchange rate went from just over 50 cents in the dollar to almost 80 cents. This pushed the American price to over US\$31,000 making them that bit harder to sell.

Personally, I believe the Pontiac corporate grille was wrong, this is supported by Pontiac offering a much sportier front as part of the Sport Appearance Package on the 2006 MY cars, together with the twin snorkel bonnet the GTO now looked the part of a muscle car.<sup>28</sup>

Would it have been better for Lutz to have



not marketed the Australian coupe as a GTO Pontiac but rather as a Chevrolet SS, naming the coupe in Australia a Monaro, after the original 1968 Monaro coupe, was contentious, Mike Simcoe wanted something new, he wanted the car to “Look forward” not backwards, perhaps Lutz should have taken a similar view.

Could Pontiac have used the front from the Australian HSV GTS or GTO and saved development money? This was done with the Vauxhall VRX version and given hi-praise by the Top Gear team. This is a question many bench sessions will argue over.

Owners were pleased with their purchase, a 2014 survey reveals a 96% positive experience, most negative reviews related to the powertrain which was US manufactured.<sup>29</sup>

The GTO entry into America paved the way for future Holden exports, the G8 Pontiac sedan (2008-2009), Chevrolet Police Pursuit Vehicle (2011-2017) and the Chevrolet SS (2014-2017).

### Footnote

The 2006 Pontiac GTO is held by enthusiasts as the model to own, with the larger LS2 6.0-litre V8, twin snorkel bonnet it is closer to the original GTO concept. In 2014 “Hot Rod Magazine” featured a 2006 GTO that was modified, apart from the supercharger and ROH wheels it had all the Australian Monaro CV8Z trim and badging, the ultimate praise for a Holden Aussie design.<sup>30</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Ian McCleave, email correspondence, June 2022.
- 2 Newsfront, “Holden to export VT,” Wheels, 09 (1993), 11.
- 3 McCleave.
- 4 Peter Robinson, Autobiography – The inside story of Holden’s all-new VE Commodore, (Sydney, Aus: Focus, 2006), 192.
- 5 McCleave.
- 6 Joshua Dowling, Rebirth of a Legend, (Sydney, Aus: Book works, 2003), 147.
- 7 Bob Lutz, Car Guys vrs Bean Counters, (NY: Penguin, 2011), 134.
- 8 Angus McKenzie, “Oversteer,” Wheels, 07 (1998): 7.
- 9 Dowling p153.
- 10 Lutz, 136.
- 11 Dowling, 181.
- 12 Andrew Hynson quoted in Dowling, 155.
- 13 Peter Robinson, 196.
- 14 Holden Media release, 21 June 2002, Holden Ltd, Fishermans Bend Vic.
- 15 Dowling, 159.



Proposed Holden export LHD Chevrolet SS-400. Would forgetting the Pontiac GTO name badge been a better option?  
GM Corp.



The Vauxhall VRX, based on HSV’s Coupe. Would this have made a better Pontiac GTO?  
GM Corp.

- 16 Norm Darwin, Monaro Magic, (Mt Rowan, Aus: Hand Publishing, 2011), 187.
- 17 Laura Thomas quoted in Dowling 160.
- 18 Dowling, 161.
- 19 Dowling, 165.
- 20 Dowling 164.
- 21 Cover image, Road & Track, 02 2003.
- 22 Dowling, 165.
- 23 Motortrend, “2004 GTO Road test,” 12, (2003).
- 24 Aaron Robinson, “2004 Pontiac GTO deserves the show to match it’s go,” Car & Driver, 12 2003
- 25 Motortrend, “2004 GTO Road test,” 12, (2003).
- 26 General Motors Hi-Performance road test quoted in Darwin, 240.
- 27 Darwin, 202
- 28 2006 Pontiac GTO product catalogue, Pontiac Motor Division, October 2005.
- 29 <https://www.cars.com/research/pontiac-gto-2004/consumer-reviews/>, 2022 American made index – Review Pontiac GTO. (Accessed September 17, 2022)
- 30 <https://www.motortrend.com/features/2006-pontiac-gto-cult-leader/> (Accessed September 17, 2022)