

# The Longest Day 1982

Defending our title in the new 944

STORY BY GARY WITZENBURG PHOTOS BY THOM CANNELL

It starts with two parade laps. 40 colorful cars guided by 40 nervous drivers snake two by two around the twisty, two-mile Nelson Ledges Road Course. The second time by, the tension thickens like summer sweat as drivers narrow their collective concentration toward the starter's flag. The pack edges toward the starting line. The pole-sitting Camaro and our second-qualifying 944 hold their speed to keep the turbo cars behind them off boost. Racers being racers, everyone wants to be first into Turn 1 and lead the first lap.

When the green flag falls, 40 feet hit the gas, 40 engines build power, 40 drivers grip the steering wheel a little tighter. As expected, the Camaro wins the drag race to the first turn. But Fred Baker, in our Porsche 944, is trying to pass him on the outside. They sweep into the fast first turn side by side, inches apart, on a track that's still wet from an early rain. One comes out accelerating toward Turn 2. The other emerges backwards, careening across the trackside grass — it's our red 944...



It's 1982, and the Quaker State Longest Day at Nelson Ledges is the second most important 24-hour auto race in the country. Actually, it's America's *only* other 24-hour race besides February's famous 24 Hours of Daytona. Run on the weekend closest to the summer solstice, the "other 24" takes place on the longest day of the year. It was conceived by the folks who run Nelson Ledges Road Course near Warren, Ohio, and the Northeast Ohio Region of the Sports Car Club of America. Open to "Showroom Stock" cars, it's meant to be a fun endurance event inexpensive enough that almost anyone can play. Of course, good intentions can go awry.

The first Longest Day ran in 1980. I co-drove a dealer-sponsored 924 that qualified fastest and started from the pole but failed to finish. A factory-backed, professionally run Saab Turbo won that event, and two of its drivers were *Road & Track* editors. Second went to a factory-assisted Mazda RX-7 prepared, entered, and run by *Car and Driver*. Thus began the factory-vs.-factory, magazine-vs.-magazine competition that quickly became a tradition.

I returned in 1981 to co-drive Fred Baker's Porsche+Audi of Bedford, Ohio, 924. A new wrinkle was a "Prototype" class for cars too new or too modified to qualify under the SCCA's strict Showroom Stock rules. Ford entered an immaculately prepared Ford EXP for *Car and Driver* and a mechanically identical Mercury LN-7 for *Road & Track*. A pair of factory-assisted Datsun 280ZX Turbos showed up with drivers from *Autoweek*. Our 924 ended up winning its class, and overall.

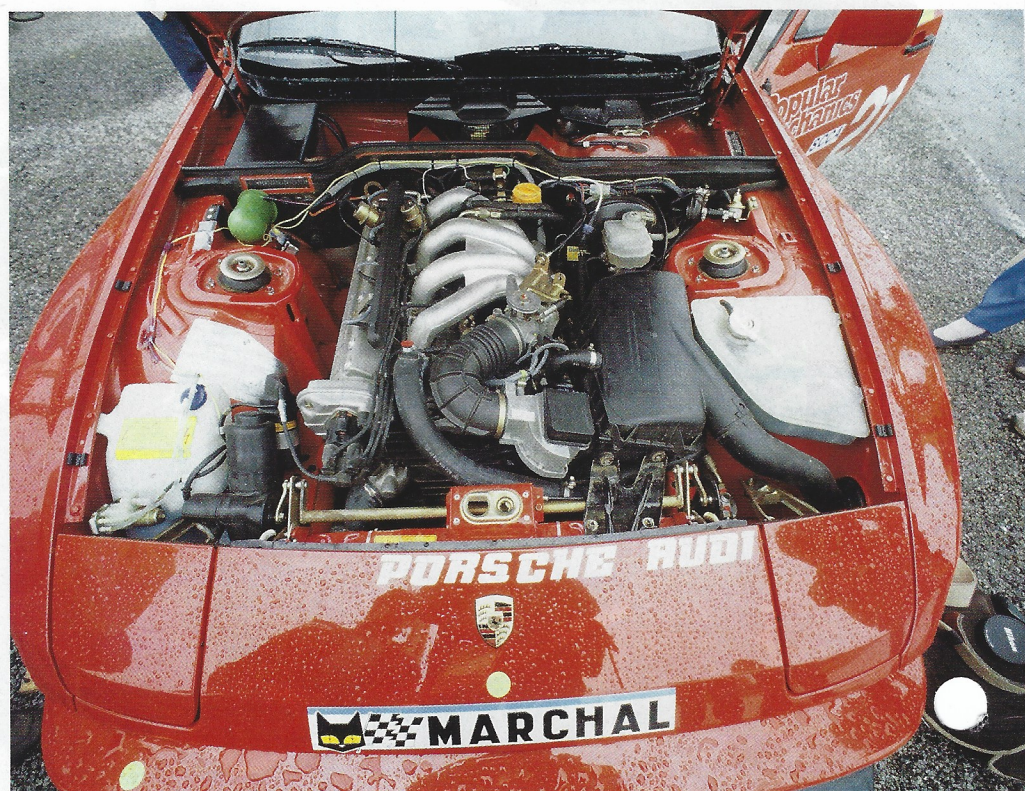
With 1982's race looking bigger and better, the opportunity seemed right for *Popular Mechanics* to get involved. I was Detroit editor at the time, and Baker and co-driver Bob Nikel had decided to try and repeat our 1981 win with the new 944. After what must have seemed like a hundred phone conversations with *PM* executive editor Joe Oldham, a deal was struck. It would be a team effort between Bedford Porsche+Audi and *Popular Mechanics* — with Baker, Nikel, myself, and *PM* auto editor Tony Assenza driving and Oldham as team manager. Added support would come from CRC Chemicals and Goodyear.

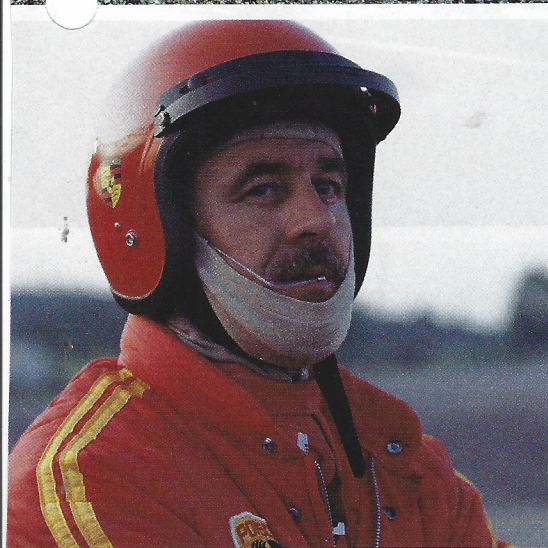
Our beautifully prepared 944 was too new to be classified and had to run in the Prototype class, and it looked like the car to beat during Friday morning practice. The competition was strong, however.



Top: Longest Day 1982 winner, an early 944. Right: Fred Baker suited up to drive.

Below: 1983 944 engine bay sans power steering reservoir. Below, right: 944 follows Mustang.





Ford's Special Vehicle Operations unit showed up with a brace of turbocharged and intercooled Mustangs for arch-rivals *Car and Driver* and *Road & Track*. There were also a pair of fast 5.0-liter Prototype Mustang V8s, one driven by three past SCCA National Champions, two of them Ford engineers. Toyota and Mazda were represented by a pair each of Prototype-class Celica Supras and RX-7 GSLs. Dodge had a matched set of Charger 2.2s in the Showroom Stock B class, one of them factory entered. Even Peugeot was there with a factory turbodiesel 505.

The media were represented in a variety of cars. In addition to *C/D* and *R&T*, there were journalist drivers from *Auto-week*, *Motor Trend*, *Import Car*, *On Track*, *The New York Times*, the TV show *Motor-week* and, of course, *PM*. But way down at the far end of the pits was the team that would give us the most trouble: Dick Guldstrand Racing with an immaculate, stock-looking but very trick Prototype-class Chevy Camaro Z-28 financed and supported by Chevrolet.

Everything went well in practice that day and into the night, and Baker qualified us second, about a second in back of the Camaro and a tenth of a second up on the *C/D* turbo Mustang. Our 944 was wonderful, its independent suspension, 50/50 distribution, and four-wheel ventilated disc brakes helping to make up in cornering and braking what we lost to the turbo and V8 cars on the straights. It was stable, forgiving, and easy to drive fast through the turns, even on Nelson Ledges' nasty surfaces. Its only vice: a tendency for the rear end to step out a bit under hard braking.

It takes Fred several minutes to recover from his first-turn spin and charge back through race traffic to fourth place. After another 90-minute thrash, he takes the lead. When he pits for fuel, I'm up.

The crew dumps in 15 gallons, checks the oil, the tires, and all the usual stuff. Freddy helps buckle me in, and in a little over two minutes, I'm off. Accelerating out of the pits, I know everyone expects me to drive as hard as Baker did. *Damn*, I think, *this is no way to run an endurance race*.

I work up to speed and push as hard as I dare, threading through slower cars as quickly and carefully as possible. With 40 cars on a two-mile course, the traffic at times seems like rush-hour. I see the *C/D* turbo Mustang coming up from behind.

It has much more power and better acceleration out of turns, so I can't hold him off for long. A few laps later, he rockets by on the long back straight. I try to stay with him for awhile, and do. But before long, he disappears into the distance as I remind myself there are 21 hours to go.

Many laps go by before I catch the *C/D* Mustang. Its driver isn't going as quickly as before, but he picks up his pace when he sees me in his mirrors and the chase begins anew. I attach the 944 to his bumper like a trailer, drafting him as much as possible down the straights, crowding him into corners, occasionally sticking my nose inside him, looking for a way to pass. But every time I move alongside, he chops me off so closely I have to nail the brakes and sometimes put a wheel in the dirt.

Three hours in, this idiot is driving like it's a 30-minute sprint race. He's willing to wreck us both, it seems, to prevent me from getting by. Normally, I'd be content to follow at a prudent distance, but he's going a second or two a lap slower than I can, holding me up, costing us valuable time that might make a difference later.

Apparently, his Mustang's brakes are hot from his earlier, faster pace. He brakes sooner than I want to for the fast right-hand Turns 1 and 2. He fends me off in the third-gear, left-hand Turn 4 and the long, bumpy, decreasing-radius "Carousel" right, then pulls away on power down the back straight. But I catch him at the 110-mph right-hand "Kink" toward the end of the straight. As he lifts and brakes slightly, I sail through flat-out at 6000 rpm in fourth without lifting.

I try a pass going into the next third-gear left a bit deeper under braking, and the 944's nose nearly gets crunched. I follow him through the tight final turn, tuck in under his bumper and try to stay with him down the front straight, past the start/finish and into Turn 1 again. This goes on lap after lap. I push him, making him use his brakes, tires, and fuel faster than he wants to. But his tactics are getting on my nerves. *If blocking were racing*, I think, *this guy would be National Champion*. I keep hoping for a mistake on his part, a bobble, a miscue of some sort that will get him out of shape long enough for me slip by. But when the mistake comes, he's not the one who makes it.

As I rush up on his tail coming out of the Kink for what seems like the hun-

dreadth time, a much slower car is in the middle of the track. The Mustang ducks left. I try going right, hoping the slower car will squeeze the Mustang off to the inside of the next left turn and leave me room around the outside. Instead, it dodges right, unaware I'm there. I juke right but run out of track. With all four wheels in the still-damp grass, the 944 makes a lazy half spin. I'm quickly back underway, but the Mustang is long gone.

**A**n hour later, our man Bob Nikel is hit by a slower car as he's passing it in the Kink and takes a ride through the pucker-brush. Our 944's left front fender is crunched and it has sucked up a lot of mud and grass, but it's the last mistake we will make in the high-pressure sprint to the finish.

Before long, the C/D turbo Mustang I'd been hounding suffers a massive brake failure and checks into the pits, which puts us back in the lead, with the Camaro a lap behind us. By the sixth hour, a very quick V8 Mustang has caught and passed us, and we're less than a lap up on the Camaro. An hour later, we're still second with all three cars on the same lap. And so it goes through the night.

**J**ust before 1:00 AM, we get a major break. Coming out of Turn 2, I see a set of headlights staring back at me from off on the right. It's the Camaro, backwards into the protective tirewall against the guardrail. 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, he's limping in on a flat rear tire, the apparent cause of his spin. By the time his crew has replaced the tire, we've put almost five laps on the Camaro.

**T**wo hours later, Guldstrand's Camaro is off again, this time backwards over the tire wall outside the first turn. More laps are lost while a wrecker struggles to get him free. By 4:00 AM, we're back in the lead, but the pressure is still on.

Miraculously undamaged, the Camaro continues flying through the darkness. Despite its two off-course excursions, it's breathing down our necks again just one lap back...and so is that fast V8 Mustang. We're flogging our sturdy 944 as hard as we can, but the more powerful tormentors can circulate faster by a second or more a lap when they choose to.

On the other hand, they're using tires, fuel, and brakes more quickly than we are

and have to pit more often. We're getting better than two hours from a 16-gallon tank of unleaded, six hours on our left-side Goodyears, much longer on the rights (since the course has only two left turns), and more than 12 hours on a set of brake pads. By midday Sunday, we've squeezed out a four-lap lead on both of them.

Fred is in our car, but we have to pit for fuel twice more and change drivers at least once more. Our left-front wheel bearing is audibly protesting the nonstop pounding it's getting from Nelson Ledge's bumpy, high-g turns. The engine is running a little warm, so Freddy has the heater on full blast to help cool it.

As Fred prepares to pit for fuel with two-and-a-half hours to go, I'm on deck. Then Oldham radios to ask Fred to stay in the car for an extra shift. He agrees. Our amazing crew completes the stop, which includes two left tires, in two minutes, one second. When Baker takes off from the pits again, everyone breaks into a hearty round of applause at the crew's performance. We're the leaders, so all eyes are upon us.

While I'm sorely disappointed I won't get to finish the race, I know it's still a tight race — and Freddy is driving beautifully. I understand the call completely. Then someone remembers a rule that, for safety reasons, prohibits anyone from driving more than four hours straight. So Baker can't finish the race, after all...

After some discussion, I'm elected to do the final hour. I'm elated, but now the pressure is on. If we can keep up a fast pace and have no problems, we'll win. If the noisy wheel bearing gets worse and we have to change it, if I make a mistake and put our 944 off the road, if another car squeezes me off in a turn or spins in front of me and I can't avoid an accident.... If anything goes wrong, at all, we could lose.

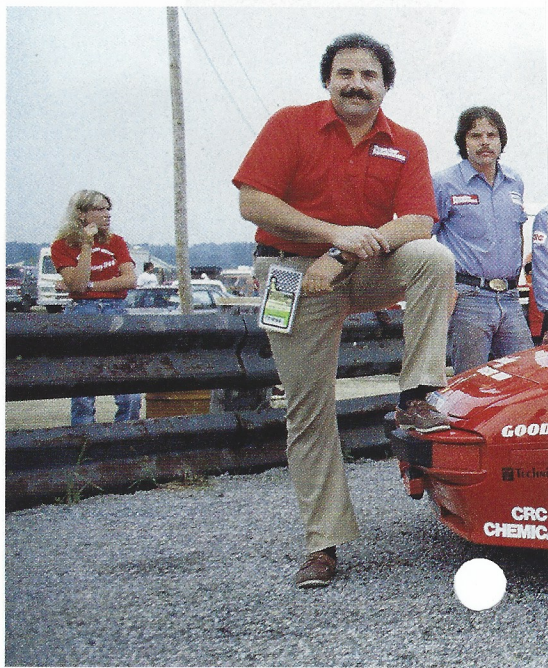
Like *Peanuts'* Charlie Brown, I'll be the hero...or the goat.

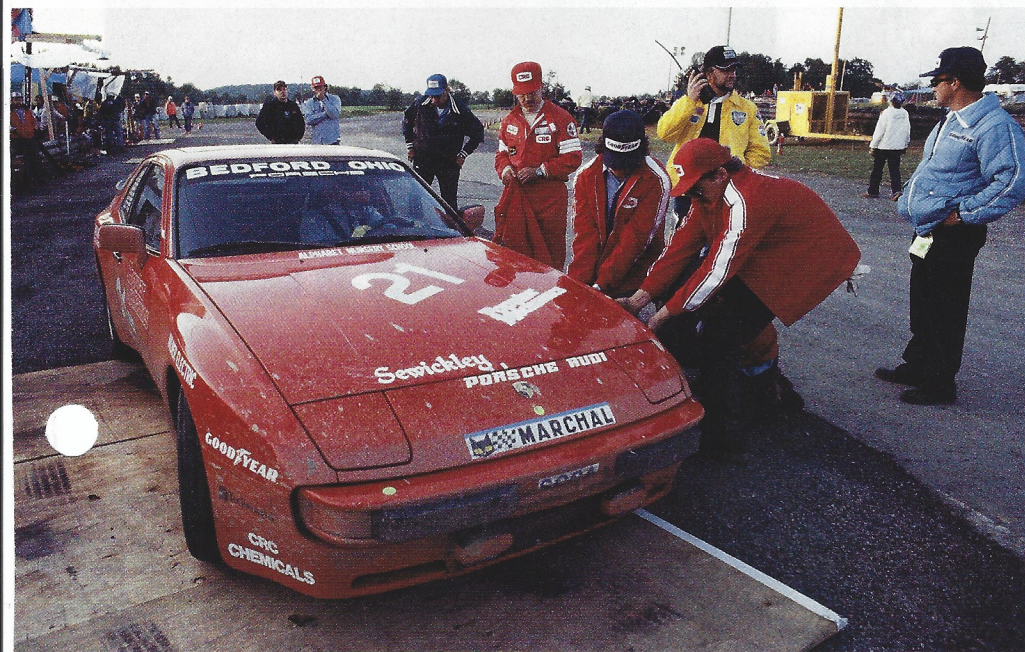
**B**aker comes in at 2:00 PM sharp, an hour before the end. After a few extra gallons of gas and a super-quick check by our tired but enthusiastic crew, I'm off. I get up to speed immediately, aware that the Camaro and V8 Mustang are pushing as hard as they can. Everyone — competitors, officials, spectators spread around the course, *everyone* — is watching.

Slower traffic, still thick after 23 hours, is thankfully kind to me. After several laps, the Mustang comes up from behind and motors by on the back straight. Freddy



Top: At race start, two by two, the Camaro beats the 944 to the first turn. Right: Crew pulls out crunched left fender. Below: Nelson Ledges at night. Bottom: Joe Oldham, left foot on bumper, smiles next to the crew and drivers (in the foreground, from left) Gary Witzenburg, Tony Assenza, Bob Nikel, and Fred Baker.





radios to tell me it's several laps down and not to worry. Then it slows to my pace and stays in my sights, as if tempting me to risk a pass. I don't take the bait.

A Datsun 280ZX, still in a tight race in its class with a Triumph TR8, comes out of the pits just ahead. The driver is flailing like a madman, half out of control. That's all I need. I back off a bit and give him some room. If he's going to have a wreck, I won't be participating. At one point, he's cut off by a slower car in a gaggle of traffic, dodges left, then right, goes off the track and back on, almost collecting the Mustang in the process.

The radio crackles in my ear. The Camaro has pitted for a tire and a splash of gas. For the first time since the race began, the pressure is off! I can ease up a bit and take it slower to the finish — or can I? It's hot in the cockpit with the heater still on to help cool the engine, but all I can think about is completing these last few laps quickly, cleanly, and safely.

At last, the clock on the Porsche's dashboard shows 3:00 PM as I accelerate out of the final hairpin. Our red-shirted crew and most everyone else is crowded along the pit guardrail, shouting and waving. But there is no sign of the checkered flag.

One more lap...

Next time around, there it is, the most beautiful sight in racing. I throw both hands in the air in triumph.

Things after that blended into a delirious blur of handshakes, grins, posing for photographers, swigging cold beers, Oldham being interviewed on television, more grinning, and more posing. Assenza, due to inexperience, didn't get to drive much during the race, so he pilots our victory lap with the rest of us piled into the back of the 944, smiling and grinning and laughing until our faces hurt.

We had done it! Porsche's new 944, neither the most powerful car nor the fastest, helped us overcome everything our competitors and the track had thrown up against us. After being manhandled at the limit of control for 24 hours of high-pressure competition, it never let us down.

We had repeated our '81 victory in this far tougher, far more competitive Longest Day and once again had beaten not just all the other cars but — importantly, especially to the very competitive Oldham — all the other magazines. *It will make a great story, I thought. And it did.* ■