

# **“Rarified Air”**

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# Rarefied Air

PRIVATEER PORSCHEs TAKE ON PIKES PEAK IN THE FACE OF AN ALL-OUT, FACTORY-BACKED ASSAULT FROM PEUGEOT

STORY BY **SEAN CRIDLAND** PHOTOS BY **LINHBERGH NGUYEN & THE AUTHOR**







A French wind blew into Colorado Springs this June past. Depending on who you ask, as many as 60 engineers, tire experts, dieticians, trainers, PR reps, and film crewmembers arrived from France to support a single Peugeot for nine-time World Rally Champion Sebastian Loeb. Overkill? That, too, depends on who you ask. • "When our Le Mans program was cancelled, we had a surplus of employees and technology and needed something to do," says Bruno Famin, director of Peugeot Sport. "Pikes Peak is a famous challenge and one that is in our racing history, so we decided to come back as an engineering exercise." In case you haven't heard, Loeb didn't merely break the record with his Peugeot 208 T16 Pikes Peak Special. He obliterated it.

8:13.878



For decades, hillclimb fans wondered when Pikes Peak's ten-minute barrier would be broken. With 156 turns, an elevation gain of 4,720 feet, and a finish line at the 14,110-foot summit, the 12.42-mile course certainly presented its challenges. So did its dirt surfaces.

In 2011, the course was finally paved all the way up, much to the chagrin of many drivers and fans. That year, the barrier was broken when six-time overall winner Nobuhiro "Monster" Tajima turned a 9:51. In 2012, Rhys Millen managed a run at just a hair over 9:46 in a Hyundai special. This year, Loeb's Red Bull Peugeot came up with a rather more impressive number: 8:13.878.

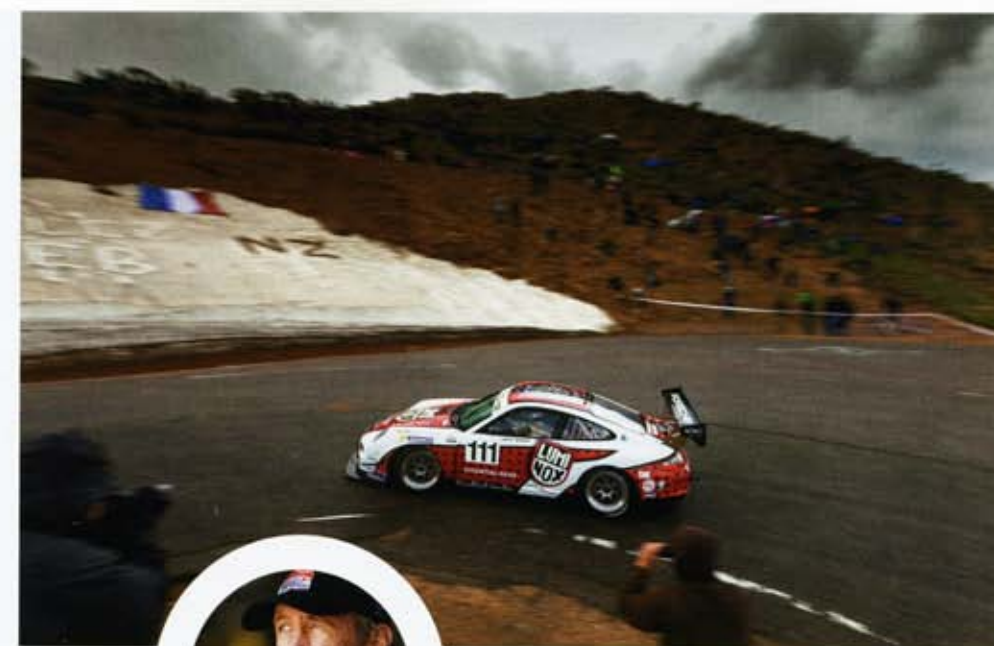
Two more records were set before the Peak's infamous weather came into play. Tajima took the Electric class win with a 9:46.530—a time good enough for an overall win just two years ago. Colin Dunne's Lightning Electric Superbike turned in a 10:00.694, making it the fastest motorcycle on the hill this year. Some believe Pikes Peak will become a leading venue for electric-car R&D. It is, after all, the perfect scenario: Weight plays a key role and a fast run lasts only ten minutes. Or less...

**THE PORSCHE STORY** at Pikes Peak this year was clouded by strong factory-backed efforts from other manufacturers. Nostalgia-holics still complain about the course having been paved all the way, but manufacturer interest is greater than it's been for a long time because the course is better suited for road-car testing. Honda, Scion, Toyota, and Mitsubishi all mounted significant efforts this year.

Still, there was plenty for PCAers to keep an eye on. There were more Porsche entries than ever—eight if Jeff MacPherson's center-seat, Chevy V8-powered 914 counts, or nine if one adds Porsche factory driver and recent Le Mans winner Romain Dumas, who returned to Colorado with a French Norma prototype powered by an...okay, no one really knew. But the car *was* wearing number 911 on its side.

Porsches were entered by some seasoned Pikes Peak veterans, from four-time overall winner David Donner to former class winner and perennial entrant Jeff Zwart. Donner's move to a GT3 Cup marked a return to his family's roots. His father, Bobby Donner Jr., won the sports-car class at Pikes Peak in 1960, 1961, and 1962 in Porsche Spyders.

Donner entered a 2008 GT3 Cup updated to 2012 specs to challenge Zwart in the increasingly competitive Time Attack class. He'd also face former overall



**Perennial Pikes Peak Porsche driver Jeff Zwart** was back with a twin-turbo 997 GT3 Cup, but the mountain's fickle weather would confront him with rain, wind, snow, sleet, and fog.

winner Paul Dallenbach in the record-holding Hyundai of Rhys Millen. Millen took his effort up a step this year by building and piloting a Hyundai prototype for the Unlimited class.

Also running Time Attack would be the 996 Turbo of Fred Veitch, a Colorado Springs businessman, lifelong Porsche enthusiast, and PCA's very first Safety Chair. Two more locals would campaign Porsches in 2013: Pirelli World Challenge racer Robert Prilika in a GT3 Cup entered in the Open class, and PCA Club Racer Chris Lennon in a 1973 911 entered in the Vintage class.

Each Porsche driver would face a unique set of challenges in the weeks leading up to Pikes Peak.

**FOR JEFF ZWART**, who missed 2012's race, a return to the mountain meant looking at the realities of the Time Attack class. With the specially built Hyundai running nearly 900 turbocharged horsepower, he figured a normally-aspirated GT3 Cup would be outclassed. But he still favors his GT3 Cup, comparing it to an extension of his body and calling it a car he "wore instead of drove."

He was impressed by the power of the GT2 RS he entered in 2011, a street-legal 997 that he drove from Los Angeles to Pikes Peak and then used to surpass his personal best in the GT3 Cup by 24 seconds. What he wanted was a 997 that utilized the best attributes of both.

So it was that Zwart, along with BBI Autosport of Huntington Beach, California, undertook the project of installing a race-tuned GT2 RS engine in his 2010 GT3 Cup. Due to ECU differences, gearing issues, wiring harnesses, and other challenges, this was no simple task—but the car ran flawlessly from the moment it came off the trailer for pre-race testing two weeks before race day.

It was fast, too. Rumor had it that Zwart had turned a 9:41 to the top in private testing. Had he been able to





Zwart's turbo-charged GT3 Cup looked good in practice under sunny skies.



duplicate or beat that time on race day, he might have beaten Dallenbach's 900-hp Hyundai. Alas, the weather didn't cooperate and Zwart had to back off as he approached the summit and ran into—alternately and together—rain, snow, wind, sleet, and fog. He had to settle for a time of 10:13.856, nearly 18 seconds off Dallenbach's class-winning time of 9:46.001. Still, Zwart ended up tenth overall for the day, a promise of things to come...

**IF ZWART WAS** the logical favorite among Porsche fans, Donner had the hearts of Pikes Peak fans almost from day one. His history with the mountain, with hill-climbing, and with road racing runs deep.

Besides his father's wins with Porsches in the early 1960s, his older brother Bobby Donner III was a Pikes Peak winner in 1989. The latter was tragically killed when a deer jumped in front of him in a hillclimb in Teller County, Colorado later that same year. Though the family has deep roots in Porsche lore, the Donners raced Ferraris around the U.S. and Europe through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in club, professional, and vintage events.

While the GT3 Cup is often called a perfect turn-key race car, Donner's first experiences with his used example were troubling. In testing at Pikes Peak International Raceway's oval/road course, he had a hard time keeping the car from spinning under braking. After flat-spotting several sets of tires, he set out for mid-May's Pirelli World Challenge race at Circuit of the Americas with trepidation.

Early practice at COTA revealed the same issue and only increased his frustration. After soul-searching, assessment of data, crawling around under the car, and fi-

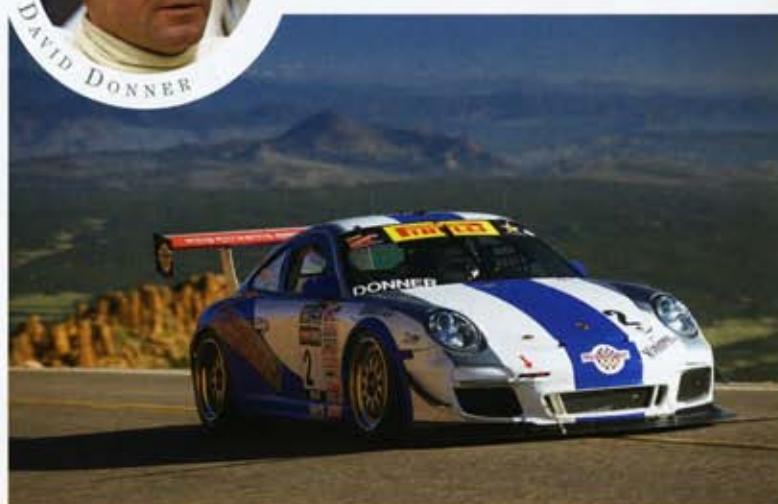
The Donner family was back in a Porsche for 2013, with David Donner choosing to run a GT3 Cup for the first time.



nally walking pit lane in search of brake experts, it was discovered that the ABS system had been assembled backwards at some point!

When Donner went back out, his transaxle ground its innards to bits in a final protest to being thrown backwards at speed too many times. That meant another walk down pit lane. It was a hard lesson, but at least it came early enough to allow proper preparation for Pikes Peak.

With additional track testing and tuning, Donner showed up at the first on-mountain tests with the best-looking and best-sounding car in attendance. While Loeb and Millen were obviously faster, the popping, hissing, and banging of their Unlimited-class turbo cars was jolting after the smooth, metallic whine of an expertly guided Porsche on a mountain that its driver grew up on.



Donner's trials and tribulations paid off: In mid-week qualifying on the lower half of the course, where turbo cars don't have as much of an advantage, he beat both Dallenbach and Zwart to take the pole.

On race day, Donner had a critical advantage: He went up the hill before the weather came in. Hopelessly underpowered but divinely motivated, his timed run of 9:53.581 was inspiring to watch. It was good for seventh overall—ahead of many of the Unlimited cars—but still second to Dallenbach, who managed to sneak his run in before the really bad weather came in.

**IF DONNER HAD** a difficult month, Fred Veitch had one that was, shall we say, character-building. Not that Veitch needs any. He's a six-foot-five giant with a personality to match and an unparalleled enthusiasm for Porsches and PCA.

In 1975, Veitch instigated the formation of PCA's Alpine Mountain Region and became its first President. He's long been a proponent of Driver Education events and Club Racing and has shown a number of concours-winning cars as well. Yet, as a resident of Colorado

ing his right front fender but narrowly averting a horrific crash. According to Veitch, he and Millen were briefly staring into each other's eyes at a combined speed of 150 mph. In a later encounter out of the cars, Millen's hands were still shaking.

In the next test session, this one a private "Fred Veitch Invitational" for top cars and stars, Veitch was first off the line. Five miles from the start, his enthusiasm met with cold tires and surfaces. Over the side he went, catching the guardrail and plunging some 60 feet down an embankment. This time, the toll was serious, with significant suspension, cooling system, and body damage.

Help came from far and wide. BBI went through its parts bin. Road Scholars shipped parts in. Veitch's head mechanic, Dave Petitti, is also the service manager at Porsche of Colorado Springs and led his team to work feverishly. The car was testing again on the Friday before race week began. Driving a bit more conservatively, Veitch qualified the 996 comfortably and was looking

forward to the race. He didn't know he had yet to face his biggest challenge.



**ON RACE DAY**, the motorcycles all made it to the top in dry, sunny weather. As the Peugeot team prepared to run, the skies darkened. Loeb did his record run in dry conditions as did all Unlimited-class cars. But, as Donner set off, small water droplets started to appear on windshields. Starting only minutes later, Zwart found it impossible to set a fast time and settled for third.

When Veitch ran, the heavens let loose. Before he arrived at the tree line, it was raining. As he entered the heart-stopping "Ws," with perilous cliffs, sleet was carried by a gusting wind. Up through Devil's Playground and down to Bottomless Pit, Veitch faced hail, rainwater, and deepening slush.

Through Boulder Park and on up to the summit, the road was beyond slick and visibility narrowed to only a few feet. Veitch's 996 Turbo was wearing slicks. With harrowing experiences fresh in his memory, he was extremely nervous, if not downright scared. Who wouldn't be?

Still, he persisted and made it to the top. His time reflected the conditions he faced and the intelligence with which he responded to achieve a time of 14:02.679, putting him 17th in class. While not the improvement in place he'd hoped for, Veitch had earned his stripes in a race that can be as unkind to its favorites as any of the greats—Indy, Daytona, and Le Mans among them.



Springs, he had never raced up Pikes Peak.

That changed in 2012, when he and Porsche of Colorado Springs fielded a street-stock (except for roll cage and other safety equipment) 996 Turbo—complete with heat, A/C, and stereo. He drove a strong yet conservative race to finish a triumphant seventh in his first attempt. 2013 wasn't so kind.

On the first weekend of testing, a course-marshalling mistake sent Veitch down the mountain just as Rhys Millen was coming up. Meeting at a portion of the course where Millen was going well over 100 mph, Veitch reacted quickly, diving off the road into a snowbank, damag-

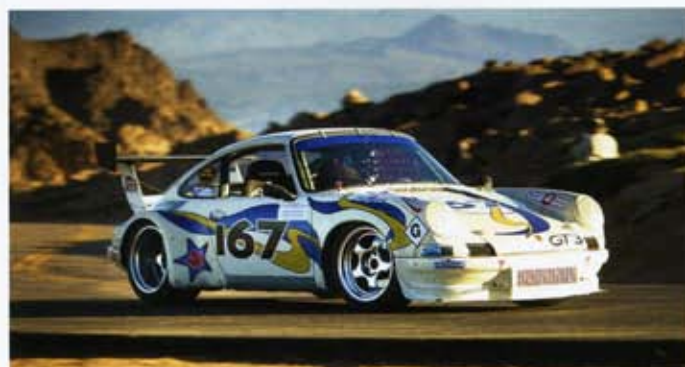
Fred Veitch drove an ideal car for the Street Stock class, a sure-footed 996 Turbo. Even so, he would face major challenges.

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# Driver's Perspective



DRIVING IN THE PPIHC is like a baseball or hockey fan getting to play in the all-star game, or a casual golfer getting to play in the Masters. It would never happen. Here, it can.

Imagine being in a drivers' meeting for a test day where there are ten drivers: Sebastien Loeb, Ro-

main Dumas, Rod Millen, Rhys Millen, Jeff Zwart, David Donner, Greg Tracy, Robert Prilika, Fred Veitch, and...you. The fantasy continued on race week, when I practiced every day with IndyCar star Simon Paggenaud. We had a chance to chat after each run, and I knew it was

something special when he came back to my car and asked, "Chris, how was your run?" I had just watched him win the IndyCar race in Detroit three weeks earlier, and here we were, hanging out on top of Pikes Peak.

North American Rally Cup champ Andrew Comrie-Picard became a fast friend last year after he noticed the Canadian maple leaf on my car. He was a real pleasure to get to know better this year. The day before the race, on the summit in the snow, he had three bags of hot donuts (summit donuts are legendary) to take back down, presumably for his crew. I noticed because we Canucks are well known as connoisseurs of such things. Fun fact: Paul Dallenbach's dashboard

flashes "Donuts at 14,000 feet" when he starts his race car.

Then there was Fan Fest, where my old 911 proved to be a huge hit. My wrist got sore from signing autographs, and I was interviewed by press from around the world. Photographs and video of the car spread across the World Wide Web like a virus. Never had that happen at a club race.

When I stepped off the podium on Sunday night with my trophy, the first person to offer his hand in congratulations was none other than ten-time winner, Nobuhiro "Monster" Tajima. A huge thank you to all of the sponsors, crew, and, most of all, my wife Kathleen, who made this fantasy a reality.

—Chris Lennon

**MEANWHILE, IN THE OPEN** class, 911 GT3 Cup driver Robert Prilika had his own tribulations. In mid-May, he had been doing well at the Pirelli World Challenge race at COTA and assisted Donner. Holding down a top ten finish with only a few laps to go, Prilika was punted into the back of another race car and then pinballed into the wall. His 911 was mangled on both ends.

Parts came slowly and he missed all the early testing

John Baird's yellow 914 crashed heavily. Jeff MacPherson's V8 914 took seventh in class. Dumas' prototype was felled by a loose connection.

sessions, only running the car on a track again for the first time the Friday before official hillclimb practice. Worse, it was discovered that his steering rack had been damaged at COTA. A new one had to be flown in, and the team at Porsche of Colorado Springs installed it before Tech Inspection on the Monday before the race.

On the first day of on-mountain practice, a couple of other competitors had fairly major shunts, meaning

there was only one practice run for Prilika's class. The next couple of days went more smoothly, allowing him to get refamiliarized with his car and qualify comfortably in class. On race day, however, the Open division ran late and several competitors had crashes or mechanical issues, with daylight dimming and conditions alternating from clear and dry to abysmal.

Prilika's main competitors, the father/son team of Randy and Layne Schranz, showed their long experience on the mountain. With good weather, they finished first and second in class. Still, when Prilika finally took his start, he had a good run. Making up time in the switchbacks as only a Porsche driver can, he hit some of the wetter conditions near the top of the course. Still, he came through with a time of 11:33.487, just 12 seconds off first, to place third in class—a fine effort for his rookie year with so little testing and practice.

**VINTAGE CLASS RACER** Chris Lennon found his own set of problems during the first weekend of testing. A failed pressure plate in his 1973 911 limited him to just one day of early testing on the lower half of the mountain. He was able to get more seat time on Veitch's private test day, and came on strong during race week.

Lennon, a class winner in his first year, was outgunned this year by the 1970 Shelby GT350 of Swedish driver Ralf Christensson. The latter had Lennon on horsepower but finished second in qualifying, several seconds back. Things were looking good for Lennon, but weather came somewhat into play and Christensson managed to nip him by eight seconds on race day.

Jeff MacPherson's single-seat, V8-powered 914 finished seventh in class, a minute and a half further behind.

John Baird crashed his 914-6 heavily in Turn 2. While the car was badly damaged, he walked away.

Frenchman Romain Dumas, who won the Open class last year and missed winning the overall title by only a few hundredths of a second, came into 2013's Race to the Clouds fresh from a class win at Le Mans.

Earlier, he took a break from Le Mans testing to fly in on June 14 for Veitch's private test day, driving the mountain in a spec Boxster before jumping back on a plane for Le Mans. He returned to Colorado Springs after Le Mans without delay to see his Norma car through Tech and immediately began setting faster and faster times, qualifying behind Loeb but well ahead of Rhys Millen.

Many fans hoped Dumas would mount a challenge to Peugeot. On race day, however, his car came to a stop just a mile from the starting line thanks to a loose battery connection—a bitter disappointment after last year's 0.18-second loss.

**IN THE END**, Porsche teams notched four podium finishes in three classes entered—no small feat for privateer efforts facing purpose-built, factory-backed race cars from major manufacturers.

Even so, the 91st running of the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb will rightly be remembered as Peugeot's show. Its works effort ushered in a new era of fast times at the Peak. As for the mountain itself, it reminded drivers, teams, and fans that even a fully paved course remains as unpredictable and cruel a racing venue as any. It may be ripe for a Porsche-dominated renaissance in the years to come, but that will depend on the talent, skill, and dedication applied. That, and a little luck with the weather. ☺



Loeb's Peugeot was untouchable at the Peak this year, obliterating all previous records by more than a minute. Prilika's GT3 Cup was third in class.

