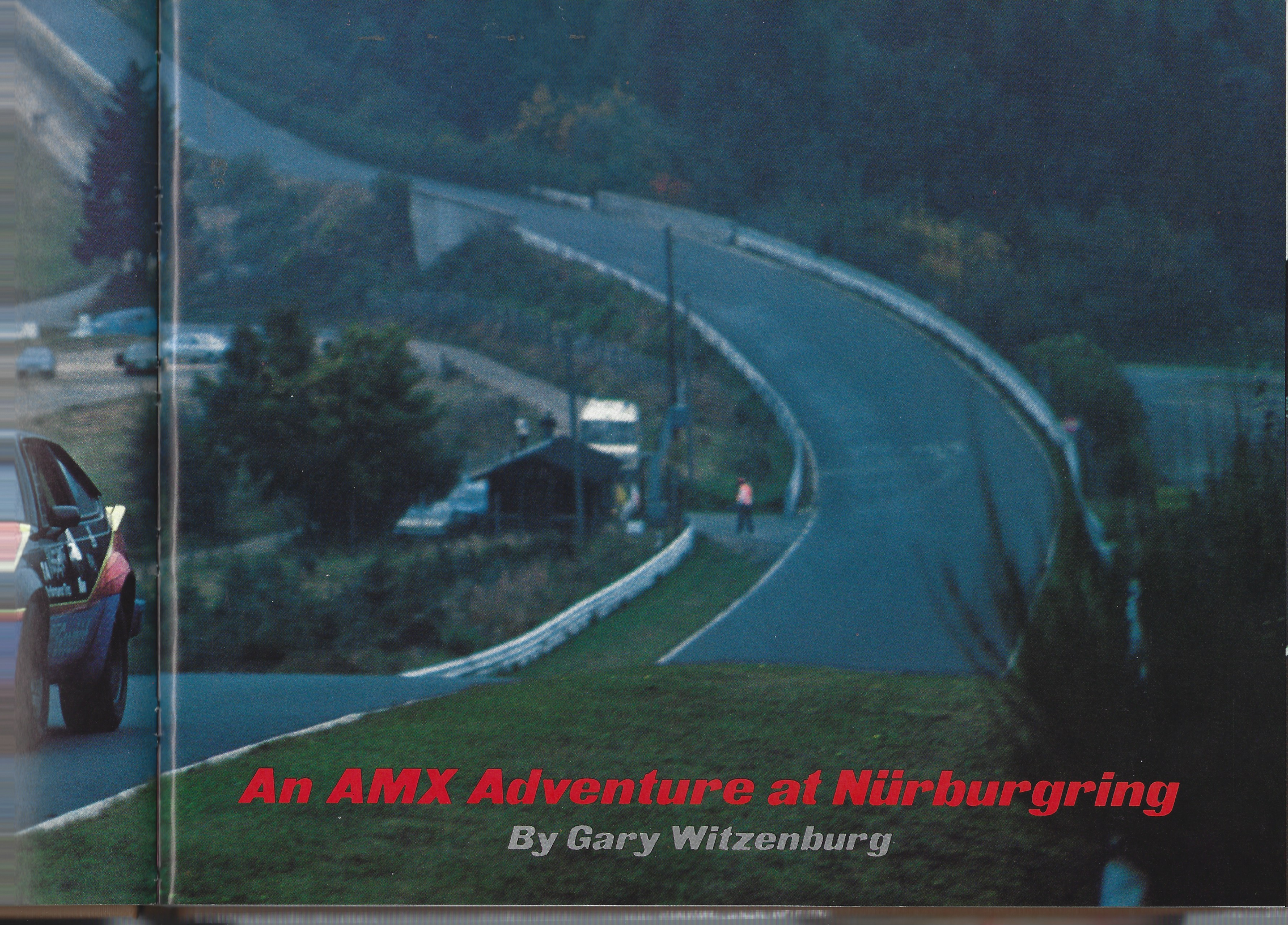


***Race for a Day***



**Am**





# ***An AMX Adventure at Nürburgring***

***By Gary Witzenburg***



*A popular notion has it that one should never throw away any clothes that have gone out of style because if you allow them to hang in the closet they will eventually come back into fashion again. This is something of a variation on the "plus ça change" idea—and it has wide application beyond the fashion industry. In this case, to pick up where Bob Ackerson left off in the Javelin/AMX story, both those cars departed as the Seventies moved to mid-decade. However, a styling project called the Javelin XT in 1972 evolved the following year into an operational prototype called the Gremlin G/II, and eventuated for model year 1979 as the Spirit, a stylish subcompact which in essence was a new-generation translation of the Javelin/AMX theme. Speaking of generations in this instance, considering the short space of time with which we are dealing, provides stark evidence of how much and how quickly government regulation and the fuel crisis have changed things. While at the same time, other things remain the same. Before the Spirit went on sale, it was snapped up with a Trans-Am-Javelin-type enthusiasm by veteran race driver Amos Johnson for IMSA campaigning. And the Spirit was immediately given a sporty companion model specially equipped for the performance-oriented car buyer—and its designation was . . . AMX. In October 1979 a B.F. Goodrich-sponsored two-car team of V-8 AMX's became the first American entries in the traditional twenty-four-hour Group One endurance race at West Germany's legendary Nürburgring race track. Gary Witzenburg was one of the team's six drivers. These are his memories of this unique adventure.*

Is it nerves or mere unhappy coincidence that seems to bring on the call of nature every time I'm about to step into a race car? Lyn's coming in next time around and it's my turn to drive. A lap takes more than ten minutes here, though, so I've plenty of time.

Now she's in the gas pits getting fuel. I'm pacing nervously, helmet on and buckled, gloves in hand, not noticing the cold any more. Finally, she's here, jumps out, yells in my ear while Woodward helps me buckle in. "The car's fine, but don't trust the brakes!"

I'm in gear and off into the darkness and fog, accelerating toward the first turn. Gotta work up to

speed gradually, getting used to the feel of the car and the track at night. Haven't raced at night in years. The steering wheel's too high and far away for comfort, stretching my arms in tight turns, a bit clumsy in drifts and slides, because the seat's angled rearward too much. I manage to move the seat up a notch on the long straight, then try again the next time around and it snaps back to where it was. Screw it.

Traffic is bothersome. Slow cars get in the way while trying not to. A faster car comes up from behind at times, then disappears from my mirrors going into a turn . . . Which side is he on? . . . Is he passing or waiting? The AMX's cornering is good, but something's wrong with the brakes . . . the pedal goes almost to the floor and they aren't much good even when I pump them up. Have to brake earlier than most cars to compensate. Some repass going into slow turns, then hold me up through the fast ones.

I find myself turning into apexes too soon, coming out too soon, and having to back off to avoid running out of track. Why? I realize that my long-range lights are aimed too low . . . can't see far enough ahead, especially in dips and downhill. I'm straining to pick up the barber-striped F.I.A. curb at the next apex, then diving for it when it finally flashes into view. The curbs represent security, knowing where I am in the darkness, and I'm going for them early. Recognizing the problem, I concentrate harder and try to avoid it.

Have they forgotten to call me in? If I run out of gas out here, it's all over. The two-way radio is one-way to the pits . . . I can talk to them, but they can't reach me. I call in about the lights and ask for a signal whether or not to pit. Am I missing the pit board in the darkness? My arms are getting sore from stretching . . . seems I've been out a long time.

Wait, there it is: "PIT." Fourteen miles and ten minutes later I'm scrambling out of the car. "It's running and handling great," I holler into Downing's helmet, "but the lights are a bit low . . . and watch out for those brakes!"

I'm soaking wet inside the heavy, quilted driving suit, and I begin to notice the cold again.

It was B.F. Goodrich on the phone. They were taking a matched set of V-8 AMX's to the 24 Hours of Nürburgring on their street Radial T/A

tires and making a promotional movie on it, and would I like to drive? Are they serious?

The street-stock cars were obtained less than three weeks before their ship would sail and hurriedly prepared by Amos Johnson's Team Highball of IMSA RS renown. There was a brief test and filming session at Mid-Ohio with the first car; and a few days later the second car was finished and the huge BFG tractor-trailer rig was loaded and on its way across the ocean.

Sharing the New York to Brussels flight with me were driver Lyn St. James, Goodrich Tire Division communications manager Athene Karis and adman Bruce Butzier. We toured Brussels briefly on foot and consumed some sidewalk-café beer and sandwiches before boarding a train, loaded down with luggage, four bottles of wine, a loaf of local bread and a huge wheel of cheese for dinner. My apologies to the straitlaced matron with the bad luck to be sharing our compartment while we inelegantly ate, drank and laughed our way to Cologne without benefit of corkscrew or utensils. Luckily, we were met at the station, poured into a VW van and transported to the AM Ring Inn in the town of Nürburg.

Most of our entourage arrived the next day, but German Customs was still holding our truck and its two hapless drivers at the border . . . something wrong with the papers, they said. So BFG mastermind and stand-up comic Gary Pace duly dispatched himself to pull off a rescue, without which we wouldn't have a race. Some twenty-four hours and numerous frantic phone calls later, Pace was back, exhausted, with the rig not far behind.

"I never kissed so much ass in my life!" he reported. "We took everything in the truck apart and reassembled it, counted every T-shirt, separated by size, every jacket and cap, every nut and bolt, every rag, every decal . . . We had to back up to a dock and unload the cars, take down every last wheel and tire and count 'em."

"Then they said the rig was too high, too wide, too long and too heavy, and they wouldn't let us bring it into the country. Every time we'd get one thing solved, they'd think of something else. Three times during the day they gave us the go-ahead, we'd move twenty feet and all these brokers would come out of their little offices to watch us try again, and then some Customs guy



would come out and back us up again!

"When they finally gave us the permit, they routed us down this dinky-ass little road, with an overpass about a foot-and-a-half lower than the trailer. We took out some lady's fence trying to get through one little town, and she ran out in her nightgown, hollering at us in German. The only thing we could understand was 'kaput!' So we went back and paid for her fence. But we had to keep going because it was too narrow to turn around! . . . Oh, God, let's drink!" And we did.

We spent much of the week learning the incredibly challenging 14.1-mile, 176-turn Nürburgring course in rental cars, dodging tourist traffic (cars, motorcycles, buses, even joggers) and track maintenance crews every lap. Fortunately our innkeeper at the AM Ring happened to know a retired racer named Heinz Hennerici, a true Nürburgring expert and winner of countless races there . . . in spite of having lost his left arm in World War III!

So amazing was a ride with Heinz around the course in his BMW, watching him steer, shift and gesture wildly with his right hand while barking instructions in German and holding the wheel with one knee or the other between course corrections, that the film crew shot a lap with him for the BFG movie. Mostly thanks to Heinz, we knew that course cold by race-day morning.

At the track on Friday, the tech inspectors objected to the location of our master electrical cut-off switches, but Jeremy Nightingale (a British-AMC racer-type who was there to observe and help us) convinced them it was right by our English translation of the rules even if their German versions said something different.

There was a meeting after dinner to discuss team strategy and track emergency procedures and regulations. For instance, you can stop if necessary to change a tire or work on your car (there'd be small tools, tape, wire, flashlight and spare parts in the glovebox) but only off the track surface and alongside a straightaway, and you're disqualified if you receive help or abandon the car even for a short time. You refuel at civilian-type pumps just before the pits, must kill the engine and must not remove your helmet. If you can't restart after fueling, you have to get out and push the car unassisted to your pit.

Drivers for car No. 1 would be "Famous Amos" Johnson, North Carolina "Tarheel" of the bearded but thoroughly pleasant variety, hard-charging driver and cunning organizer of Levi's Team Highball Racing; Dennis Shaw, soft-spoken, sincere, red-bearded fellow Tarheel and ace driver and engine builder; and James Brolin, deep, introspective, articulate, funny, black-bearded and indecently handsome actor and amateur racer. In car No. 2 would be Jim Downing, bearded, bespectacled, razor thin and equally sharp, serious-minded and hard-working Atlanta car trader and winning IMSA Mazda driver; Lyn St. James, petite and pretty, capable of handling "men's" cars on "men's" tracks, Florida businesswoman and serious driver; and myself, currently unbearded writer and part-time racer.

The 'Ring has a reputation for nasty weather, often differing from one section to the next, and no one was surprised when Saturday arrived cold and wet. Fog clung to the Eifel hills thick as smoke in a singles' bar. The four hours scheduled practice and qualifying time was cut a half-hour short due to the fog, and it was all we could do to get in each driver's mandatory two laps, make some last-minute adjustments to the cars and strap Amos and Jim Downing in to qualify.

The No. 1 car was tuned and geared faster than our No. 2 in hopes of winning the race overall, while our job was to go a bit slower and be sure to finish. Complicating things were soft and untrustworthy brakes (worse in our car) which the excellent Highball crew was at a loss to cure despite a lot of trying. Nevertheless, we qualified twentieth and twenty-first in the 120-car field with just two flying laps, with Jim's brakes giving him some scary moments and Amos slowing a bit to wait for him so they could draft together down the long, long final straight. Our times were about 10:26 in a field that ranged from 9:38 for the hottest Ford Escort to 14:10 for the slowest 1.0-liter Mini . . . not bad considering we were the only cars in the fast group on street rubber.

"Very welcome to you American friends," the PA announcer is saying in accented English. "Very welcome to you here at the Nürburgring for your first race in Europe. Wishing you good success." Amos and Downing are strapped in and ready to go, everyone wishing them luck, the

film crew getting some pre-start footage. The order is given to clear the grid.

The Grand Prix-style standing start is flagged off at 4:00 p.m. sharp. Both AMX's get a good start and pass several cars before the first turn, coming back down the straight behind the pits in fourteenth and fifteenth positions. Ten nervous minutes pass before Amos comes by, looking good, in sixteenth . . . then Downing, braking a bit earlier and back to twentieth . . . damn! Soft brakes already? But both report "okay" on the radio. Amos does a 10:17 to Jim's 10:35 on the second lap. The cold I picked up yesterday is getting worse.

"Car number one, Amos Johnson, has technical trouble," says the announcer. "Broken throttle cable," Amos radios. Silence. "No, just slipped out of the bracket. I'm on my way in."

Crew tapes the offending cable in place so it won't come out again, and Dennis takes over. Downing comes in and hands over to Lyn while they tape our throttle cable the same as No. 1's. Dennis radios that his clutch has started to slip. Brolin and I take our first turns as dusk turns to dark . . . he's babying the clutch, I'm battling the brakes.

I stick around taking pictures and notes after my turn. Team scorer Ann Brantley has found an enclosed booth to protect her from the wind while others are busy taking times, working the pit board, running for coffee and food. Everyone's freezing, sneezing and sniffing. Fuel consumption is giving a maximum of ten laps between stops . . . about two hours counting fueling and pit time.

"Bad understeer!" radios Downing. "Seemed like oil all over the track before the little carousel." "Didn't notice it," says Dennis from No. 1. "May have a tire going bad," muses crew chief Jim Woodward. "Something let go in the rear axle, bad oversteer!" It's Downing again, and we've got trouble. It's 10:00 p.m.—eighteen hours to go.

I ask Brolin how he's doing. "In the dark," he says thoughtfully, "you kind of have to learn the track all over again. That curvy section between the two carousels that I was having trouble with in the daylight . . . at night I feel completely disoriented through there."

Downing's in. "Drifting through a left turn, something goes 'pop' and it puts you right off the











road; I mean, *off the road!*" Crew swarms under the car but finds nothing wrong. Lyn takes it out. "I hope she gets back!" says Downing, shaking his head.

Lyn's on the radio: "Something's rubbing on the right side. I'm staying out." Then it's Dennis in No. 1: "Something went 'tinkle-clank' in the right front . . . suspension's down, tire's rubbing, can smell the smoke, I'm coming in." Crew readies a new front spring/shock unit. Now it's Lyn again: "I'm off the track . . . car's okay . . . be going again in a minute." Just 11:00, and things seem to be sliding rapidly downhill.

Dennis limps in, crew changes the right-front spring and shock, Brolin takes it out. Now Lyn's in: "It's uncontrollable in left turns!" Crew finds and tightens some loose rear spring bracket bolts, sends her out. "Slightly better," she radios, "but still doing the same thing. I'll try to go the distance."

She does, and it's my turn again. "Be very, very careful in left turns," she screams in my ear.

"Fast or slow?" I ask. "All of them!" Crew's still under the car. "We've found the problem," says Woodward. "Right-front camber adjustment's loose, snaps the wheel out in left turns." It's fixed and I'm off . . . and it's fine, thank god!

I've got the seat adjusted to where it's more comfortable . . . lights are better . . . brakes worse. Campfires dot the darkness helping spectators fight the cold. Dozens of flashbulbs pop in the corners . . . they sure are interested in these cars! Amos comes up from behind, and we run together through a long, uphill section of flat-out curves and straights. I have trouble getting slowed for a hairpin, blow the apex and let him by, then follow him for a while. He pulls away on the long straight, but we continue chatting on the radio, warning each other of oil and wrecks on course, reporting in to the pits each lap. Feels great to work as a team. I've settled into a comfortable pace and do my ten laps in about 110 minutes, but I'm enjoying myself so much it seems more like ten.

I catch a quick nap between shifts but have

trouble sleeping. I want to get back to the pits to know what's happening . . . can't wait to get back into the car! While I'm gone, No. 1 yields another front shock and a rear spring bracket to the 'Ring's torturous carousels and suspension-pounding jumps, and loses an hour while the crew welds the bracket and rips replacement parts off of Jeremy's street AMX. Our car gets new brake linings and a fresh brake bleed . . . Downing says they were better for a while but going bad again.

In the confusion, they leave Lyn out for eleven laps, and she runs out of gas on the long straight. She tries the auxiliary pump (which has a lower pickup in the tank for just such an emergency), but it won't prime. She manages to coast within sight of the gas pumps . . . but no further. She cranks the starter . . . it fires and dies, fires and dies. Corner workers are watching to see if she'll get out and push. She tries the starter one last time . . . it fires and catches. She pops the clutch and burns rubber all the way to the pumps.

Amos and I get the dreaded six-to-eight-in-

*From the program, the 24 Hours of Nurbürgring. Prior to practice, from the left: Amos Johnson, Dennis Shaw, Lyn St. James, Jim Downing, Gary Witzenburg, James Brolin. BFG cars line up for practice early race-day morning. Downing waits in car as brakes are serviced, after the author comes in to hand No. 2 over, his sun-up turn completed.*

**24 STUNDEN NÜRBURGRING**  
**6./7. Okt. '79**  
 Training: 6. Okt. von 9-13 Uhr  
 Rennen - Start: 6. Okt. 16 Uhr  
 Trans-Europa-Meisterschaft  
 Serien-Tourenwagen  
 Dieselfahrzeuge  
 Renault-5  
 Pokalfahrzeuge  
 Am Start und Ziel  
 großer Vergnügungspark  
 um die August-Bilstein-Trophäe  
 VERANSTALTET: ADAC NORDRHEIN e.V.





the-morning shift, when the course is said to be especially treacherous with dew and fog; but we luck out with a dry track and heavy fog only in the start/finish area. I shoot some dawn footage, per instructions, with the film crew's in-car cassette camera. It's overcast and not much of a sunrise, but it feels glorious to see the sky light up while I'm driving. Still relaxed and comfortable, but near-brakeless, I'm doing 10:40's and clock one lap at a respectable 10:35.

Instead of sleeping, I shower and trade my sweat-soaked Nomex undies for fresh ones before my last turn at the wheel. The No. 1 car has broken still another shock and takes our last spare, its clutch is slipping badly, and the engine is using a lot of oil. Both front shocks and the brakes are all but gone in our car, to the point where pumping the pedal drags the front spoiler but has little effect on speed. I back off a bit trying to cool the brakes, but it doesn't help. With five hours to go, we're thirty-second overall and No. 1 is forty-fourth. I count sixty-five cars still cir-

culating.

One of our interpreters has been out to some spectator areas with the film crew and says the people are impressed with the way our cars corner on street tires . . . and to see us still running. Seems American machinery doesn't have much of a reputation for durability here. "Are they for us or against us?" I ask. "Now they're for you," he says. "They want you to finish."

Less than an hour to go, and Amos and Lyn turn on their lights and run together for the final few laps. A light drizzle begins, slickening the track. Corner workers and spectators all around the course are lining the rails, cheering and waving. Lyn's helmet is too tight, her head is throbbing, and she's choked with emotion. Amos calls her on the radio and she can't answer. The film crew's helicopter follows them around as the countdown clock ticks slowly toward zero.

Strangely, cars start lining up just short of the finish with a few minutes to go, not wanting to risk another fourteen-plus miles, while some still

thread their way through to get in one last lap. When the clock strikes zero, this whole mob accelerates over the line, looking more like a start than a finish, to the cheers of spectators, workers, officials and especially exhausted crews. Lyn and Amos come around at last, and the whole BFG bunch is as excited and emotional as if we'd won the thing . . . running around, babbling incoherently, hugging and kissing each other like crazy people. Suddenly the sun is out, and my cold is much better.

We've done it! We haven't won, but Goodrich's expensive gamble has paid off handsomely nonetheless. We've finished twenty-fifth and forty-third overall, first and second in class; the tires have performed remarkably well, going eight hours and more between routine changes, and without a failure or trouble of any kind; and we've recorded one of the greatest adventures imaginable on film and in our personal memory banks.

Le Mans, anyone? ☘







T/A *St. James & Co.  
Producing for  
Walt Disney Co.*  
Performance Tires

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