**Mid-Ohio Madness**

*Starting last with no practice or qualifying, one low-budget team turns heads*

By Gary Witzenburg

Thirty minutes and counting to the start of our June 4, 1972, Mid-Ohio 2.5 Challenge Series race, and I’m toting a transmission across the paddock to be bolted into our Datsun 510 before the start. It’s the only 4-speed box I could find among the nine Datsun teams there because everyone else was running 5-speeds, which would not yet fit in my car. Dealer/racer George Alderman had one and kindly lent it to me. I plopped it down by the car, which my volunteer crew had up on jacks with its oil-leaking gearbox already out, and they went to work.

 Back up a month to the season’s first 2.5 Challenge race that May 6 at Connecticut’s Lime Rock Park. We towed our untested, no-budget 510 on its rickety old trailer all night, then had problems in practice and qualifying. For my first pro race and first look at Lime Rock, our underpowered car was barely track-worthy, let alone tested or developed.

When something broke during practice, I parked it at Turn 2 and waited, sleep-deprived and frustrated, for the session to end. A photographer snapped my picture while I glared at him through bleary eyes. They gave us press kits at a Saturday night dinner for Datsun drivers, and there in it – along with all the others -- was that angry, tired-eyed photo and a shot of our car.

Still, we ran surprisingly well as I learned the track…until a car I was passing on the outside of Two forced me over the high outside berm, which yanked our cobbled-up exhaust apart. Our stop to wire it up cost us some laps, so I drove even harder trying to gain back time. I caught Alderman and pushed him for several laps, gaining on the curves but losing on the long front straight. Finally, I was able to draft him, pull alongside and pass him into Turn One…because, as it turned out, he had backed off because the checkered flag was out. I had totally missed that in my fixation on his Datsun’s derriere. How embarrassing to drive an extra hard lap, not knowing that the race was over, while everyone else was pulling in. Bob Sharp won in a guest BRE Datsun, Alderman finished 7th, and we ended up 12th out of 28 cars.

 I had bought this shabby used 1969 510 4-door for $300 the year before and worked long nights to get it to an SCCA driver’s school to regain my Regional license after four years away in the Navy. I bought some competition body and chassis parts from BRE but could not afford much to boost its 1.6-liter four’s performance beyond a hotter cam and valve springs. Yet we scored two B-Sedan Regional wins among five top-fives that 1971 season on my way to earning my National License.

 Then, brimming with ambition beyond my financial (and probably talent) reach, I set out in 1972 to run SCCA Nationals and 2.5 Challenge Series pro races. After Lime Rock, we won a National on Michigan International Speedway’s (now long-gone) road course and another at Donnybrooke, Minn., then added a 500-mile enduro win at Donnybrooke (on BFG street radial tires) the following day. And after the 18-hour slog back to my Detroit-area job, since our now-reliable Different Drummer Racing 510 was running fine at the 500-miler checkered flag, I left it on the trailer and didn’t touch a thing.

 But not so reliable was my ’69 Chevy Suburban tow vehicle. Its fuel pump failed on a Detroit freeway soon after we left for Mid-Ohio early Saturday morning, and by the time we fixed it and arrived at the track, we had missed practice and qualifying. The rules would let us start from the back if we could complete at least five laps in the early Sunday warm-up. Which we did…laying a trail of blue smoke from what turned out to be a broken transmission housing. We had an hour before the start to find a replacement and get it installed. Which we did.

 We aired our Goodyear slicks on the way to the grid and arrived just in time to start dead last (24th), while factory Datsuns and Alfas filled the first three rows: BRE’s John Morton on pole, guest driver Peter Gregg third, Mike Downs fourth; Alfa aces Horst Kwech second, Bert Everett fifth and Harry Theodoracopulos sixth. A few weeks earlier, I had brazenly written Peter Brock asking him to let me drive his guest car in this race on the theory that an unknown doing well in it would make the car look better than a name driver would. He politely declined.

The green flag waved, 24 throttles slammed floorboards, the pack streamed into Turn One…and just as I got there, someone blew an engine, coating my windshield with oil. Despite that, I knew and loved Mid-Ohio and started driving like a man possessed, passing cars where I could and moving up each lap. It’s a handling course, and our 510 was handling! Whoopee!

But as the race wore on, I found myself fighting for control whenever I got even slightly off the racing line. What I couldn’t see through my greasy windshield was that the newly paved surface was breaking up and spewing loose stones outside the lines, so moving over to let an occasional faster car pass became a butt-tightening exercise in control. A couple of times, I got sideways enough to send corner workers scattering. Really! Then I wisely stopped moving over. Those factory cars had more power, so they could damn well pass me on the straights.

 I had no idea how we were doing or what position we were in but was feeling good and having great fun. At one point, we heard later, the track announcer was somehow calling us – a total unknown clearly driving balls-out -- as the leader! He must have gotten his lap chart confused. And when the checkered fell on the 50-lap race, we were astounded to learn that we had finished seventh (winning $300!). Morton had parked his 510 after 29 laps with overheating, Gregg had won, Downs was second, Everett’s and Kwech’s Alfas third and fourth.

Could I have won in BRE’s guest car? Probably not. But it would have been fun to try.

After celebrating our unexpected performance (and paddock neighbor Milt Minter’s Firebird victory in the Trans Am feature race), our exhausting day was not quite over. We still had to pull Alderman’s transmission back out of our car and return it to him. Which we did.

We ran eight more Nationals that season, plus two Regionals and two more 2.5 Challenge events -- DNF at Donnybrooke (head gasket); eighth at Road America – and missed an SCCA National Championship “Run-Offs” invitation by just two points thanks to growing and more competitive B-Sedan fields and late-season bad luck. It was a busy, tough, often fun, yet frustrating year with some respectable runs despite our amateur inexperience and tiny budget.

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