

Invisible Blimps over Nurbürgring

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B Gary Pace
F. Goodrich PR-man Dave Cole is on the phone. Would I be interested in driving a 24-hour endurance race at the Nurburgring? Visions of Kremer Porsches dance in my head... 200-plus mph down the long final straight...powerful lights splitting the misty darkness...rosy-cheeked frauleins clamoring for autographs..."Are you kidding?"

The plan is to run a pair of Goodrich-sponsored cars and make a movie of the adventure. It will be the first time an American team has ever entered this traditional Nurburgring event, which is part of a Trans-European endurance series for Group One sedans. The cars will be five-liter V-8 AMX's prepared by AMC/Levi's Team Highball of IMSA RS fame. The other drivers: Highball team leader Amos Johnson, engine builder and ace racer Dennis Shaw, Mazda hot-shoe Jim Downing, Kelly Girl series regular and leading lady driver Lyn St. James and actor/amateur racer James Brolin. And we'll be driving on street Radial T/A's.

Wait a minute! Heavy, under-braked AMX's (Spirits with spoilers)...on street tires...against nimble, slick-shod European Group One machinery...on a course with 176 turns? "We think we'll be fairly competitive," says Cole. Who cares? "When do we leave?"

Sounds nutty, but then BFG has been doing strange and wonderful things to promote its wares ever since fielding the first "Radial Tirebird" A-Sedan in 1970. They made the SCCA "Runoffs" at Atlanta the following year, then switched emphasis to John Greenwood's killer Corvettes and scored some decent international endurance racing finishes in '72 and '73. "Our philosophy with Greenwood wasn't necessarily to win or to conquer racing tires with street tires," says Goodrich Performance Team manager Gary Pace, the mad genius behind such craziness. "We were

out to show the capabilities of a new product and to build its reputation."

In 1973 they'd taken on full sponsorship of IMSA's popular RS (Radial sedan) series for small sedans, renaming it the "B.F. Goodrich Radial Challenge" and winning a lot of races even though competitors were free to use whatever street radials they chose. But they bowed out in '76 when the rules changed and the blimp folks came in full-force. Then in '79 they jumped back into RS racing with all four wheels, taking on Goodyear's Wingfoot with a new-design Radial T/A. Goodyear won the series on Roger Mandeville's Mazda, but The Other Guys scored an impressive 11 wins out of 15 events.

Meanwhile, Pace (who looks like a cross between Burt Reynolds and Jimmy Carter, fields a stream of wisecracks that could make Richard Pryor blush, and could charm the hide off a crocodile) had moved his company into such other sorts of motorized mayhem as off-road racing, Pike's Peak hillclimbing and even tractor-pulling. All with good success. Then in 1980 he launched a frontal attack on performance rallying as well with Dick Turner, perennial champ John Buffum and others.

How does our assault on the Nurburgring fit in? "As a one-time deal that event wouldn't be worth much," Pace explains, "but it fits in very nicely as part of the total program. We have a new T/A, and we want to continue building its image. Nurburgring is a legendary track, and it's probably the toughest road-racing challenge available for that product."

Johnson had gone over to co-drive a British AMX in a similar event at Spa, Belgium, in mid-July. Still early in development, the car had failed to qualify, but he'd learned a lot about European Group One racing and his appetite had been whetted. He was discussing the experience with Pace over

a beer the following weekend at the Sears Point, Calif., IMSA event, when...ding, ding...they hit upon the idea of going to the Nurburgring 24-Hour in October.

Why AMX's? As an American tire company taking an American team to Europe, Goodrich naturally wanted to run American cars. The AMX was already homologated for FIA international competition in a configuration that promised to be competitive (see sidebar). A matched set could be prepared very quickly combining parts support from Jim Rader's performance group at AMC and experience gained from Team Highball's successful IMSA RS Spirit effort. They were small enough to fit in comfortably with the Group One bunch, yet heavy enough (2,845 lbs.) to provide a real cornering, braking and sustained high-speed challenge for the tires.

But would they be fast enough around the 14-plus-mile, 176-turn Nurburgring course to keep us from looking foolish? Those little twin-cam Fords and BMW's and Opels are awfully fast and agile. Johnson and Pace figured we could win the race with luck...but professional racers eat optimism for breakfast every morning. I had my doubts. I thought we might be competitive on the straights with our five-liter V-8's, but I figured we'd get badly walked on in braking and cornering. And with street tires against riding slicks...

The test day at Mid-Ohio only reinforced my pessimism. The car was beautiful, a rolling piece of art all in da-glo blue and black with four shades of orange and yellow striping. But, God, was it slow! Compared to my own RS Datsun, the steering felt numb, the handling twitchy, the acceleration sluggish and the brakes simply awful. It couldn't even run with Amos' six-cylinder RS Spirit. Unless they work some major miracles before loading this

thing on the boat, I thought, we're in a heap of trouble.

The BFG entourage, some 30-strong counting drivers, crewmen, engineers, advertising and PR types, film crew, interpreters and assorted wives and friends, trickled intact into our AM Ring Inn headquarters trackside at Nurburgring early in the first week of October. But something very important was missing—the rig and its contents. German Customs had impounded the whole shebang at the border because of some discrepancy in the paperwork. Drivers Ankrom and DeAngelo were getting nowhere trying to negotiate their way in, and the whole program seemed in serious doubt. After numerous frantic phone calls to Akron, to brokers in New York and Antwerp, to German Customs and the two nervous rig drivers sweating it out at the border (they couldn't move either way) had accomplished nothing, Pace dispatched himself late Monday night to pull off a rescue.

Twenty-four jittery hours later, they made it. "I never kissed so much ass in my life," he reported, exhausted but jubilant. They had to back up to a dock, unload the cars, parts, tires, tools, T-shirts, jackets, caps, decals, even the shop rags, and inventory each by type and size. They were told the rig was too high, long, wide and heavy to enter the country, had made a mad dash several miles away for a special permit and had to cry and cajole it out of a hostile woman official who must have been a descendant of Attila the Hun himself.

The next day was spent practicing in rental cars (see sidebar) and filming this and that as the crew got down to work at final preparations. We shot a "local color" scene at a bar in Adenau that night, quaffing mugloads of beer and group-singing "Roll out the Barrel" for the cameras until they had to roll us out the door. Thursday we had an hour of exclusive track time for everyone to get in at least one lap in the race cars while cameras rolled and the crew managed a little dialing in of engines and chassis. The Johnson/Shaw/Brolin #1 car worked fairly well right off, but #2 (for Downing, St. James and myself) seemed severely short of both power and brakes.

Friday took us through tech and "paperwork" (registration) with only one scare when the tech inspectors ob-



An early morning fog enshrouds Car #2 as St. James sweeps down a long straight of the Nurburgring.

jected to our master electrical cutoff-switch location. Jeremy Nightingale from the British AMC team told them it was right by the English translation of the rules even if their's said something different. We got in our last few rent-a-car laps while the mechanics toiled and the film crew filmed.

That night we had a meeting after dinner to discuss the track, race strategy and the local rules. For instance, you can stop on course to change a tire or make repairs unassisted, but off the pavement and not near a turn, and it's kaput if you leave the car even for a short time. (There'd be small tools, tape, wire, spare parts and a flashlight in the glovebox.) Refueling is done at civilian-type pumps near the pit entrance, with

engines off and helmets on, and you have to get out and push by yourself if the car won't restart.

Naturally, race day greeted us cold, wet and foggy. Practice time was cut short due to the fog, which in typical Nurburgring style was dangerously thick in some places and nonexistent in others. Each driver managed the mandatory two practice laps without incident, but the high-torque, short-wheelbase AMC's proved skitterish and hard to drive smoothly in the wet. Our #2 was considerably improved since Thursday, but with its more mildly-tuned engine, taller axle ratio and softer brakes was still no match for #1. Except for the brakes, however, this difference was intentional since #1 was supposed to

Building The Car

When BFG's Gary Pace called Amos Johnson with the go-ahead to prepare two AMX's for the October 6th 24 Hours of Nurburgring, it was August 25th... six weeks to the day before the race. Backing up a week for preparation and practice at the track, plus two more for ocean transit, there were just three weeks left to get the cars and parts, bolt them together and haul them to Newark, N.J., for shipment. "Drop Dead Hour" was Noon, Monday, September 17th.

AMC helped to locate a pair of V-8, four-speed 79 AMX's with no options. The first was picked up in Virginia just before the team left for its September 1 IMSA race at Road America. The second was located in Milwaukee and driven back to the Raleigh, N.C., shop by Johnson. A test day was scheduled for September 11 at Mid-Ohio, and the work began.

FIA Group One "Series Production Touring" cars are basically well-massaged showroom stock. The trick is that any manufacturer wishing to win (which sells a lot of cars in Europe) needs only to "homologate" the necessary special parts by equipping at least 5,000 production cars with them in one year's time. Things like springs, shocks, ignition parts, tires and clutch and brake linings can be any make and type within the original configuration. Appropriate lights, gauges and switches, a racing seat and steering wheel and a safety fuel cell are plugged in, and various other minor modifications can be made provided they don't affect performance. Roll cages are bolted (not welded) in place, and (for Nurburgring only) stock exhaust systems are required from the engine back.

The standard AMX "handling package" sway bars were retained, but racing springs and shocks served to tighten and lower the suspension. Marchal quart-iodide driving lights replaced



the stock high-beams, and another pair were added beneath the parking lamps. The 21-gallon fuel cells were fitted with dual pickups (one lower than the other) and were piped through twin electric fuel pumps with separate switches to prevent running out of gas on-course. Out went the standard seats and in went fore-aft adjustable racing seats, engine gauges and the roll cage.

In six days the #1 car was essentially together and, with a stock engine and its paint still sticky, was trucked to Mid-Ohio for testing and filming, while driver/engine-builder Dennis Shaw stayed behind completing the three racing motors. Thanks to the English team already racing AMX's, the 304 V-8's were homologated with some pretty fine stuff—11:1 aluminum pistons, 360 V-8 valves, pre-smog performance camshaft, pre-economy intake and exhaust manifolds and a Holley 4-bbl carburetor. Motorcraft electronic ignition and Champion N60-X racing plugs provided the fire. There was no time for dyno work, but Dennis estimated that he'd squeezed out something over 300 hp at

5,000 rpm by the time he was through. (Back home after the race, he put the #2 car's motor on the dyno and found 270 actual horsepower... then tuned it to 324!)

The standard four-speed transmissions were retained, coupled to a 3.15:1 Detroit locker in the #1 car and a 2.87:1 in #2. BFG P245/60R14 Radial T/A's were mounted on seven-inch AMC "Turbocast" alloy wheels, racing brake and clutch linings were installed, every important nut and bolt was triple-checked and safety-wired, the #2 car was buttoned up and painted, and the whole shootin' match was loaded and ready to go by early morning Sunday, Sept. 16th. BFG drivers Buddy Ankrom and Frank DeAngelo put their boots to the wood and make it to the pier just in time.

It was a night-and-day, gut-busting, superhuman effort by Johnson and Shaw, Johnson's wife Bunny, crew chief Jim Woodward and crewmen Joe Purcell, Joe Lasher, Bill Browne and Bill Cotton. But the results were to prove well worth the trouble. □

win, while our job was to get a bit slower and be sure to finish.

With the drizzle stopped, the track dry and the fog finally lifted, Johnson and Downing ran together for two flying laps to install us 20th and 21st on the 120-car grid. Their times were about 10:26 compared to 9:38 for the pole-sitting 2.0-liter Ford Escort and 14:10 for the slowest 1.0-liter Austin Mini. Amos figured #1 was good for 10:10 or so if pushed to the limit, which would be damned respectable on street rubber.

The 10 classes were divided into three groups with three separate standing starts. Our group (the fastest, and first to start at 4:00 PM sharp) consisted mostly of hot-dog Ford Escort 2000 RS's and Capris and Opel Commodores and Kadette GTE's. The second was a mishmash of little VW Rabbits and Sciroccos, Audi 80's, Toyotas, Alfas, Fiats, Hondas and the like, a few of them indecently quick. The third was more of the same with smaller displacements, plus a cadre of Renault R-5's (Le Cars) and another of diesel Rabbits, each running in its own separate class.

Both AMX's (Johnson and Downing aboard) got off to good starts and came back behind the pits in 14th and 15th positions. Ten minutes later they completed lap one in 16th and 20th. They soon settled into comfortable paces, Amos doing between 10:15 and 10:20, Jim in the 10:35-to-10:40 range in heavy traffic. There was one early scare when Amos radioed that he was stopped on course with a broken throttle cable... but it had merely slipped from its bracket. Both cars' cables were securely taped in place on their first stops. The first two shifts were short (five laps) to get a good handle on fuel consumption, but it was nearly dark when Brolin took over from Shaw at about six o'clock and pitch black when I relieved St. James a few minutes later.

Surprise! The car handled beautifully, front tires biting and turning into apexes with no troublesome understeer, rears spinning and sliding just slightly under power coming out. The engine was much better than it had been in morning practice and felt like it would run for weeks at the 5000-rpm redline. But the brakes were still super-soft, feeling like lots of air in the lines, despite much bleeding and adjusting before the start.



Jim Downing (in car) and Gary Witzenburg discuss track conditions during a practice session.

At times the pedal would go right to its stop and flash its bright red warning light just when I needed brakes the most.

I found that I could corner with most anyone and was faster on the straights than all but the very quickest cars, but I had to back off early and gave a lot away under braking for the tighter turns... like driving a big Corvette in a field of Porsche Carreras. Traffic was bothersome, with slower cars unintentionally getting in the way (they didn't know I was near brakeless) and the occasional faster one hovering in my mirrors before deciding to pass. The seat was angled back too far for comfort, making me stretch uncomfortably for the wheel, and the driving lights were aimed a bit low for long-distance vision at speed. Otherwise, everything was cool.

It was after my first turn that our trouble began. Something in the chassis started coming adrift, and at one point it jerked poor Jim clean out of the bowl-like carousel turns and almost into the guardrail. He came in, the crew checked and tightened everything they could find and sent Lyn out. "I hope she gets back,"

said Downing gravely. A few minutes later she radioed in with the same problem, which had given her a nasty spin and another near-miss with a guardrail in a flat-out left turn. In she came, under they went again, and out she went. "A little better," she radioed, "but still bad in left turns. I'll try to go the distance."

Finally they found and fixed the elusive problem—a loose right front camber adjustment, which would pop back in place and look OK in the pits—before my next shift, and it handled perfectly again. Lucky for me! Plus, the lights had been re-aimed and the seat was better adjusted, so I zipped around for the next two hours with only the brakes to bother me. I hadn't driven at night for a while and soon found that I still thoroughly enjoyed it. Campfires dancing and flashbulbs popping in the trackside darkness. Taillamps glowing warm red ahead, then changing abruptly to harsh white in my mirrors as I passed slower cars. Heavy concentration on the narrow field of vision in my own powerful beams. We were going nearly as quick as anyone now, and traffic was less of a

problem with attrition cutting through the field. Amos and I ran together for a while, chatting on the radios and warning each other of the occasional wreck or oil on the track. It felt great to be part of a first-rate team effort! In the car, the hours passed like minutes; out of it, they seemed like days.

We had fallen well back with our brake and suspension troubles, but had worked our way back past mid-field by daybreak. The #1 car had yielded front shocks and a rear leaf spring bracket to the Ring's bumps, jumps and high-G carousels during the night, and was now running on stock front suspension pieces ripped from Nightingale's street AMX. They'd been babying a slipping clutch since the early hours, and their engine was using a lot of oil. At 11 AM, with just five hours to go, we're 32nd overall and they're 44th with some 70 cars still running. Dirt frames the crewmen's sunken, bloodshot eyes, everyone's exhausted... but we think we're going to make it!

Amos and Lyn are out for the final hour, lights on, circulating together as a light drizzle slickens the track. Workers and spectators around the course are waving and cheering, impressed by how well we've gone on the street tires—and that our funny American cars are still running at all. The film crew's helicopter marks the cars' progress down the long final straight to, at last, the waving checkered flag.

We've finished 25th and 43rd overall, but first and second in our own over 3.5-liter class. As the first American team ever to enter this traditional event, we've acquitted ourselves well enough to go home satisfied and proud despite the many problems. It was Goodrich's most expensive single-race effort yet, but the six-figure gamble should pay off handsomely toward enhancing the new Radial T/A's reputation. For their parts, the tires performed flawlessly, giving eight hours and more of excellent traction between routine changes and not a trace of trouble.

Flying home, we reflect on the experience, probably the greatest adventure in any of our lives. Like kids after Christmas, we're elated... yet depressed that it's over. We all hope that we're in on whatever the encore might be.

Le Mans, anyone? ☐

Learning The Track

I was flogging the big Mercedes as fast as it would go, considering I hadn't a clue which way the course went, artfully dodging the occasional cars and buses full of tourists. Beside me was my friend Jill—surely the best and bravest lady I know—trying to read a huge course map. A few laps later she was taking notes as I thrashed the car around: "Tight esses with curbing at 3 km," "Medium right after jump, then fast esses."

Completed in 1927 and much improved and updated since, winding up, down and between the gorgeous Eifel hills south of Cologne and Bonn, West Germany, the Nurburgring is probably the most difficult and challenging closed road course in the world. It has not hosted the German Grand Prix since Niki Lauda's near-fatal crash in 1976, but an all-new 4.1-mile track has just been completed for that purpose south of the original.

My first visit to the "Ring" (as a spectator) has been capped by three half-drunken laps in a brand new Triumph TR4-A (which was to become my first race car) following a 500-km event in 1965. Now there were six of us trying to learn the 14.5 miles in four days, prior to competing in the traditional October 24-hour race.

Anyone can drive the course for 10 DM a lap (about \$6), and if you damage yourself or your car, it's your problem...damned civilized attitude! B.F. Goodrich had rented four cars for our use (three six-cylinder, automatic Mercedes and a four-cylinder, four-speed Opel) and a V-8; four-speed street AMX had been brought over from England by British AMC racer Jeremy Nightingale. Arrangements were made to pay for our track time by the hour, so we had virtually unlimited opportunity to practice. "This must be heaven," marvelled Jim Downing one afternoon, "just driving all day!"

We had trouble pronouncing the Ger-



man place names around the course, so we picked landmarks and made up our own: "Coming up through this chute you see three speakers on a pole, and that's the really hard left-right" "There's a tower like Fort Apache just before the left leading to the little karussell." Two haul-ass rights over a brow near our inn became "Hotel." A fast, scary, triple-apex right with a rail separating the track from the valley below was "Guardrail." Jim Brolin used a trash can as a clue that the next series of blind turns could be taken flat-out—and then somebody moved it. But that section remained "Trash-can Turn" nonetheless.

By a great stroke of luck our innkeeper happened to know a true Ringmeister, a small, weathered man in his 50's named Heinz Hennerici. Heinz had run and won countless races there... despite having lost his left arm in the war. Heinz agreed to help us, and he was incredible! He'd pile three of us into his stick-shift BMW and do everything with his right hand, moving the wheel just enough to slide smoothly through each apex, holding it with one knee or the other while shifting and gesturing wildly, all the time barking instructions like an SS drill sergeant. He didn't speak English, and none of us knew any German, but it didn't seem to matter.

We rode with Heinz, and he rode with us. We followed Heinz, and he followed us. We'd arrived thinking that there'd be no way to really learn the whole track before the race. But by Friday, thanks to Heinz, we knew every inch of it and the quickest way around, and we could roll it through our minds like a newsreel. Does wonders for the confidence. ☐