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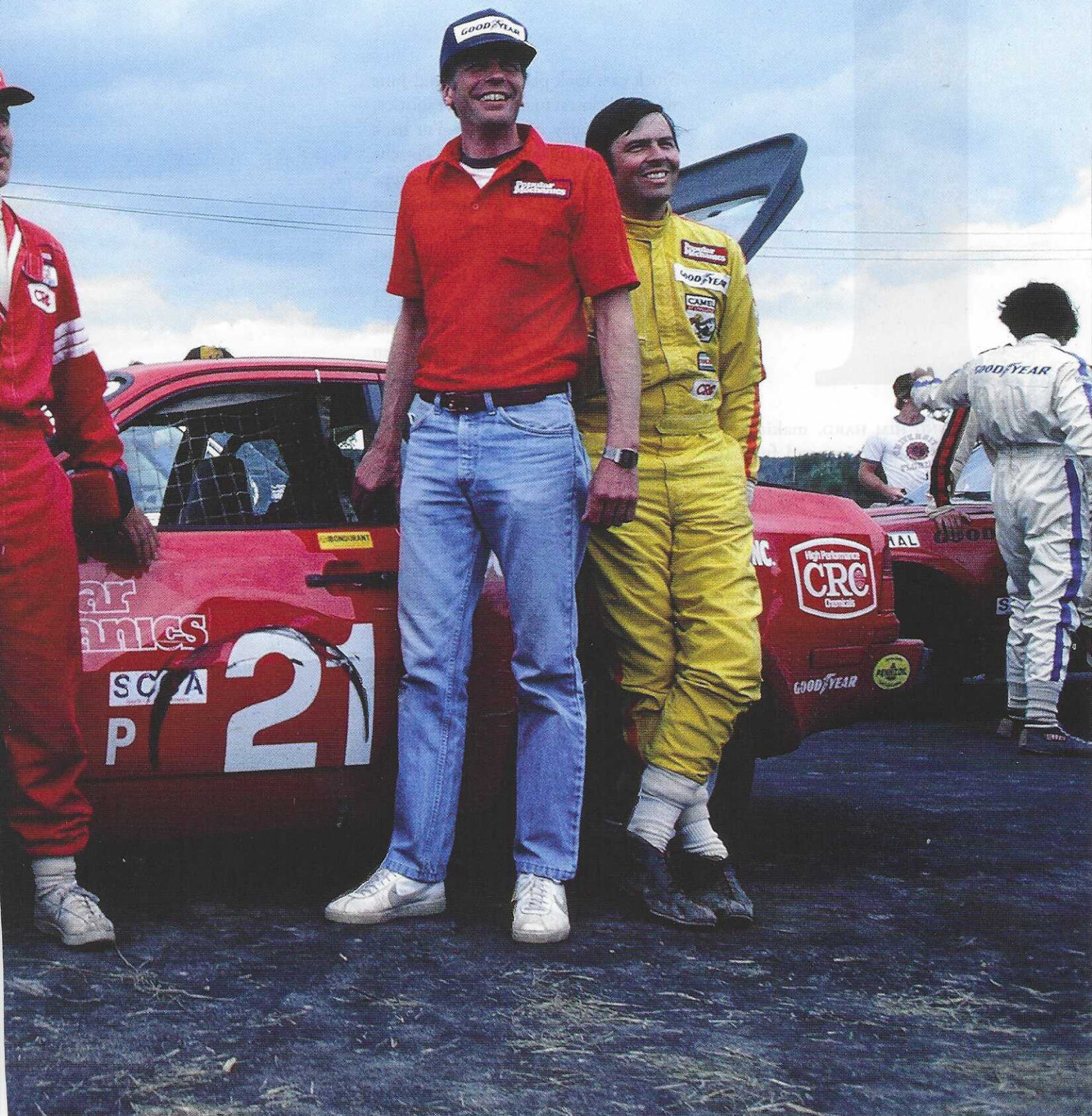


THE LONGEST DAY

WORDS BY GARY WITZENBURG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOM CANNELL



Let's go back to when Nelson Ledges, a club track in northeast Ohio, hosted one of the most important endurance races on the calendar.



I

'M PUSHING HIM HARD, making him use more brakes, tires and fuel, and his tactics are getting on my nerves. If blocking was racing, I think, this guy would be national champion. I keep hoping for him to make a mistake, a bobble, a miscue of some sort that will get him out of shape enough to let me slip by. But it's not he who makes the mistake.

As I rush up on his tail for what seems like the hundredth time coming out of the kink, there is a much slower car in the middle of the track. The Mustang ducks left. I try the right, thinking the other car will squeeze him off to the inside and leave me room around the outside.

Instead, it dodges right.

I manage to miss it but end up with all four wheels in the still-damp grass. One lazy half-spin and a short wait for traffic later, I'm back underway. The Mustang is long gone.

For this 1982 Longest Day at Nelson Ledges—so named because this race for SCCA Showroom

Stock cars took place on the mid-June weekend closest to the summer solstice, the longest day of the year—I'm back with Freddie Baker in his new Porsche 944. We had to run in the Prototype class because it was an '83 model not yet available at U.S. dealerships.

As Detroit editor for Popular Mechanics at the time, I helped convince Executive Editor Joe Oldham that sponsoring Baker's Porsche against cars backed by—and co-driven by editors from—Car and Driver, Road & Track, MotorTrend and a slew of others would be good PR and, win or lose, a fun story.

Judging by the cars and teams there, this was the toughest Longest Day field yet. Besides our beautifully prepared 944 fielded by Baker's team—winners the previous year—the competition included a pair of turbocharged Ford SVO Mustangs for Car and Driver and Road & Track plus two 5.0-liter Mustangs, one co-driven by three past national champions, two of whom were Ford engineers. All were also in the Prototype class.

Toyota and Mazda also entered our class—a Celica Supra for Toyota and an RX-7 GSL SE for Mazda. Chrysler sent a matched set of 2.2-liter Dodge Chargers for one of the slower classes.

But the car that would give us the most trouble was a stock-looking but very trick Camaro Z28 entered by Dick Guldstrand Racing and (surreptitiously) supported by Chevrolet.

Everything went well in practice, and Baker qualified us second on the grid, about a second back from the Camaro and a tenth up on the Car and

The big magazines ran for bragging rights at Nelson Ledges. Representing Popular Mechanics: Freddie Baker, Bob Nikel and Gary Witzenburg.



Driver turbo Mustang. Our car felt wonderful, its fully independent suspension, 50/50 weight distribution and vented, four-wheel disc brakes helping us make up in cornering and braking what we lost to the more powerful V8 and turbo cars on the straights.

It was also very stable, forgiving and easy to drive quickly through the turns, even around the bumpy Ohio track. Its only vice was a tendency for the rear end to step out a bit under hard braking into a turn.

The adventure begins with two parade laps: 40 colorful cars piloted by 40 eager drivers snaking two by two around the 2-mile Nelson Ledges course. The second time by, the tension thickens as the drivers narrow their concentration to the starter with his green flag.

As expected, the Camaro wins the drag race to Turn 1, but Baker tries

to pass him on the outside—on a track still wet from an early rain. One red car accelerates out of the turn, while the other comes out backward, careening across the trackside grass.

It's our Porsche.

"Nuts!" I say to no one in particular.

It takes him a while to muscle through the traffic back up to fourth and another hour and a half, thrashing the car as hard as it will go, to take over the lead. Then he pits for fuel. My turn to drive. Our crew dumps in 16 gallons of gas, checks the oil, tires and all the usual stuff, and in a bit over 2 minutes, I'm off and charging.

Shortly after turning over the car to Bob Nikel after my first stint—he was formerly a mechanic at Stoddard Imported Cars—he is hit by a slower car in the kink. He takes a wild, spinning ride through the pucker brush with a crunched left-front fender. He



picks up a lot of mud and grass but no serious damage.

That, fortunately, is our last mistake in what turns out to be a high-pressure, 24-hour sprint. The action never lets up.

Things look good a minute before 1 a.m., though: While coming out of the second turn, I see a set of headlights staring back at me from off the track on the right. It's the Camaro, our nemesis, ass-first into the tire wall. The next time around, he's still there. And the next. Then he's gone.

As I complete that lap and accelerate past the pits, I see him limping in on a flat rear tire—apparently the cause of his spin. By the time his crew has replaced the tire, thoroughly checked the car and sent him back out, we've put almost five laps on him.

A couple hours later, the Camaro is off again, this time backward over the

tire wall outside the first turn. More laps are lost while a wrecker struggles to get it free.

By 4 a.m., we're back in the lead. But the pressure is still on. That damned Camaro, miraculously undamaged, has been flying through the night. Despite two off-course excursions, it's somehow breathing down our necks just one lap back. And so is that fast V8 Mustang. We're flogging our sturdy Porsche as hard as we can, but both tormenters could circulate faster by a second or more a lap when they chose to.

But they're using up brakes, tires and fuel faster than we are, so they have to pit more often. We're getting more than 2 hours on our 16-gallon tank, 6 hours on our left-side Goodyears, and much more on the rights (since the course has just two left-hand turns). We go more than 12 hours on a set of brake pads.

Porsche didn't yet have its 944 in U.S. dealerships, so the Popular Mechanics team ran theirs in the Prototype class.



By midday Sunday, we've squeezed out four laps on both of them, but it looks as if we'll have to pit for fuel twice more and change drivers at least once. Our left-front wheel bearing is audibly protesting the non-stop pounding it's been getting from Nelson Ledges' bumpy, high-g right turns. The engine is running hot, and Freddie has the heater on full blast trying to keep it cool.

I am due to take over next when he pits for fuel with 2½ hours to go. But at the last second, Joe, our executive editor, comes on the radio: Freddie should stay in the car for an extra shift, and he's fine with that. Our crew completes the stop, which includes installing two new left-side Goodyears, in an amazing 2 minutes and 1 second. As the race leaders, all eyes are on us. When Freddie takes off

again, everyone gives a hearty round of applause for the crew's performance.

I am disappointed but understand Joe's reasoning. Then someone remembers that the rules, for safety reasons, prohibit anyone from driving more than 4 consecutive hours. So, by rule, Freddie can't finish the race. After some discussion, I am elected to run the final hour. I'm elated, but now the pressure is really on.

If we can keep up a fast pace and have no mechanical problems, we will win. But what if the wheel bearing gets worse and needs to be changed? Or I make a driving mistake? Or another car spins in front of us? If anything at all goes wrong, we will lose. Like Charlie Brown, I will be a hero—or a goat.

Freddie charges in at 2 p.m. sharp, an hour before the finish. With a few extra gallons of gas and a super-quick check by our tired but still enthusiastic crew,



I'm off. I get up to speed immediately, very aware that the Camaro and the Mustang are still pushing as hard as they can. And that everyone—competitors, officials, corner workers and spectators spread around the course—is watching.

The slower traffic, still thick after 23 hours, is thankfully good to me, spreading like the Red Sea to let me through. After several laps, the Mustang comes up from behind and motors by on the back straight. But I get a message on our radio that he is several laps down and not to worry. Then it slows to my pace and stays right in my sights, as if tempting me to risk a pass.

Then the radio crackles in my ear: "The Camaro has pitted for a tire and a splash of fuel." For the first time since the race began, the pressure is off.

I can ease off a bit and take it slower to the finish. Or can I? What if the

race scoring is off—as it often is—and our lead is not what they say it is? I keep the hammer down just in case. The heater is still on to help cool the engine, and it's hot in the cockpit. But all I can think of is completing these last few laps quickly, cleanly and safely.

At last, the clock on my instrument panel shows 3 p.m. Coming out of the final turn, I see our red-shirted crew and most everyone else crowded along the pit straight guardrail, shouting and waving.

But no sign of a checkered flag.

One more lap, I think to myself. It has to come out soon, right?

Sure enough, next time around, there it is, the most beautiful sight in racing. I throw both hands in the air in triumph—and relief. As I cruise around on the cool-off lap, waving back at applauding spectators and corner workers, I honk the horn like a New York cabbie. 🚗

Despite a little car-on-car action—and a few spins into the grass—the 944 made it to the checker. Then the celebrations could begin.

