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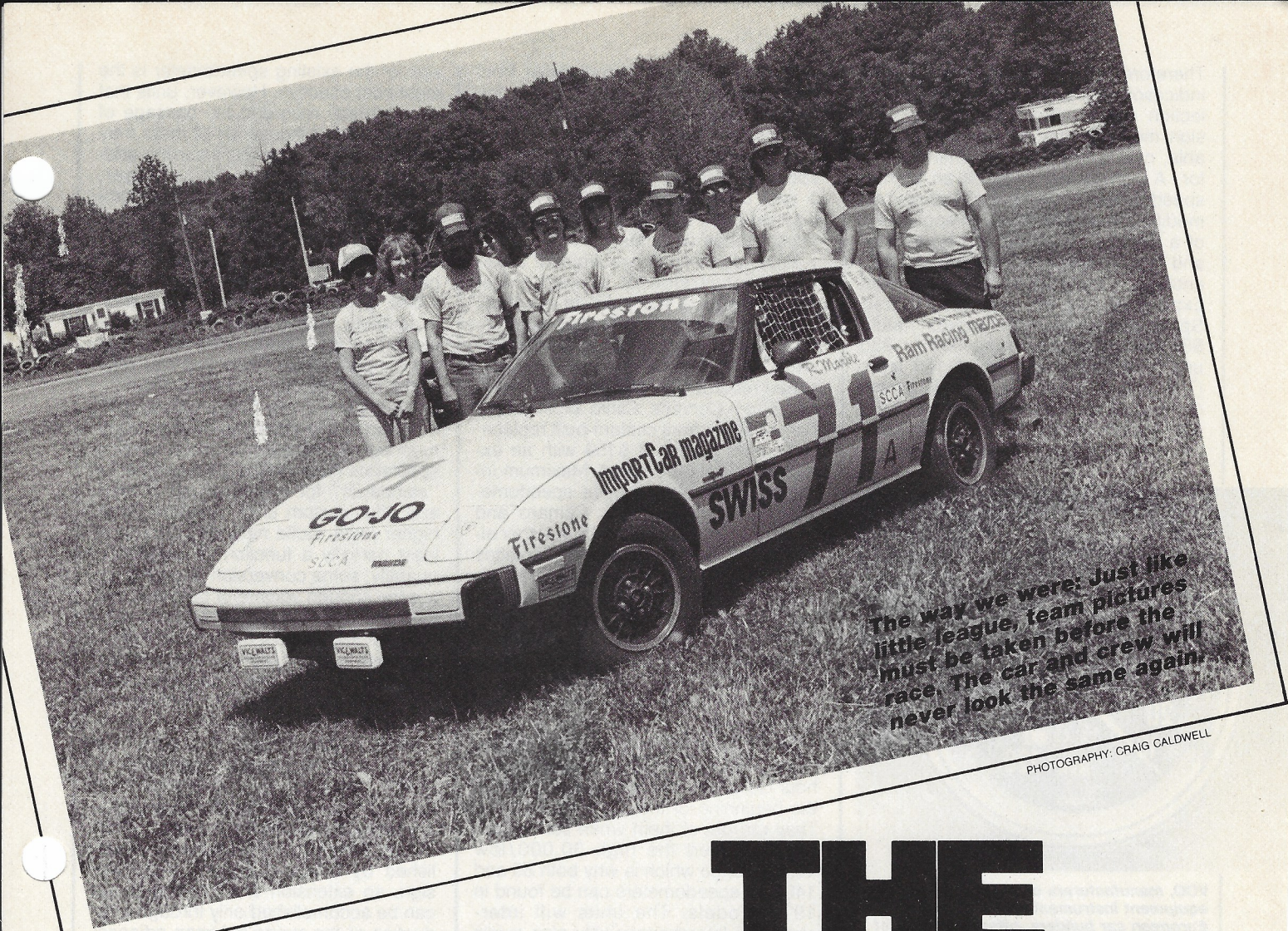
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**NELSON LEDGES 24-HOUR:  
STOCK AROUND THE CLOCK**





# THE LONGEST PIT

**At The Nelson Ledges 24-Hour Showroom Stock Enduro, Even The Losers Spray Champagne** By Craig Caldwell

***The legs go first in endurance pitting, followed closely by the brain. It is 3 a.m. and the race is only half over. It seems like it has been going on for days.***

The 24 hours of Nelson Ledges, the Longest Day, is like that I'm told. It has become in just four runnings the Great American Schizophrenia Showdown for showroom stock and friends. What started as a nice little game of flag football has become a factory/media Superbowl complete with gang tackles and dirty tricks. The ungroomed, sandlot 2.0-mile road course in the middle of an Ohio swamp has been invaded by the Los Angeles Raiders. Al Davis would be proud. But with the little guys not having the sense to take their ball and go home and the pros having a great time stumbling over their own cleats, the race endures despite prob-

lems, protests, prototypes and pampered press.

When it came time to divvy up the free media rides for the '83 Longest Day, *SPORTS CAR GRAPHIC* was sitting pretty. Contributor Gary Witzenburg was dialed in for the third year in a row with Fred Baker's Porsche team. *SCG* contributor Peter Frey was in California waiting like an expectant father for completion of the Herb Adams factory Avanti (neither Frey nor the Avanti made it to the race). *SCG* contributor Rich Taylor was in Connecticut, explaining why his Mazda RX-7 wouldn't be ready until the next Longest Day. So, being covered with the race favorite, the probable and the nonexistent, I drew the assignment to cover the other end, the non-factory teams—the guys whose race Nelson Ledges used to be.

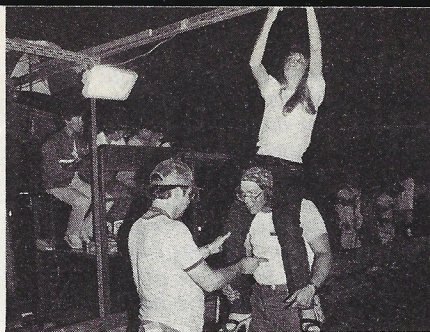
***Out in the darkness of the exit of***

***turn 13, a horn breaks the monotony of racers completing another lap. Someone says "that's us" and we get ready for who-knows-what. The unscheduled pit stops have become predictable. Five hours earlier, after just seven hours of racing, our car slid past us unexpectedly into a neighboring pit with missing front disc pads and a ruptured rear brake cylinder. Since then we've been as alert to potential problems as our communications system—a small pit board and the car's horn—allows. A small hole in the radiator is growing. We add a couple of bottles of water and wonder whether to start stripping the radiator from one of the drivers' personal cars. The race car heads back into the night and we start discussing where to find chemical stop-leak in the middle of No-***

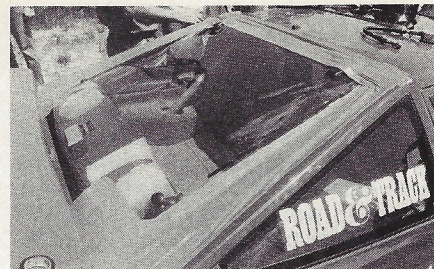




Most teams put at least six hours on the car during testing and qualifying sessions. The Warren Tarr Automotive Camaro went on its roof in practice, but came back to finish 618 laps and was still running at the end of 24 hours.



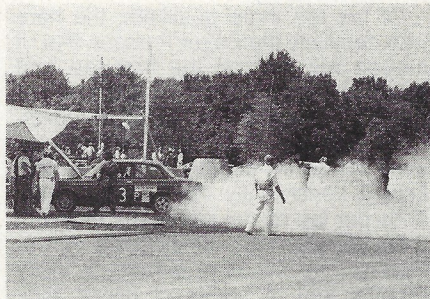
A session of night practice allows teams to set the lights on the cars and in the pits. Real pit crews don't use ladders.



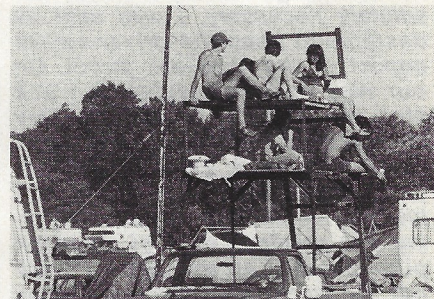
The Road & Track Mitsubishi Starion entry lost its rear window in practice. Unable to find a spare, the team bought a rear window from a spectator's RX-7 and went racing. A shunt with a Saab put the car out of the race hours later.



Nelson Ledges is not quite Indy but that didn't keep one enthusiastic team from releasing balloons at the start. Anybody know the words to "Back Home Again In Ohio?"



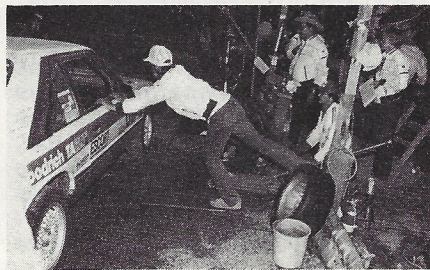
Yes, Swen, there was a Volvo in this year's race but you had to look quickly. The prototype GL Turbo retired after only six laps.



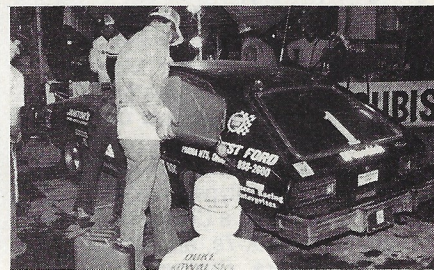
Spectators were few but were witness to some outstanding wheel-to-wheel racing.



Things that go bump in the night included the Road Trolls/Reinertsen Motors Saab Racing Saab 900. As co-driver Satch Carlson of Autoweek was heard to say, "It's going to have to be straightened out just to get it on the trailer."



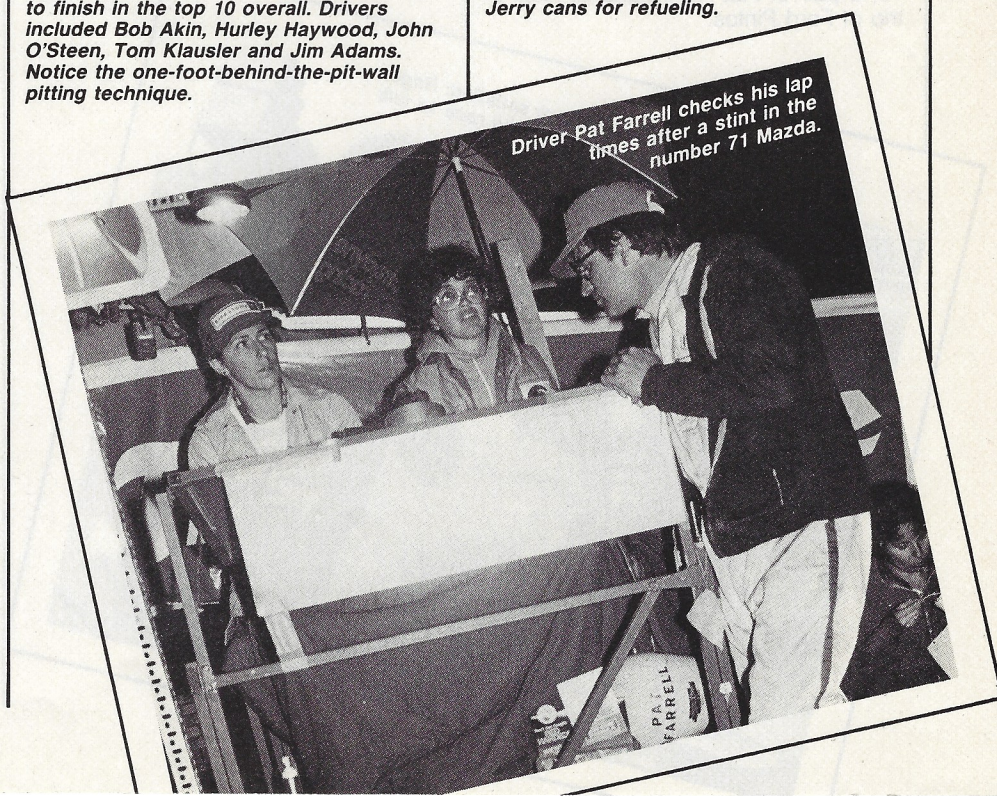
Team Capri's 5.0-liter Mercury entry survived an early fire and other problems to finish in the top 10 overall. Drivers included Bob Akin, Hurley Haywood, John O'Steen, Tom Klausler and Jim Adams. Notice the one-foot-behind-the-pit-wall pitting technique.



The Woods Brothers were busy so the Duke Kowalski Racing Team Pinto used Jerry cans for refueling.

**where, Ohio, early on a Sunday morning.**

The disparity among race teams at Nelson Ledges is incredible. Professional race drivers share the starting grid with weekend warriors. Support vehicles range from semi-trucks hauling 40-foot trailers to three-drawer toolboxes in the back of pickup beds. Refueling stops are handled for the most part by dump cans but five-gallon Jerry cans are also seen. Besides the media representatives from most major automotive magazines (who have discovered in the race their own private playground), the pits are brimming with sponsor's reps, tire engineers and public relations and advertising staffs. Hospitality suites, complete with landscaping, emerge in the dusty parking lots and video crews are paraded from track to pit to capture the action for po-



Driver Pat Farrell checks his lap times after a stint in the number 71 Mazda.







the hands forward. There is still a good seven hours of racing remaining. Having made the rookie's mistake of not sleeping all night, I find I've lost all enthusiasm for the race, the team and the assignment. I sneak away from my fire extinguisher duties and wander down the pits. There are fewer people in the pits at 8 a.m. than there were at 3 a.m. A car comes in and has to honk vigorously to attract a crew. After a while I wander down to the B.F. Goodrich hospitality corral and sit on a patio swing while watching a man vacuum a large spread of indoor/outdoor carpeting. The Longest Day is getting weird.

It's hard to tell by the lap charts how many cars are running at any particular time. Cars that are towed in somehow sneak back onto the track after miraculous repairs. The only sure DNFs are a Mitsubishi Starion and a Saab that tangled at speed as the sun went down. Other wrecks are pounded out, racertaped and sent back to battle. Every car in the parking lot becomes fair game for parts. The omnipresent public address system announces the needs and crew members rush to strip windows, brakes and suspensions from willing spectator's vehicles. In the end, the unofficial count of non-finishers is just 14 vehicles. Considering the shape in which some cars started the 24 hours and all cars finished, it is an amazing statistic.

I wander down to my rental car and change into a clean T-shirt. Except for the two hours chasing parts, I've now spent over 24 hours at the track and there are six hours of racing left. I head back to the pit and even though the crew is preparing for another brake change, everyone seems to be moving in slow motion. I comment that no one is talking. One of the drivers says there's nothing more to say. As a group we have hit the marathon racer's "wall." It is not pretty.

The Guldstrand Camaro overcomes its vaporization problems without a major unscheduled pitstop. By making a series of adjustments with every refueling, they have stayed close to the leading Porsche 944 Turbo and Mustang SVO while slowly improving performance. The Porsche runaway has not materialized and it is announced that first the Mustang and then the Camaro are within striking distance. At hour 22,



... but minutes later the car was back on the track and charging hard toward the finish.

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## Longest Pit



Ron Smaldone's Mustang SVO Turbo almost snuck away with the victory, despite looking like a refugee from a demolition derby. The car lead in the late stages of the race after qualifying on the pole. In the end it was just seven laps behind the winning Camaro.



The Baker Automotive Bertone X1/9 not only won SSC class but finished a surprising tenth overall with a total of 895 laps. The car finished the 24 hours on one set of brakes, never made an unscheduled pit stop, had the hood raised only once (a precautionary oil check) and averaged over 17 miles per gallon. Driving with Kim Baker were Joe Crowell and Larry Hendricks—all rookies to Nelson Ledges, 24-hour races and night racing.



At Nelson Ledges, you don't win, you survive. Even fifth-place finishers get to shoot champagne.

all three cars are on the same lap.

The battles in the other classes are harder to follow unless you are involved with a specific car. In SSGT, the front runners are a pair of Porsche 944s and a Shelby Charger. The battle for SSA, last year dominated by a pair of TR-7s, is a race between a TR-7, a Supra and an RX-7. In SSB, an Audi, a TR-7 and Charger are in the hunt. And in SSC, a Bertone X1/9 is surprising everyone by running a flawless race and holding position in the top 10 overall.

Still all eyes are on the prototypes as the three leaders start their last-hours sprint through traffic.

At 11 a.m. Sunday, according to car owner and team manager Roger Marble's game plan, we would evaluate where we stood and make adjustments for the finish. As the hour approaches no such session is needed. Unlike the previous year, when the team (in another RX-7) was sitting third in SSA behind the faster TR-7s, we have never been in the thick of the hunt. Handling, brake and fuel pickup problems have plagued the car since the practice sessions and we've been running fifth or sixth in class all night. It takes a perfect race to win class at Nelson Ledges now and we've spent too much time in the pits. Marble and co-drivers Al Speyer and Dave Weitzenhoff, all Firestone tire engineers, turn their attention to the car's tires. Running on new European-designed S-211 all-season radials, they had originally hoped to run the entire race on one set. A cut caused by track debris in one tire has already forced the use of one spare. Now they must decide wheth-

er to change left side tires because of uneven wear. As the car comes in for another brake change at 10:40 a.m., the tires are changed. A Firestone video crew zooms in on the action as Marble explains, "Counting all of the practice sessions, the tires lasted over 24 hours. Not bad at all."

The pitting for brakes this time takes only 20 minutes. With the car back out on the track and the tire drama resolved, Marble is more relaxed. At age 38, he understands his limitations as a driver and car owner but it hasn't diminished his enjoyment of racing. As owner of this year's team car, he admits being worried about the car. After all, he is the one who has to drive it to work the day after the Longest Day and he is the one who has two years of payments still to make on old number 71.

"Until the first metal-to-metal contact, which I did," he says, "I was really worried. My credit union and insurance company don't know I do this." Varying in his moods, he seems to be gathering his strength for a final push.

The car seems sure to finish now, barring any last minute catastrophe. The child in me wants to ask "are we there yet?"

At hour 22, all eyes that remain open are glued to the track. All drivers seem to be picking up their pace in a now-or-never frenzy, led by the Baker, Smaldone and Guldstrand entries, now all reported to be on the same lap.



Come-from-behind victors were the Dick Guldstrand Camaro team with drivers Jim Cook, Don Knowles and Bob Carradine. The team used over 500 pounds of ice during the race to chill fuel to overcome a vaporization problem. The winning Camaro featured a high-output 305-cubic-inch V8, special suspension and Goodyear VR50 Eagle tires.



Suddenly, Baker's Porsche careens off the track and into a tire wall. Towed back into the pits minutes later, the crew jumps to work removing and replacing the battered front suspension. Any other team but the two-time defending champions probably would have called it a day. Less than 30 minutes later, the Porsche is miraculously back out on the track.

*I happen to be standing against the Armco at the pit entrance when Baker's Porsche comes in on the hook. It is badly crushed—an insurance estimator wouldn't know where to start—but like major league L.A. car strippers, the Baker crew, with only five guys over the pit wall, have the car apart in less time than it takes me to reload my camera. Compared to these Pit Crew Hall of Famers, our own pepper-in-the-radiator gang seems amateurish. Yet our car is running at the moment and theirs isn't. We have nothing to be embarrassed about.*

At twenty minutes of three, only a few races within classes are close. In SSA, the Supra's crew cheers on its driver as he makes up ground on the leading Mazda. The hot Prototype race has cooled with the Baker crash and the superior running of the Guldstrand Camaro over the fading Mustang SVO. All crews crowd to the wall to watch the finish. At 3:04 p.m. Sunday, exactly 24 hours after the dropping of the green flag, the checkered appears. The Camaro cruises to the overall victory, having completed 964 laps. It is the first victory for a domestic vehicle in the short history of the longest day. The Mustang SVO is second, though it coughs its way around the victory lap with hardly a mile left in its battered body. The Baker Porsche is third, though it would later be disqualified for being underweight.

*The Mazda comes by for the checkered. I try to share the joy of the jubilant crews around me. I can only think about a shower and sleep and a meal not coated with preservatives and artificial flavorings. Unofficially, our car has finished 27th overall and fifth in class out of eight starters. Looking at the drivers and other crew members, you would think we just took first at Le Mans.*

*Champagne fights are breaking out in every pit—the thrill of victory and the thrill of finishing.*

*Marble looks around for someone to whom he can give an interview. Howard Cosell being absent, I ask him the standard "How was it out there?" and then don't wait for the answer.*

*"It was just great," he yells to me. "There were some moments when I had my doubts...it needs a good wash."*

*I smile and slip off into the crowd. ■*

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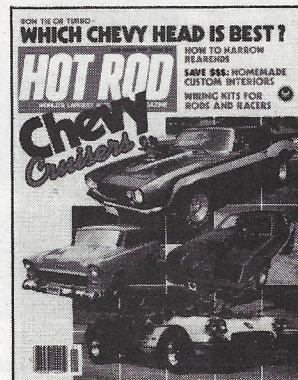
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## WHY FREDDY DIDN'T WIN

By Gary Witzenburg

We were leading, eight laps up on the second-place SVO Turbo Mustang, when they sent me out with just three hours to go... or so we thought. My instructions were to drive quickly but carefully, stay out of trouble, and don't worry if the Mustang was going a second or two faster per lap.

I was to do an hour and a half, then come in for fuel. Freddy Baker (team leader and Bedford, Ohio, Porsche+Audi vice president) would finish the final hour and a half. Barring an accident or mechanical troubles, no one could possibly catch us. There was no need to push to stay ahead, so we'd let them do the pushing. The champagne (for celebrating what would be our third consecutive Nelson Ledges 24-hour victory) was already on ice.

We were a little down on power, possibly due to a clogged catalytic converter, but otherwise our prototype Porsche 944 Turbo was running fine after 21 hours of hard racing. There were notable exceptions, but most of the slower traffic was moving over courteously to let us through. The car was understeering just a bit, and our only other problem was above-normal water temperature. I switched on the heater to help cool it; better to roast my feet than fry the engine.

At one point, the Guldstrand Camaro came up from behind on the main straight and I politely handed him the line into turn one. He was running third, no threat to us (as far as we knew) but pushing hard to catch the Mustang.

A few laps later, everything started turning sour. Pit Boss Mike Puskar came up on the radio asking me to pick up the pace. All of a sudden, he said, the hourly standings showed us only *one* lap up. This was typical for this event; the scoring is always confused and everyone protests it constantly to get credit for the proper number of laps. It was hard to believe, but somehow the Mustang guys had found seven laps and convinced the scorers they were right. There was nothing I could do but drive a little harder and thread my way through the traffic more aggressively.

I noticed our second team car, a standard (non-turbo) 944 competing in the showroom stock GT class, off in the tirewall with front-end damage. Within a couple of laps, however, one of the

excellent tow truck crews had him on a rope and headed back to the pits.

It was just about one o'clock, two hours to go, when something in our car's front suspension broke with a bang in the middle of the 110mph "kink" in the long back straight. Suddenly I was careening across the grass, trying to stop, regain control, or at least get it spinning to scrub off speed. Nothing worked. The car wouldn't turn and it wouldn't stop. I couldn't even pick my spot.

I hit at what seemed like 60 mph, plowed over and through a tirewall on one side of an access road and came to rest in a second pile of tires on the other side. The corner workers ran over, asked if I was okay (I was) and what had happened. I said I thought I'd lost a wheel. They said the wheels were all still there. Try to back it up, they suggested. I tried, but it wouldn't move. The wheels were there all right, but the front ones weren't attached to the car anymore.

I radioed to tell Mike what had happened. "Can we fix it?" he asked. "No way," I said, "the thing's torn up pretty badly."

The tow truck arrived to drag it out of the tires. The nose was smashed, parts were hanging from what was left of the front suspension, and the workers were tossing various loose pieces into the cockpit. I rode back in the truck, only to find our unbelievably hard-working crew gesturing frantically. They had finished rebuilding our other crashed car and were ready to tackle this one.

Twenty-three minutes later, Freddy pulled it out and accelerated down the pitlane to a hearty round of applause from the onlookers crowded around our pits. We might not be able to win this race, but we *were* going to finish it.

I think we finished third. The Camaro apparently won, with the Mustang a close second. I say "think" and "apparently" because this was another Nelson Ledges Longest Day that would end in protest and controversy, with nobody knowing exactly where they had finished. Maybe this week, maybe next, there will be official results, after all the protests are settled and the scoring tapes are counted and recounted.

This race began four years ago as a fun enduro for amateur teams in unmodified "Showroom Stock" cars. Several auto writers drove with various teams to add interest, and the first year's event went to a Saab 99 Turbo co-driven by two *Road & Track* editors. I

co-drove a dealer-sponsored Porsche 924 that started from the pole position but failed to finish.

The following year saw the creation of a "Prototype" class for cars not yet eligible under SCCA Showroom Stock rules. The intention was to attract factory participation, and it has, along with a growing number of journalist drivers. I've been fortunate to drive the last three races with Baker's team, winning two years ago with a 924 and last year with a new 944, despite the best efforts of Ford, Chevrolet, Datsun, Mazda and many others.

It's a wonderful concept, but it's gotten out of control. Most of the factory "prototypes" are serious racers disguised as street machines (future high-performance models not yet on the market) prepared and driven by pros and amateur champions. Our spies tell us the SVO Mustang, for example, had quick-change brakes and a water injection system through the washer fluid reservoir. One of the Camaro entries was caught with a 30-gallon fuel tank and had to change it, but who knows what other "innovations" it had. Baker, too, played the future-model game this year with a factory-prepared (in Germany) 944 Turbo that won't be introduced until sometime next year.

Then there's the inadequacy of the facility for what has evolved into a very serious event. The pits are narrow, overcrowded and dangerous. One tricky, dangerous "carousel" turn becomes more treacherous each year as its surface breaks up into tire-eating, wheel-bending, suspension-breaking potholes and flying chunks of concrete that could fly through a windshield. Every year the track management promises improvements; every year conditions get worse.

Finally, a serious race needs professional organization. A lot of very competent and dedicated volunteers work their hearts out to put on this event—not to mention the time and money that goes into competing—and it's a shame to have the thing overshadowed by unpredictable, capricious rule enforcement ("The speed limit in the pits is 35 mph. I don't care what your speedometer says—if we think you're speeding, *you're speeding*, and we'll call you in and read the Cleveland phonebook to you.") and a scoring system that simply doesn't work.

One of three things has to happen: the race goes back to being a fun, low-pressure event run by and for amateurs; the organizers get their act together and force the track to provide a respectable facility at which to stage a professionally run event; or another track (Mid-Ohio, for example) steals the show by scheduling its own identical race on the same date.

I will say one thing good about Nelson Ledges: The tirewall concept, which has softened the impacts of thousands of out-of-control race cars and prevented countless injuries and deaths, was invented there. I hate to think what might have happened if the wall I hit in Freddy's Porsche had been steel or concrete instead of stacks of worn-out tires. ■



Witzenburg's B.F. Goodrich-equipped Porsche 944 Turbo.