

Behind the Wheel at Nelson Ledges

Twenty-four hours of frayed nerves.

It was sometime around 4:00 A.M., and I was dog-tired. I hadn't slept since the morning of the day before; my eyes were sore from strain, watery and gritty with the dust in my helmet.

For nearly an hour I had been battling traffic, other competitors racing each other and me, cars passing, repassing, sliding, sometimes bumping, kicking up dirt ahead, blinding me with laser-bright light in my rear-view mirrors.

Now, at last, I had a clear track. All the others had pulled away, fallen behind, or checked into the pits for fuel or service. There was only the occasional slower car to pass.

Just as I was starting to relax a bit, there was a vibration in the left front wheel. I'd felt that same vibration before, a year ago, in this same event in a similar car. It had turned out to be a wheel bearing going bad, grinding out its protective grease until it had finally failed catastrophically and cost us two hours in the pits.

I called the crew on the two-way radio and informed them of the problem, and we discussed whether to fix it now or try to make it to the scheduled five o'clock fuel stop and driver change. Meanwhile, it was getting worse, progressing from vibration to noise on hard right turns. We decided to stretch it if we could, but the crew started digging out parts.

We were running second, a couple of laps behind the leading Datsun 280-ZX, and could ill afford an unscheduled stop for repairs. Still, it's better to finish an endurance grind like this, a triumph in itself, than to break or crash the car trying to win.

I concentrated on driving, trying to ignore the ominous noise. One of the high-powered driving lights was not illuminating properly, leaving a gap

of dimness in the left front of my field of vision, just where I most needed strong light to see the pavement's edge in Nelson Ledges's three fastest turns. At more than one hundred miles per hour, I was straining to pick out the familiar landmarks that told me where to brake or turn toward each coming corner.

The Nelson Ledges road-racing course is a narrow strip of aging, bumpy, treacherous blacktop that winds for two miles through rolling farmland near Warren, Ohio. It be-

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gins on a short start-finish straight that runs past the primitive, cramped, unpaved pits and curves viciously into a fast right turn, then another, then a slower left and a long, devilishly tricky, decreasing-radius right called the "carousel," then a long straightaway to a flat-out dogleg right, another slower left and a hairpin right, back to the original straight past the pits.

In one of the faster unmodified sports cars and sedans that run in the Sports Car Club of America's (SCCA) Showroom Stock category, like the Porsche 924 I was driving, a good lap takes just under a minute and a half—an average of about eighty-two miles per hour.

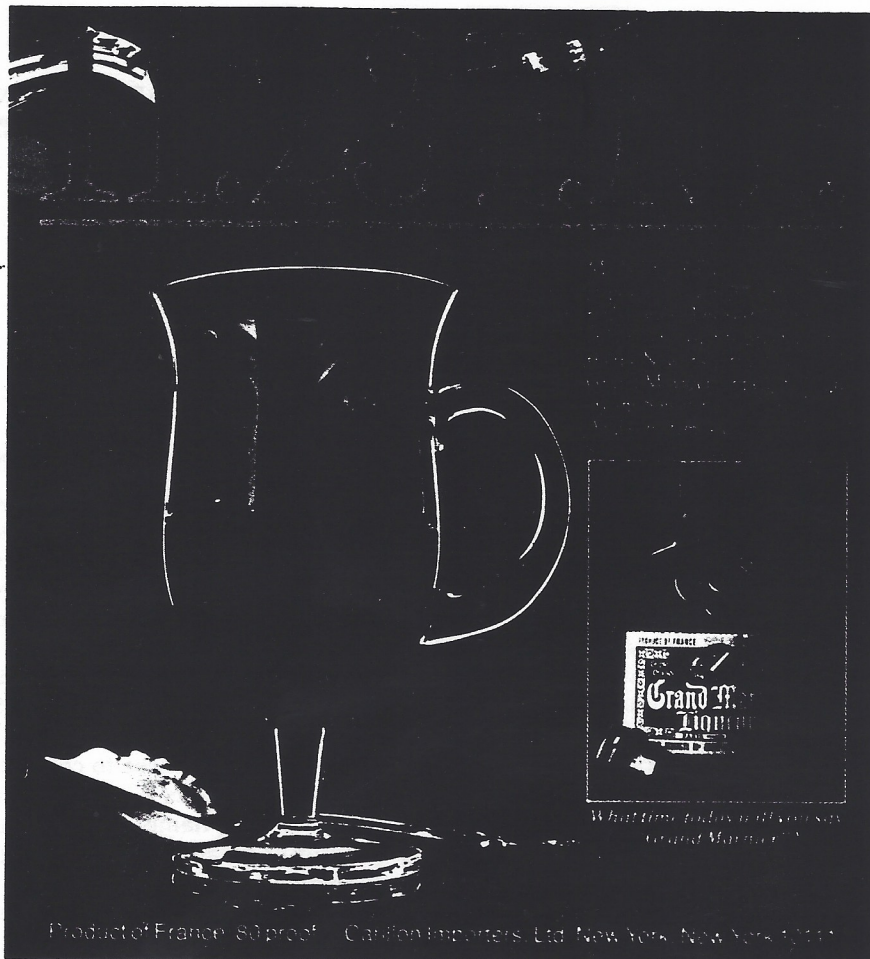
It's a long way from Le Mans, France, or Daytona Beach, Florida, sites of the most famous day-long endurance races, but in just two years

the Quaker State/Nelson Ledges Longest Day (so called because it's held on the summer solstice, the day of the year with the most daylight hours) has become America's second most important twenty-four-hour race. Because drivers compete in relatively affordable Showroom Stock cars, you don't need an inheritance or a family business to compete, yet the race attracts a surprising number of big-name drivers, a fair amount of factory involvement, and tremendous press attention.

As part of another very competitive Porsche team, I had participated in 1980's inaugural event but had failed to finish because of the wheel bearing and other troubles. Teamed with SCCA national champion Freddy Baker, former champion Catherine ("Cat") Kizer, and a third talented driver named Bob Nickel, and driving Baker's Porsche under the sponsorship of Bedford (Ohio) Porsche Audi and *Road Test* magazine, I seemed to have a good chance at winning in 1981.

But I had a vibration, which by now had become a siren howl even on the straights. A crippled bearing that could seize at any time. It was still a half hour before our scheduled stop, but definitely time to pit.

The crew was ready and waiting, the necessary parts neatly arranged along the pit wall, as I slid to a stop. I scrambled out and helped steady the car as they jacked it up and swarmed over and under, changing brakes, tires, the offending bearing, and associated parts, refueling, cleaning the windshield, and performing routine checks and maintenance. In an astounding eleven minutes fifty-two seconds, the work was done, and Bob Nickel was belted in and zoomed off to resume the chase. ►



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DRIVING

Mentally and physically exhausted, I dragged myself off for a few hours of fitful sleep, awaking to find that we were back in the lead, two laps up on a Prototype-class turbocharged Mazda RX-7 and miles ahead of the next car in our own Showroom Stock A class. The Datsun that we had raced through the night had succumbed, a victim of terminal wheel-bearing failure.

The last few hours of an endurance contest are the strangest time in racing. Some of the competitors who have broken or crashed have already loaded up and headed home. Some hang around forlornly to the end, rooting for friends and rivals. Some survivors battle cars that are threatening to fall apart around them, holding them together with baling wire and tape. Those with healthier cars are equally nervous, fearing disaster in every strange noise under their hoods. Everyone looks like the living dead, peering through sunken, bloodshot eyes in dirt-streaked faces, sitting limply on toolboxes or pacing aimlessly when not working or driving.

Although it was not in our class, we raced the turbo-Mazda right down to the end for the overall win. It was going a couple seconds a lap faster but had to pit for fuel more often. We finally beat it by two laps (four miles)—three minutes out of twenty-four hours. If our crew had taken 180 more seconds to change the bearings and brakes at 4:30 that morning, we would have lost.

Why do people put themselves through such ordeals? Certainly not for the money—you usually spend much more than you can ever win. Not for the fleeting fame—few outside the sport will remember who won the 1981 Longest Day race two days after they've read about it.

Perhaps for the challenge, and the personal pride and sense of accomplishment that comes with meeting and beating it. For me, at least, the answer is simple: driving a race is the most fun thing I've ever done sitting down; and the longer the race, the more driving I get to do. ■

Detroit-based automobile writer Gary Witzenburg contributes a monthly column to Mainliner.



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