

YOU JUDGE IT...4 DR. VETTE

KEEPIN' TRACK of

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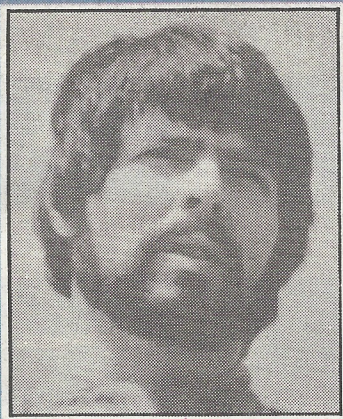
CORVETTES



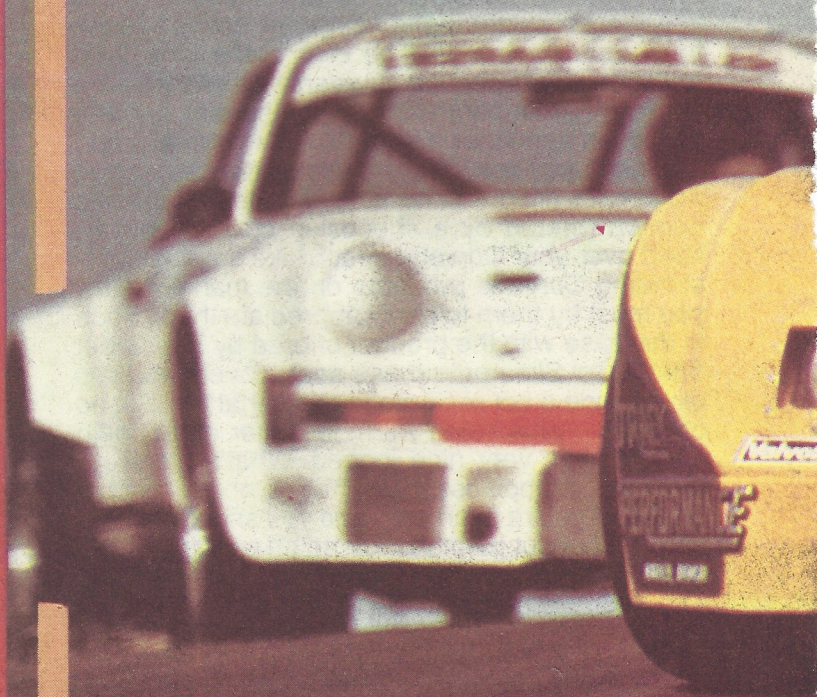
What's it really like out there ?

Co-driving Rick Hay's
600-hp Wide-Bodied
Corvette in IMSA's
Camel GT Series.

By Gary Witzenburg

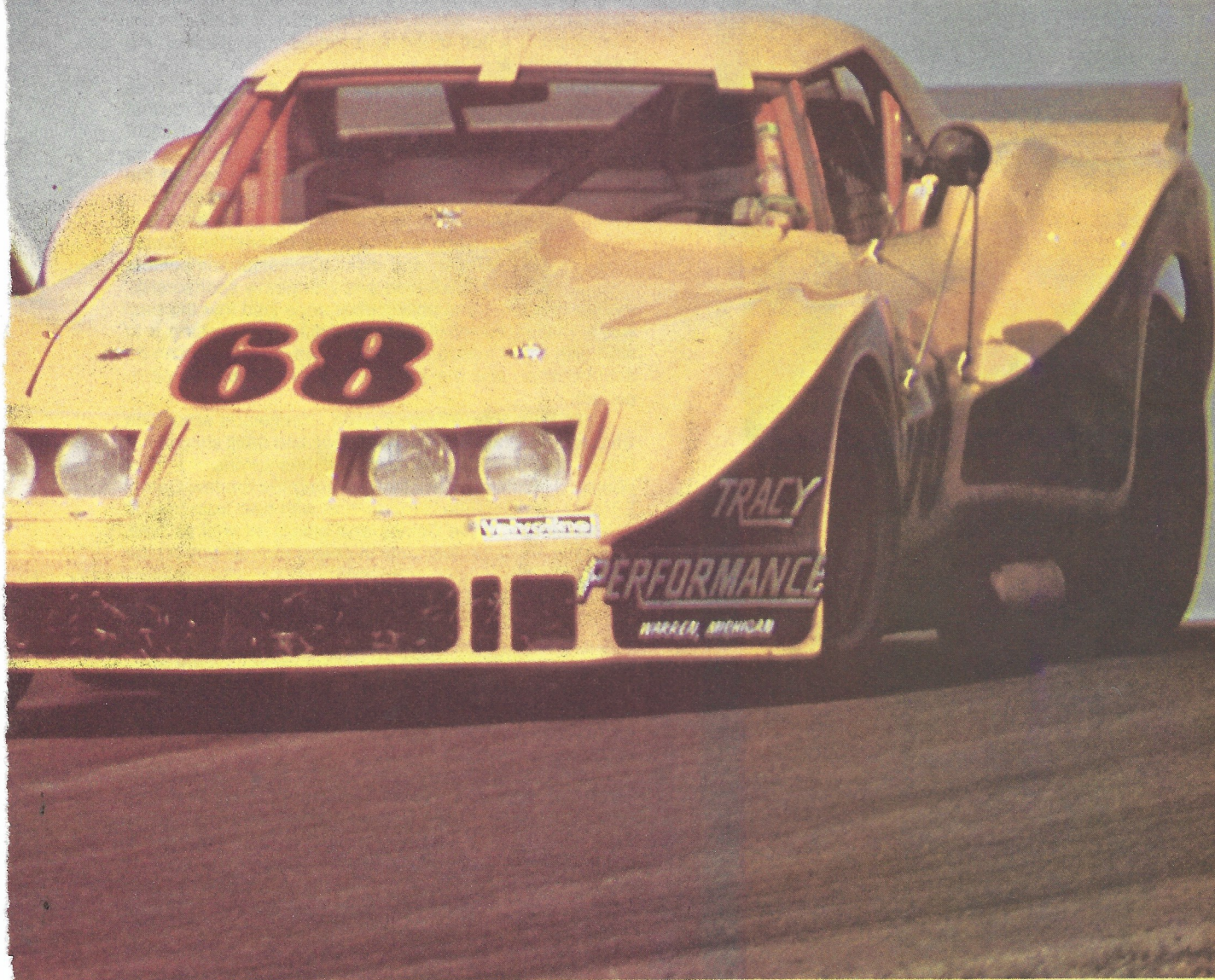


A bearded Witzenburg
stands ready and anxious
to take over the Corvette
at Mid-Ohio.



The minute I got on the brakes at the end of Mid-Ohio's 160-mph long back straight, I knew I was in trouble. It was only my third practice lap in Rick Hay's monster racing 'Vette and my very first try at establishing a braking point for the medium-speed, right-hand turn that follows that straight.

After a couple of warm-up laps to get the feel of Rick's car, I had picked a large vertical white stripe on the inside guardrail as a likely spot to begin the braking and downshifting sequence that would slow me and the car down



sufficiently to negotiate the turn. But it was a poor first choice; I was already in too deep.

Standing on the brakes as hard as I could and struggling to keep the car going more-or-less straight, I could see the corner rushing up much too fast. I knew I'd never make it, and I started thinking about the smooth, slippery grass on the outside of the turn — which leads to a dirt bank on which many a car had been thoroughly disarranged.

Rick's last words as he had helped buckle me in started ringing in my ears: "I don't care how fast you go," he had warned, "but whatever you do, don't get the car off

course!" Even a slight trip through the weeds could tear up the low-slung front fiberglass bodywork, cut an expensive racing tire . . . or worse.

I grabbed third gear and let out the clutch as quickly and smoothly as possible to let the engine compression help slow me. Rick's car was not set up for heel-toeing at that time, and getting off the brake to blip the gas and ease the downshift was out of the question. The engine roared. The rear tires lost traction momentarily and the Corvette fishtailed side-to-side as its clutch tried to match engine and rear axle speeds in the lower gear; and I kept it going in

the right direction. Another quick shift down into second, brakes still full on, brought more protest from the driveline and additional rear-end gyrations.

By now, I was completely out of room. The choice was going straight off through the grass . . . or launching it over the low dirt bank . . . or trying to make the corner and risking

a wild spin. A spin seemed the better choice (unless the next guy through couldn't stop and nailed me broadside in mid-rotation). There was no more time to think.

Still braking as hard as I could, I aimed the big 'Vette to the right, toward the "apex" at the inside. Miraculously, the front tires gripped just enough to get me through the apex . . . but then the rears started sliding toward the outside. The thing to do at this point was get back on the gas and power-slide on through — which I managed to do, the left rear tire just catching a puff of dirt as it slid off, then back on the track. I made it!

It took another couple of laps to settle my nerves enough to start looking for a better braking point for that turn, but I never did take Rick's car quite deep enough into it after that first scare. Better safe than sorry, as the saying goes. I managed to stay out of trouble the rest of the weekend . . . but there was more excitement to come.

There's a bunch of money involved in building and racing a competitive Camel GT car, and most successful competitors do it full-time and with heavy sponsorship, money or both. Some philosopher once said that the best way to make a million in racing, especially road racing, is to start with three million and work down. The costs can be astronomical, and the prize money is peanuts by comparison.

Yet Rick Hay, a former John Greenwood employee who now runs his own Corvette body and paint shop in the Detroit suburb of Livonia, Michigan, has surprised a lot of people by running consistently among the top few Camel GT cars. His Corvette is home-built with help from friends — Del Markle, Dave Davies and others as well as wife, Mary; but it's as professional in preparation as any on the IMSA circuit.

Another friend, Dennis Tracy of Tracy Performance, has contributed valuable engine and parts help to the effort. Still, corners have to be cut, and at the time I co-drove the car, it was handicapped by a less-than-adequate (for high-speed racing) stock brake system, steel wheels instead of very expensive lightweight racing mags and an engine that was reliable and strong but a bit down on power compared to the top competition.

My experience had been mostly in smaller sedans, sports cars and single-seat, open-wheel formula racers, so Rick gave me a chance to test his Corvette at the nearby 1.5-mile Waterford Hills course near Pontiac, Michigan. It was a handful on the tight Waterford track, but the test session went well enough . . . I only got it off-course once, with no damage, trying my formula car technique in a tricky "S"-turn.

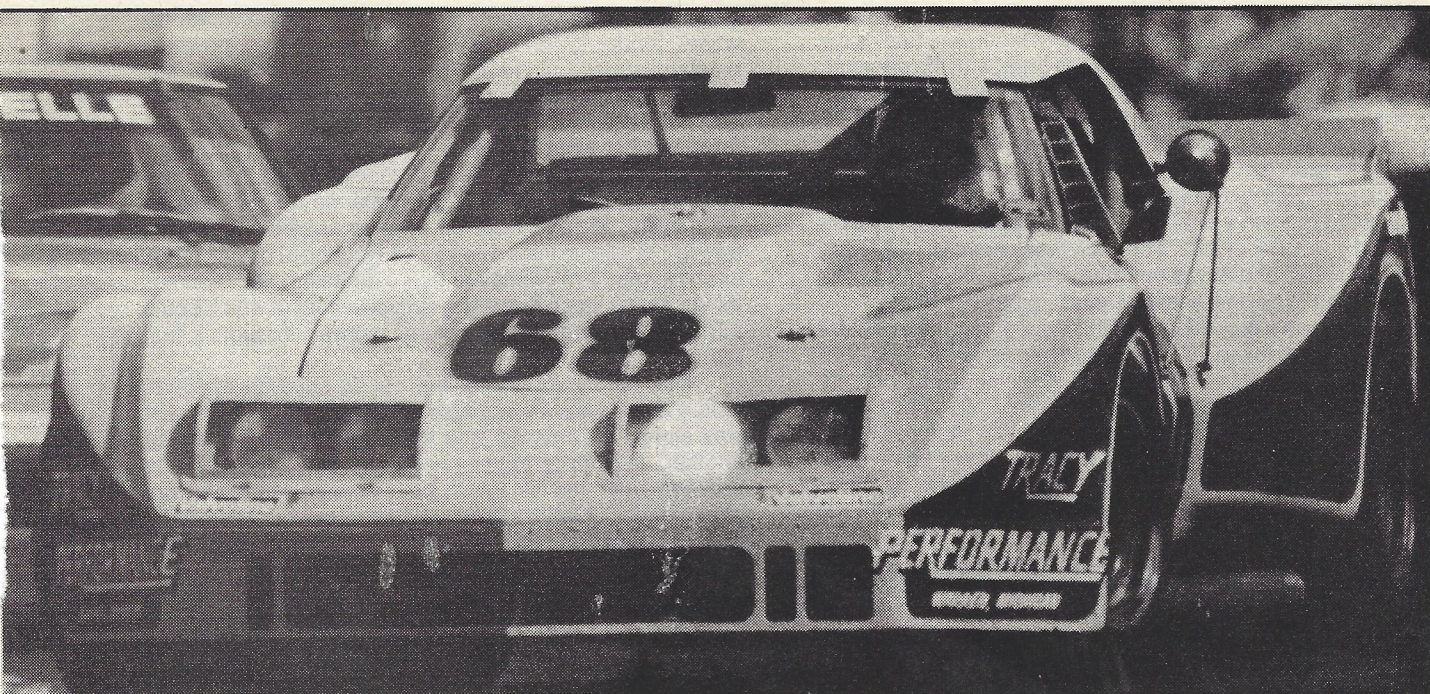
We arrived at the Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course, near Lexington, Ohio, bright and early Saturday morning, well prepared and rarin' to go. I was a bit nervous about racing the 'Vette in the three-hour pro-series event, but at least I already knew the course well and would have only to "learn the car" a little better, I thought, to get it going fairly respectably.

Mid-Ohio is a 2.5-mile assortment of difficult turns connected by various lengths of straightaway, most of them too short to give much of a bother to car or driver. The short start/finish straight leads into the track's fastest turn, a sweeping left-hander (under a spectator bridge) taken at 100-plus mph in third gear. Out of that turn, you get well into 4th gear (140 mph or so) before having to brake and down-shift for a medium-speed right, which is followed by a quick left and then a hairpin right-hander that leads onto the long back straight.

Even Mid-Ohio's longest straightaway requires concentration in a car as fast as Rick's. Shifting through the gears from 2nd through 4th, you'll be streaking past slower cars on both sides, and there's a slight right jog partway down where you have to be on the right "line" at speed or risk going off and collecting the outside guardrail. Then



Dennis Tracy listens to the engine and Rick is just about to slide into the big 'Vette to blip the gas pedal a little. Keeping the engine in a perfect state of tune, along with a working suspension, is a constant battle by everyone in the pit crew.



At speed, Rick Hay in one of Mid-Ohio's right-hand hairpins.

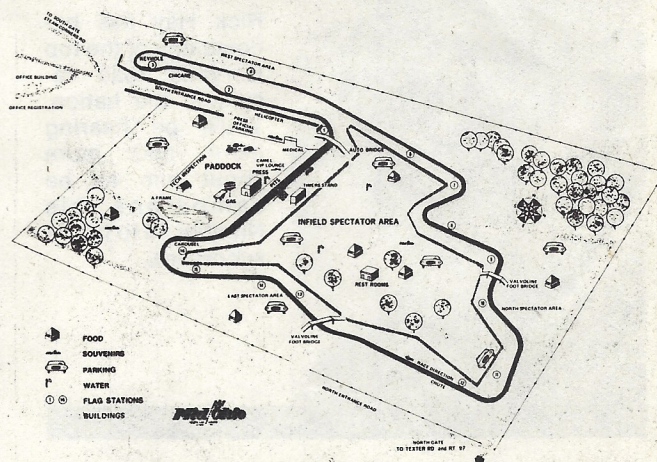
there's the braking point, which must be carefully chosen depending on the car's speed and braking potential... as I found out that third time around. Brake too early and you lose time, and someone will out-brake you and pass you going into the turn. Brake too late and...

After that right-hander at the end of the straight, you're confronted immediately with a tricky, off-camber, 2nd-gear left that leaps up over a hill and down the other side. Surviving that, you accelerate briefly, grab 3rd, then brake hard and downshift again for a 90-degree right-hander. A left jog then leads up a hill to a fast right-hand dogleg... where the suspension gets light and causes the car to drift sideways a bit at the hill's crest.

Another 90-degree right follows that and leads into a fast, medium-length straightaway (really a long curve) that climbs still another hill, under a spectator bridge, where you can gather a good head of steam before having to brake and downshift again for a fast left-hander. A long, slow hair-pin right finally leads to one last left jog before you're back on the start/finish straight. The fastest GT cars accomplish all of this in about a minute and a half, averaging nearly 100 mph in the process.

Unfortunately, Rick's car is set up to perform best on the very fast super-speedway courses such as Daytona, Talladega (Alabama) and Pocono (Pennsylvania) and is at a considerable disadvantage compared to the lighter, more agile Monzas, Porsches and BMW's at a place like Mid-Ohio. At that particular time we had more traction from the huge rear tires than from the smaller fronts, which made the car want to "understeer" right off the slower turns under power. Some chassis and tire pressure adjustment helped, but the best Rick could do during qualifying was a 1:42.9, good for only 19th on the 48-car Camel GT grid. But we figured to move up considerably during the three-hour event through steady, mistake-free driving and the well-prepared Corvette's reliability.

Forty-eight drivers stood on the gas, when the green flag fell unleashing some 24,000 screaming horsepower, and 48 cars crowded into Mid-Ohio's first turn. Soon the racers sorted themselves out a bit and charged in groups around the course as Rick eased his way through the pack, gaining a position here, a couple of places there. There was no hope of catching the first-place battle between the



Here is a good overall view of the Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course with its many challenges and demands.

much-faster Monzas of Al Holbert and Mike Keyser, but we expected to find ourselves well up into the top ten before it would be my turn to drive.

Suddenly our yellow and blue 'Vette roared into the pits... an unscheduled stop. Something was wrong.

Rick had made a mistake trying to pass another car in the very fast Turn One and had taken a trip through the grass. The crew quickly checked for damage, then sent him back out. But now we were way back in 29th position.

The rest of the first hour passed uneventfully while Rick worked his way back into the top 20. Then it was time for a fuel stop... and for me to take over.

The window safety net was already up as the car slid into our pits. The hard-working crew jumped into the business of refueling, cleaning the windshield and checking things under the hood and everywhere else they could reach. In seconds, Rick had scrambled out and I was in, buckles fastened, the net was secured and I was ready to go. "The car is fine," he yelled in my ear over the noise of the race going on a few feet away. "Just take it easy and keep it on the track."

The powerful big-block engine fired immediately with a roar, the crewman signalled all was ready, and I was off,

accelerating down the pit lane and onto the track at the inside of Turn One. The first couple of laps were fairly slow as I collected my thoughts, came to grips with the car once again and tried to settle into the steady rhythm necessary for long-distance racing.

Another Corvette came up behind me. I thought about trying to race him but let him go instead. It was a long race ... no use getting over my head and risking a mistake until I had settled down a bit. The lap times started coming down ... 1:46 ... 1:44 ... 1:42. The crew was signalling my times from the pits, and it was encouraging to know I was going as well as Rick had qualified after just a few laps.

Traffic is a big problem in this type of race. The fastest cars come up to lap you from time-to-time, and at the same time you're catching slower cars at a high rate of speed. Some see you coming and move right over; others don't and you have to work your way past them. Rick had been put off-course and into a guardrail by a slower car he was trying to lap at Mid-Ohio earlier in the season, and I didn't want the same thing to happen.



Rick Hay has become one of the top Corvette road racers in the nation. You'll be hearing more and more about him as he campaigns his Number 68 to future successes.

By now I caught the Corvette I let by in my first few laps. I started to look for a way around him, but he saved me the trouble by dashing into the pits. Then I found myself behind Phil Currin's Corvette. Currin at that time ran a small-block engine and had less power on the straights than we did, but his car was also lighter in front and handled much better in the right turns. Phil is also a skilled driver with years of Corvette experience, so it was a thrill for me to be able to follow him for a few laps. Soon he, too, ducked into the pits for fuel.

After only 20 minutes or so, I began to feel tired. I had done a lot of pushups in preparation for driving the heavy Corvette, but the Mid-Ohio course is a real strain and I was beginning to feel it. I started to wonder if I could last the full hour. But then the tiredness seemed to go away as I concentrated on going as fast as I could, and in a few more laps I had forgotten all about it.

The next car I found myself racing was Warren Agor's Monza, with his co-driver, Peter Knab, at the wheel. The lightweight Monza, which should have been quicker than our car, crashed at Pocono the week before and was hurriedly rebuilt for Mid-Ohio. But something was not right because Peter was obviously experiencing handling problems. I trailed him for a couple of laps, then got by when he made a mistake and drove two wheels off course. He soon passed me back, but made another mistake and I was by him once again.

I was having a grand time by now, racing wheel-to-wheel, fender-to-fender with this beautiful, big, powerful machine and enjoying every minute. The last little bit of nervousness was gone. Knab finally got things under control, got by me again and motored away. I couldn't stay with him anymore, but what the hell ... I was having fun!

But then I noticed a little vibration in the left rear wheel. I decided the wheel had thrown a balance weight and tried not to worry about it. It became worse and the car started feeling peculiar in right-hand turns. Nothing to do but check in at the pits. It might have been a chunking tire or something coming loose in the suspension, either of which could turn into Big Trouble in a hurry halfway through a fast corner.

Rick hardly waited for the car to screech to a halt before he was fairly dragging me out of the cockpit. My stint was almost up anyway, and there's no sense in wasting another stop for a driver change. I tried to explain the problem over the din, and the crewmen went to work checking it out while others managed the refueling rig. It didn't take long to find it: two of the five left rear wheel nuts were gone, along with the studs!

Rick took a slow lap to feel it out while the crew discussed what to do, then came back in. The wheel was removed and one with a soft, treaded rain tire was fitted in its place. Since the rain tire was thinner than the big dry-pavement slick, it was on a thinner-section wheel, which allowed the two broken studs to stick through just enough to get lug nuts started on them.

Within seconds, Rick was back on course and circulating at a slightly reduced pace. It would be risky to finish the race that way ... two of the nuts were barely on, and the other three studs might break off at any time. Also, the car would be tricky to drive on one rain tire and three slicks but the fact that a rain tire doesn't generate as much traction as a slick on dry pavement was in our favor, since it meant that there was less stress than before on those weakened left-rear studs. It was a gamble, but Rick was determined to finish and take home as much crucial prize money as possible.

The next hour went fine as we all waited and watched nervously in the pits. I learned that my best laps had been in the high 1:40's, which were as fast as Rick had gone earlier in the race. It felt good to know that everyone was happy with my debut performance, and that I would get to co-drive again two weeks later at Road Atlanta. We had been up to 12th place before the unscheduled stop.

Finally, with just a few laps to go, Lady Luck struck us down again. Rick was circulating as well as he could, trying to nurse his soft-compound rain tire to the finish, when suddenly the car spun violently to the outside just as he was rounding that last left-hand turn on the start/finish straight. The rear wheel came off, and we watched it bounce merrily across the track, over the guardrail, then back over the rail and across the track again before coming to rest against the pit rail, almost at the start/finish line. Rick recovered from the spin and guided the three-wheeled Corvette off the track without hitting anything. He climbed out of the car, jumped the rail, put his foot up on it, rested his chin in his hand and forelornly watched the last ten minutes of the race.

We had been up as far as eighth before the wheel came off. The mishap dropped us back to 22nd in the final scoring ... a bitter disappointment to say the least. There would be little prize money to take home. It turned out that one of the right-rear studs had broken, and the remaining four let the steel wheel flex until its center pulled right out. Close inspection of the original left-rear revealed that it, too, was cracked and would have broken the same way had I not come in when I did!

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Next month better luck at Road Atlanta!)