Restoring and Modernizing 1979 Pontiac Firebird

Sometimes a classic car is more than just a car—it’s a dream you’ve been waiting years to make a reality.

When my wife was getting ready to retire, I wanted to help her celebrate by finding her dream car: a **second-generation Pontiac Firebird**. We set a budget of about $30,000, sold her 2017 Honda Civic Si, and started searching.

The Search for the Right Car

We knew exactly what we wanted—and what we didn’t.

Our search focused on a **1971–1981 second-generation Pontiac**, but we had a pretty specific wish list. We wanted a car with **no T-tops**, an **automatic transmission**, and a **vinyl interior**. The paint and bodywork also needed to be finished because we wanted a car we could enjoy rather than start with a complete restoration.

And there were two color combinations we weren’t looking for: red or the iconic black-and-gold combination.

Those requirements narrowed the field considerably.

Over the next four months, we looked at several cars but couldn't find one that checked enough of the boxes. Eventually, we found a **1979 Pontiac Firebird in Delaware** that caught our attention.



After several conversations with the seller, we decided this was the one. I climbed into the tow truck with the driver, headed to Delaware, and brought home my wife's retirement present.

A Classic Car With a Few Too Many “Classic” Features

Once she started driving it, she discovered something important: she loved the car, but she wasn't quite as enthusiastic about some of its **1979 technology**.

The loose, old-school steering, lack of air conditioning, drivetrain characteristics and other features might have been authentic, but they didn't provide the driving experience she wanted.

The goal quickly became clear.

We didn't want to take away the character that made the Firebird special. We wanted to **modernize the right things while preserving the look and personality of the original car**.

With another budget of approximately $10,000, the upgrades began.

🛞 Tightening Up the Steering

The loose steering feel was one of the biggest differences between the Firebird and the modern vehicles my wife was accustomed to driving.

To improve steering response, I installed a **modern quick-ratio steering box** along with a **tilt steering column**.

These upgrades made the Firebird feel more responsive and predictable without changing what makes driving a classic car fun.

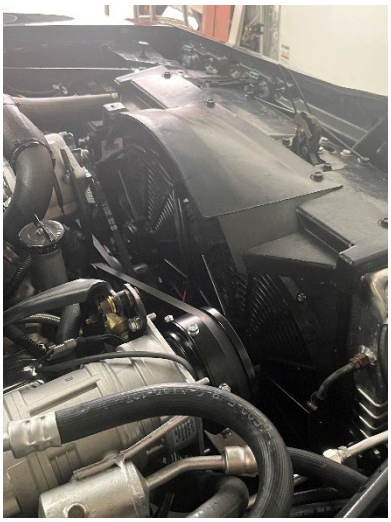
❄️ Bringing the A/C Into the Modern Era

Comfort was also high on the list, so the heating and air-conditioning system received considerable attention.

I reinstalled the A/C system with modern upgrades, including an **aluminum A/C compressor**, and **rebuilt the vacuum-control system** that operates the heat and air conditioning. The **factory ductwork was resealed** to improve airflow.

I also installed **upgraded SPAL electric fans**, a custom fan switch and a **105-amp alternator** to better handle the additional electrical demands.





The result was a system that maintained the car's original character while providing much better comfort and reliability.

⚙️ Transforming the Drivetrain

One of the biggest upgrades was replacing the transmission with a **700R4 four-speed automatic overdrive transmission**.

The installation included a **Bowler transmission lockup control and Tru-Shift conversion system**, along with an extra-capacity transmission pan and external transmission cooler.

I also installed a **2,800-rpm lockup stall converter**.

The original shifter was rebuilt and modified using a **Shiftworks conversion kit and cable**, allowing it to work properly with the 700R4 while maintaining a factory-style appearance.

Out back, we installed **3.73 gears with Positraction**, giving the Firebird stronger acceleration while the transmission's overdrive helps. Adding wider tires improved handling to make the car more controllable under hard acceleration.



🛡️ Adding Modern Safety and Convenience

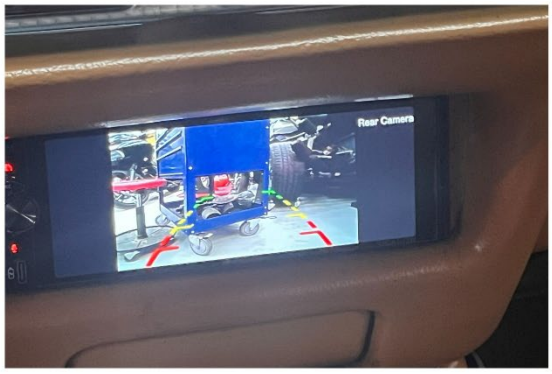
We also wanted to make the car safer and easier to drive in today's traffic.

A **CarPlay system with a backup camera** brought modern technology into the cabin while making backing up the Firebird considerably easier.

Additional improvements included:

- Installing a reverse-light switch
- Installing a neutral-safety-switch conversion kit
- Converting the interior lighting to LED
- Rewiring the exterior lighting system
- Repairing the windshield wipers
- Upgrading and servicing the brake system

Each improvement might seem small on its own, but together they made a significant difference in the overall driving experience.





For me, this project was never about creating a perfectly original restoration. It was about building a classic car that my wife could actually enjoy driving.

From the four-month search for the right Firebird to upgrading the steering, A/C, electrical system, brakes, drivetrain, and technology, each modification had a purpose: preserve the character of the car while making it safer, more comfortable, more reliable, and more fun to drive.

That's one of the things I enjoy most about working on classic cars. You don't have to choose between preserving the past and enjoying modern performance. With the right upgrades, you can have a little bit of both.



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