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MOTOR TREND CLASSIC

ISSUE TWO // 2005

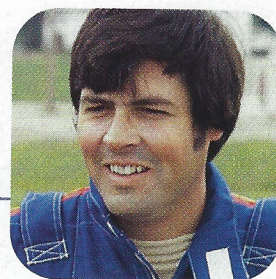
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TEAM PLAYERS
 Opposite page, from left: team principle and IMSA standout Amos Johnson, future IndyCar racer Lyn St. James, actor James Brolin, and our racing writer, Gary Witzenburg. Above: "You're not from around here, are ya, boy?" was the Nürburgring's general reaction to the thundering, V-8-powered AMC Spirit Al

ramblers at the 'ring

LONG BEFORE TESTING CARS THERE WAS FASHIONABLE
AMONG DOMESTIC CARMAKERS, AMERICAN MOTORS
AND BFGOODRICH ASSAULTED THE FABLED NORDSCHLEIFE



FIRST TIME I SAW THE 'RING. I was just out of school, touring Europe in the 1966 Triumph TR4-A destined to become my first race car, sleeping in low-cost youth hostels, trying to see and touch as many Formula 1 Grand Prix courses as possible. A 500-kilometer Touring race was running that day, and I watched with friendly German fans who shared their delicious beer. Postrace, in a tavern in town, we sang German and American folk songs and quaffed a bunch more beer.

Then someone said I could drive the course for the equivalent of about a buck a lap. Really? I shouldn't have been on any road that night, let alone the legendary Grand Prix circuit through the Eifel Mountains. But I was young and invincible and couldn't resist the temptation. Somehow, I did three glorious dark-of-night, half-drunk 14.1-mile, 176-turn laps at future famous racer speeds without maiming myself or anyone else—then drove all night to get where I was going. Wherever that was.

That remains one of my more memorable life experiences. Who knew I'd be back 14 years later as part of an American team taking on a 24-hour race in a real (almost) race car?

●●●● WORDS

GARY WITZENBURG

●●●● PHOTOGRAPHS

RAINER SCHLEGELMILCH/COURTESY BFG

<MOTORSPORT> < 1979 NÜRBURGRING 24-HOUR >

SIZE MATTERS

Although compact cars by American standards, the AMCs looked huge compared with the VW Golfs, Renault 5s, Audis, and Opels that regularly competed in this 24-hour race. White-lettered tires and dune buggy-style mag wheels must have looked a bit strange, too.



GETTING THERE

Known by today's American enthusiasts as a wickedly tough development track for European and some American cars (most notably Corvettes and recent Cadillacs), the treacherous 78-year-old Nürburgring, which translates to "the track at Nürburg," acquired its legendary status as the site of Germany's Grand Prix and countless grueling endurance contests through the years. Twisting up, down, and among the picturesque hills south of Cologne and Bonn, West Germany, it may be the most difficult and challenging closed road course on the planet. It hasn't hosted the German GP since Niki Lauda's near-fatal crash there in 1976; a newer 4.1-mile course adjacent to the original has served that purpose.

My second 'Ring adventure began with a late-summer 1979 phone call from then BFGoodrich motorsport PR ace Gary Pace. He asked whether I'd like to join a two-car Goodrich/American Motors effort in the annual FIA Group One—modestly modified production coupes and sedans—Nürburgring 24-hour race that October. I'd team with IMSA (International Motor Sports Association) AMC drivers Amos Johnson and Dennis Shaw, factory Mazda shoe Jim Downing (who'd later co-develop—with Bob Hubbard, my former engineering classmate—the head and neck-protecting HANS device for racers), rising female driver Lyn St. James (predating the IRL's Danica Patrick by two and a half decades), and actor James Brolin, who'd taken up racing after winning some celebrity events.

OKAY. WHAT'LL WE DRIVE?

"AMXs," he said. The 1968-1970 two-seaters? "No. Spirit AMXs." Oh. "Spirits with spoilers, safety bumpers, lots of smog gear, and absolutely no power," I thought to myself. The Spirit had succeeded AMC's oddball sawed-off Gremlin earlier that year. An AMX performance version sported stiffer suspensions, bigger tires, V-8 power, and, yes, spoilers front and rear. Conveniently, it was already homologated for FIA European Touring competition.

Pace and team leader Johnson believed we could win the race. I wasn't so confident, especially on Goodrich street radials (good as they were) versus racing slicks. The smaller, lighter twin-cam BMWs, Fords, and Opels of the time would be fast and more agile. I figured we'd be good on the straights but get smoked in braking and cornering.

When do we leave?

LEARNING THE COURSE

The good news: When the track wasn't closed for competition or private testing, we could drive it all we wanted for the U.S. equivalent of about six bucks a lap. The bad news: So could everyone else, including bicyclists, busloads of tourists, local hot dogs, and clueless rental-car pilots. With precious little closed-course practice before the race, the team thoughtfully provided rental cars—three six-cylinder automatic Mercedes sedans and one four-banger five-speed manual Opel—for the six of us to flog around most of the week to learn the course.

I recruited my then-girlfriend (now wife), Jill, the best and bravest lady I know, to guide me around as quickly as possible using a giant course map. Hopeless. Then she started taking notes: "Tight esses with curbing at 3 km," "Fast esses following medium right after jump," "Fast triple-apex right (with

"I FIGURED WE'D BE GOOD
ON THE STRAIGHTS
BUT GET SMOKED IN
BRAKING AND CORNERING"



scary drop-off over outside rail)." Not much better. Actually learning this monster course corner-by-corner to maximize each one seemed an unattainable dream.

Then, our innkeeper asked whether we'd like to have a pal of his, a just-retired multiple 'Ring winner called Heinz Hennerici, provide some instruction. How soon can he get here?

The small, weathered man who popped in early next morning hardly looked the 'Ring-meister role. For starters, he had no left arm, having lost it in World War II. And he spoke no English. And we no German beyond *ja, nein, danke schoen*, and *biergarten*. He proved purely amazing.

Heinz jammed three of us at a time into his own six-cylinder five-speed BMW and drove the course smoothly and skillfully at speed, setting precisely the right steering input for each turn, holding the wheel with his knee while shifting and gesticulating with his right hand and barking instructions in German like an SS drill sergeant. We rode with him, he rode with us; we followed him, he followed us, lap after lap, communicating through translators between laps.

He showed us not just the proper lines through each corner and exactly where to cresting each blind rise, but also where we could deviate from those lines for optimum advantage. Despite the language barrier, it somehow sank in. I nodded off following the Friday night meeting running entire 14.1-mile laps in my mind. And I sensed at times during the race that I knew the track better than many competing drivers.

Thank you, Heinz.

THE START

The 'Ring has a reputation for nasty weather, often differing from one section to another, so no one is surprised when race day breaks cold, wet, and foggy. Heavy fog cuts our practice time short, so it's all we can do to complete each driver's mandatory two laps, make last-minute adjustments, and strap in Amos and Jim to qualify.

The Johnson/Shaw/Brolin #1 car is tuned and geared faster than our Downing/St. James/Witzenburg #2. Their mission is to win the race. Ours is to run a bit slower and steadier to be sure to finish. Johnson and Downing run two laps together and qualify a respectable 20th and 21st in the 120-car field. Their times are roughly 10 minutes, 26 seconds versus the hottest Ford's 9:38 pole time and the slowest Mini's 14:10. Not bad, considering we're the only cars in the fastest group (seven classes are divided into three separate groups) running street rubber, complete with raised white letters.

The F1-style standing start is flagged off precisely at four p.m. Amos and Jim



get a good start and exit the second turn 14th and 15th. Ten nervous minutes later, they flash past our pits in heavy traffic...in 16th and 20th.

"Car #1, Amos Johnson, has technical trouble," barks the P.A. announcer in heavily accented English. Bummer. And so soon.

"Broken throttle cable," Amos radios. A minute passes. "No, just slipped out of the bracket. I'm coming in." The crew tapes the cable in place and sends Dennis out. Jim brings in #2, they tape its throttle cable, too, and Lyn powers away. Our fuel consumption is giving us about 10 laps, roughly two hours, between stops, counting fueling and pit time.

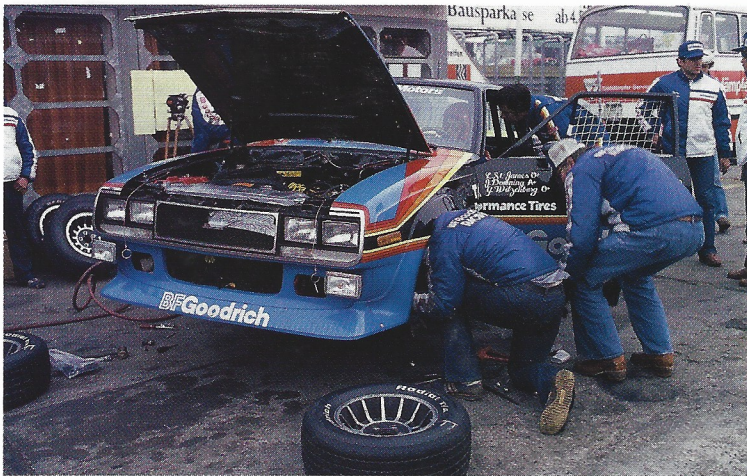
Dennis radios that his clutch is starting to slip. Lyn, like Jim before her, reports soft, unreliable brakes. Someone had decided to use new high-tech fluid and must not have purged all the old stuff from the system. Brolin's first stint begins just before dusk; mine well after. Bad brakes in the dark. Marvelous.

SCREAMS IN THE NIGHT

Lyn scrambles out, I wedge myself in. "The car's okay," she yells in my ear, "but don't trust the brakes." I'm in gear and off into darkness and fog. Gotta work up



<MOTORSPORT> < 1979 NÜRBURGRING 24-HOUR >



NUMBERS GAME

In an odd numeric juxtaposition, the #2 car came in first in class, and the #1 car finished second.

From left: Johnson, Shaw, St. James, Downing, Witzenburg, Brolin.

to speed gradually, get used to the car and the track at night. The seat adjustment is wrong, making smooth driving tough. I try but can't get it readjusted.

I find myself turning into corners too soon, coming out too soon, and having to lift to avoid running out of road. Why? My driving lights are aimed too low, can't see far enough ahead, especially in dips and downhills. I'm straining to pick up the barber-striped FIA curbing on the inside each turn, then diving for it when it flashes into view. Recognizing the problem, I concentrate harder to avoid it. Traffic is troublesome at times. Slower cars get in the way trying not to. The lights of an occasional faster car disappear from my mirrors starting to pass going into a turn...then hover, undecided, in my blind spot.

The AMX's handling is good, but the brakes are awful: The pedal goes to the floor and, even when furiously pumped, doesn't slow the car much. Have to brake early to compensate. Cars I blow off on a straight repossess me under braking, then hold me up through the turn.

After a few laps, my arms and back are sore from stretching for the wheel. Seems I've been out a long time. Have I missed the pit board in the darkness?

Our radios are one-way to the pits; I can call in, but they can't talk to me. If I run out of gas, our race is over. I call about the driving-light adjustment at for a signal. Next time by, there it is: "PIT."

Fourteen miles and 10 minutes later, I'm scrambling out. "It's running and handling fine," I holler into Downing's helmet. "But the lights are aimed low, and watch out for those brakes!" I'm soaking wet inside my heavy quilted driving suit, and it's cold. Really cold.

MORE SCREAMS

"Bad understeer!" crackles the radio. It's Downing. "Seemed like oil all over the track before the carousel."

"Didn't notice it," says Dennis in #1.

"May have a tire going bad," muses crew chief Jim Woodward. "Something let go in the rear axle, bad oversteer!" Downing again. It's 10 p.m., 18 hours to go.

Downing makes it in. "Drifting through a left turn, something goes 'pop,' and it puts you right off the road," he says. "I mean, off the road!" Crew swarms under the car but finds nothing. Lyn's in and accelerates out. "I hope she gets back," Downing frets, shaking his head.

"Something's rubbing on the right side," Lyn radios.

Then: "I'm off the track! Car's okay. Be going again in a minute."

Then it's Dennis in #1: "Something went 'tinkle-clank' in the right front," he radios. "Suspension's down, tire's rubbing, can smell the smoke. I'm coming in." Crew readies a new front spring/shock unit.

Dennis limps in. Crew changes the right-front spring and shock. Brolin takes it out.

Now Lyn's in: "Uncontrollable in left turns!" Crew finds and tightens some loose rear spring bracket bolts and sends her out. "Slightly better," she reports, "but still doing it. I'll try to go the distance."

She does, and it's my turn again. "Be careful in left turns," she hollers in my ear. "Fast ones or the slow ones?" I ask. "All of them."

Crew's still under the car. "We've found the problem," Woodward reports. Right-front camber adjustment's loose. Snaps the wheel out in left turns." It's fixed, I'm off...and it's fine.

I've got the seat adjusted to where it's more comfortable. Lights are better. Brakes are worse. Spectator campfires dot the darkness, while dozens of flashbulbs pop in the corners. Freaky.

THE FINISH

And so it goes. Our #1 car has broken still another front shock, its clutch is slipping, and the engine is burning oil. The brakes and both front shocks are all but gone in #2. Pumping the brakes drags the front spoiler, but has little effect on speed.

With under an hour to go, Amos and Lyn turn on their lights and run together. A light drizzle slickens the track. Workers and spectators line the rails around the course, cheering and waving. Lyn's helmet is too tight, her head is throbbing, and she's choked with emotion.

Strangely, cars start lining up just short of the finish, not wanting to risk another 14 miles, while others thread their way through to log one more lap. When the countdown clock strikes zero, this whole mob accelerates over the line, looking more like a start than a finish, to the cheers of spectators, officials, workers, and red-eyed, exhausted crews.

Amos and Lyn cross the line at last. Our whole BFG bunch is excited and emotional, running around, babbling incoherently, hugging and kissing each other like crazy people. The sun comes out. Suddenly, it's not so cold.

Despite all the troubles and time lost in the pits, our #2 has finished 25th and #1 43rd overall: first and second in class. We've won. At least, sort of.

Lyn went on to race at Indy, James married Barbra Streisand, and I'm still writing car stories. The Nürburgring trophy occupies a prominent place on a shelf in my office. A few others flank it, but I'll cherish that one forever, thanks to a great team, a tough Rambler, and the wonders of German beer. ♦